

P R E L U D E

*All the faces are brown, tinged with brown, lightly brown,
the feeling of brown.*

—OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

Langston Hughes wrote what became his most famous poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” on a train trip from St. Louis, Missouri, to Mexico.¹ In this poem, Hughes mentions the Mississippi, the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile, a gesture, I believe, to situate African Americans within international culture. Although he does not name the Rio Grande in the poem, Hughes crossed this river many times on his travels to and from Mexico. These frequent crossings suggest that Hughes’s experiential relationships extended to Mexico and the Southwest and that these territories for him were more than touristic geography.

Hughes writes in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, that on one of his many train trips between the two countries—in this case from Mexico into Texas—some white Americans mistook him for “Mexican.” Hughes’s self-description might provide a clue why: “I am of a copper-brown complexion, with black hair that can be made quite slick and shiny if it has enough pomade on it in the Mexican fashion” (50). When he arrived in San Antonio, where he was to change trains, this African American turned saboteur of taken-for-granted racial indicators that he knew would consign him to Jim Crow waiting rooms. He emphasized one of the many stereotypes already banked in the U.S. popular imagination for Mexicans—the “greasy” hair. He added another characteristic to make himself more convincing to his “white” audience: he ordered his ticket in Spanish and reserved a comfortable Pullman berth for the journey home to Cleveland. Most important, Spanish was a language that would set him far enough from “Negro” to allow him to pass for “Mexican.” In other words,

"Mexican," even in the 1920s, contained an ambiguity that would bring him, in the perception of those around him, closer to "white." Hughes felt compelled to perform an identity "trick," to perform an intercultural² transaction, in order to pass as "Mexