

## **Lariassa Frías Lara**

Thomas P. (1997). Down These Mean Streets (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) New York, New York: A Division of Random House, Inc.

Down These Mean Streets reveals the history of the real life situation of Puerto Ricans in New York City. It is the autobiography of Piri Thomas, son of Puerto Rican parents- a white mother and dark skin father. There is gutter language and continuous Spanish imagery of the hardship of growing up in Spanish Harlem in the 1940's and 1950's. He is native-born and his parents are recent immigrants to the mainland from Puerto Rico. He tells the immigrant experience of growing Puerto Rican, the harsh realities of being dark-skinned in the mainland. The family and community struggles under inevitable discrimination and oppression as a submerged population group. They live a life led in outlaw and fringe status. Piri does not hide anything. He narrates as it was in this land of liberty. From the very start he lets the reader, his audience, that on the mainland you must be white on the inside and outside and there are no exceptions to the rules. Although you may be white, if you are Puerto Rican, then you are not part of the white race. It doesn't matter if you are right or wrong in America; being strong is what counts. (p.118) It is a struggle for identity within two cultures.

Although Piri Thomas is born in the United States, he is raised by his family as a Puerto Rican, his mother, reminds him, his brothers and sister of the family life in Puerto Rico. In every opportunity given to her, she lets her children know that she is proud to be Puerto Rican and wants them to be also. The paddies, the white men, as Piri calls them, seemed to have had a misconception of why the Puerto Rican moved to the mainland. It was because of the economic situation arising from the American invasion of Puerto Rico. For them it was important to obtain a better way of life, diminish the poverty situation among them, but it was equally important to maintain

their nationality; their identity. They kept the emotional identification with their homeland, not being able to solve the clash of the two cultures.

When Piri's mother talks of her beautiful paradise, she knows that she won't be able to see it again, because economical situation would never allow it, but it doesn't mean to exchange nationality. The mother never wanted her, or her family, to have hearts as cold as snow. She speaks of the warmness of her people. She goes on to explain how the less they had, the more people shared, quite the contrary in the US. She tells her children, "being poor in Puerto Rico is very different from being poor in the United States". They were firm on their nationness as a family. The Barrio in Spanish Harlem was like a little piece of the island.

The story does not state why his parents migrated to the U S but due to the economic depression at that time, one can conclude that they moved to the mainland in search of a better way of life, but at a high cost of risking their identity, their nationality and being rejected as inferior people, lower quality Americans. The novel is full of imagery of the mistreatment of the paddies not only with Puerto Rican but with the black man as well.

To the United State the only important thing was white man, the white race. Yet, having black skin was worst than being white Puerto Rican, perhaps. There was no way to camouflage in order to obtain better jobs. The mainland benefited from giving them miserable jobs where the conditions were not the best and the wages were less than minimum. It was not enough for Piri to be Puerto Rican; he had to have had the misfortune of living two cultures: growing up Puerto Rican, in a hostile different culture, plus being the negrito, black, of the house, besides being the black, the nigger, outside the community. Also, the cops didn't care if you were bleeding to death; they felt it was one less nigger, or one less Puerto Rican. They were innocent victims of the political and economic relationships between Puerto Rico and the mainland, which resulted in political and economical dependence. The consequences

were exploitation, language barriers, low wages, worst jobs, racism, shopping in second-hand stores, and first ones to be laid off in tough times, not being able to do a damn thing about it. Piri was hit so hard with racism that he concluded that that the national anthem of *My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty* was only for paddies, whites. (p123) He could not visualize America for himself, for his people nor for blacks. They survived by keeping their own communities.

Most Puerto Rican settled in New York City due to the wide availability of industrial and service-industry jobs. They built their lives in the Barrio of Spanish Harlem where they shared their good and bad experiences in the land of liberty. But liberty is not a word, it is a way of life. Because they where able to form a community, much of their culture was kept. It was more convenient, since they were able to speak Spanish. Puerto Rico at that time was going through economical depression, consequently a large mass of Puerto Rican were migrating. The ones already on the mainland received the families and friends coming in. Within the barrio, the community celebrated their holidays and feasts. They were able to maintain their typical food. They did their grocery shopping at the bodegas, played the Puerto Rican lottery, listen and danced their music.

Besides being poor, Piri also becomes deeply confused about his identity, while he is growing up. You could say that he was a hybrid, a mixture of two skin colors, his mother white and his father black. He was loved by his family but he did not feel equal among them. He was his mother's negrito, her black son, while his brothers and sister were the white ones. The Puerto Rican nation is a mixture of Indian, Spaniard, and African, still the only color that withstands is the white skin. Among the Puerto Rican this group did not have to be distinguished, because they had the right color of skin.

When Piri starts leaving for school and other places, other than his family or community, he is discriminated for two things instead of one. He is accused of being

black, which is worst than being Puerto Rican. He tries to explain that he is not black, but Puerto Rican. His being a hybrid allows him to discover that he will never be white, nor Puerto Rican, for there is only one nationess, whiteness.

Piri wanted to be respected as a Puerto Rican, and not as a black man; yet this didn't make any difference to the white man in the United States. Piri could understand this; in contrast to this, there seemed to be a racial situation within his own family. His father married a white woman. His brothers and sister were light skin and Piri was black like his father. His mother reminded him continuously that he was her *negrito*; although he was black, he would always be her son. His father on the other hand didn't treat him the same, he gave the other children more attention. He was sure it was because they were white. On the whole Piri believed his father married a white woman to perfect the race or perhaps he believed he would become white with a white woman on his side. But this was quite the contrary; his mother became black when she married a black man. His brother José did not consider himself a *moyeto*, a nigger, because his skin was light. Ironically speaking, even though they are white on the outside, they will never be white because under their skin runs black blood. Because they will not accept being called black, or *moyetos*, he reminds the family that niggers were brought in by the Spaniards when they ran out of Indian coolies. (p145) He wants his family to see that to the white man it does not matter how you look outside, you have to be white inside and outside. He wanted his father to tell him what was wrong not being white. (p147) This begins a struggle within Piri. He wants to know how it feels to be black in the south. Piri's black friend, Brew, considers him to be black. Piri explains that they are from two different cultures, yet all Brew sees is Piri's color. The truth is that Piri did not want to be black, because he did not want to face the pain that most black Americans had to endure. (123)

Puerto Ricans have social problems within their society also. White Puerto Ricans do not want to be associated with black Puerto Ricans. Within the race a white Puerto Rican surpasses a wealthy or literate black Puerto Rican. If Puerto Rican is a mixture of three races, where does this whiteness, this white pure race erupt from? It seems to have been born of the American and Spanish colonization. Puerto Ricans have to go back to being plain Puerto Ricans. It is their nationality which unifies them and gives them their real identity.

"It's not Porto Rico, it's Puerto Rico," said momma. (p.9) Piri's mother corrects them and says, "Puerto Rico" with pride and dignity. With shining eyes she spoke of her beautiful island, her isla verde, her Puerto Rican paradise. Due to the horrendous migration experience that Puerto Ricans were going through at that time, Piri asked the following question, "Did everybody love each other- I mean, like if everybody was worth something, not like if some weren't important because you were poor- you know what I mean?" The mother replies, "I like los Estados Unidos, but it's sometimes a cold place to live - not because of the winter and the landlord not giving heat, but because of the snow in the hearts of the people. The characters know that Puerto Rico and the United States will not be considered as one nation. They know there is an edge, a limit, a boundary, between the two countries; there is no one nationness.

Machismo is known as a Hispanic cultural phenomenon. The pride among the Puerto Rican men is vivid throughout this book. The women are the ones that go for welfare benefits. The men drink and the women have to bare with this. Piri's father, like many other married Puerto Ricans had one or two mistresses. Piri doesn't hide that within his people there is a lot of drinking among the men. The prostitution seems to be on every street corner. The playing of illegal numbers was inevitable for it was the only hope of gaining a large sum of money. Pushing drugs was an escape to the inhuman living conditions. The English spoken by Piri and the community is

street talk. "This Long Island is nuttin like Harlem. (91) You ain't nevah been down South, eh, Piri?" (p.120) Education was not top priority, since so many had to work in order to survive in the barrio.

Piri's mother did not speak English and perhaps had very little schooling, prejudices the American people when she mentioned that their hearts are as cold as snow. She claims that poverty among her people had noting to do with skin color. Her experience in this new world led her to conclude that being poor in United States is very different from being poor in Puerto Rico. On the whole she concluded the family was slightly better economically in spite of the high cost. The father moved to the mainland with the hope of secure employment and better opportunities for the family. It was quite the opposite, the labor was exploited with low wages, not only for him, but for the Puerto Rican community also.

Piri, through his narration, allows his reader to see that the only way for colonization to function is if racism no longer exists. He, however, does not give the American nation the possibility of being humans. If the nation stops being pro white, then, perhaps, there is in that minute, slim chance for colonization in Puerto Rico.

There is no direct protest within Piri's book; yet there is protest throughout the whole book. When the mother mentions the hearts as cold as snow, one can say it is an insult without weapons. The father's protest against the low paying jobs is another way of say thanks, but no thanks for low paid wages. Four hundred years of what? The United States, land of liberty, but for who is this liberty? It is certainly not for the Puerto Ricans. Each imagery described by Piri and his family say, indirectly, colonization is not functioning yet.

This family defines themselves as Puerto Rican. Although the father is dark skin he does not identifies himself as black American. (p.153) He tells his sons, I am not black. All my friends are Hispanics, black Puerto Ricans. The mother feeds her children with nationess. Piri tells the Italians that he isn't black that, he is Puerto

Rican. Piri defines his nationality when he explains to his black friend, Brew, that there is no way that he could be black for he was from a totally different culture.

Piri's father gave him an advice on how to survive in this nation as a Puerto Rican, which he puts into practice. Later on, this becomes not only his Puerto Rican vision of America but his conception of the world from a specific viewpoint. "Son you must learn to smell danger from a mile away. You must learn to smell *mierda*, ca-ca, shit a mile away. Remember that shit can walk on two legs and that it comes in all colors." His father knew of the racism and felt it, and experienced it, yet he made it upon himself not to become a part of it. In conclusion, if the ca-ca stops smelling, then perhaps colonization on nation might just work.

Piri realizes that in the south of the United States one can be black Puerto Rican, black Mexican, black Colombian, black Caribbean, black anything, and one had a nationality just as long as one was not a nigger, a black American. You were identified by nationality and not by complexion; different from up north, where you were white or black, nothing in between. The situation with the prostitute was Piri one shot to get even with his land of liberty. (p.189) When Piri told the prostitute that she had just slept with a nigger, that she had betrayed the concept of their pure America, it was his one shot to be 100% Puerto Rican and get even for being discriminated for being black, a nigger. The irony here is that a so high and mighty white woman from down south, had been infested with his black blood, and she actually enjoyed it. His relationship with the prostitute demonstrates that enjoying life with others has nothing to do with color. Important values such as love, justice, intelligence, life enjoyment, education, beauty, art, and health are the true human values, not colors.

When Piri was in prison, for five years, he was given twice the opportunity for parole twice, and twice was denied. While in prison, he was able to do much thinking. A prisoner, Kent, inspired him to want to speak correctly. (p.257) The hard

life forced him to mature. He continues being a Puerto Rican, but now with a clear picture. Within prison walls he begins to reveal, not only to the American world, but to the world itself how cruel the Americanization way of life can be.

Although Piri did not live during the Spanish or American colonization in Puerto Rico, he could see that neither did much good. If colonization was beneficial to his people, why did they have to struggle so hard? Why was the migration to the mainland so huge? The North Americans' welcome to Puerto Ricans on the mainland was the following: Although you are legally considered Americans, you are not accepted as such. They were alienated from white American society. From day one they had to endure the daily struggle to get by in a racist country, where whites and blacks could not be together. The experiences relived by Piri's mother in this white world are awful, contrary to the whites and black on her beautiful paradise, Puerto Rico. The whole idea of being a Puerto Rican American was ridiculous and obscure. The low paying salaries, the terrible living conditions, made it very clear that Puerto Ricans were not Americans. Piri was being forced to be ashamed of what he was, a simple Puerto Rican.

The education for the migrated children was made difficult, attending suburban schools. Their culture was not accepted. Once the students had learned enough words in English, enough for factory labor, it did not matter if they completed their studies or not. Blacks and Puerto Ricans didn't consider themselves the same. Black, were Africans and Puerto Ricans Hispanics. This may be true to them, but it was not to the school officials, or Americans themselves. The riots, fights were not monitored. The cops felt they were doing America a favor if one less black or Puerto Rican was taken out of the way. Extreme poverty, societal discrimination, and family alienation forced Piri to street life and gangs, looking for comfort and some consistent value system to deal with the array of difficult issues facing them. The value system in this case was based on the Hispanic cultural

phenomenon known as machismo: "Whether you are right or wrong, as long as you are strong, you're right." (p118) In spite of the so called benefits of Americans' Citizenship, Puerto Ricans are one of the most economically disadvantaged Latino groups on the mainland.

As Luis Muñoz Marin states in his article, The Sad Case of Porto Rico, February, 1929 issue of American Mercury:

"Two major problems perplex the old Spanish province of Porto Rico, arising out of its enforced relationship to the United States. One deals with the consequences of American economic development, the other with cultural Americanization. Both go to the root of drama now being acted on that gorgeous stage; both are portentous in their potentialities.

The importance of the economic problem is obvious to all, whatever their views or interests. Americanization is more insidious. The

tendency works while you sleep. It changes the expression of your eyes, the form of your paunch, the tone of your voice, your hopes of Heaven, what your neighbors and your woman expect of you-all without giving you a chance to fight back, without even presenting to you the dilemma of fighting back or not. Certainly no two things are more important than to have what you want and to live as spontaneously as you can manage. These two hopes are now in process of being shot to hell in my country."

In summary, we confirm how the book, not being a history one, tells us in detail the history of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland at that time. The present situation is not very different, since the colonization situation is not legally solved, even though Puerto Ricans continue considering themselves as a nation.

## References

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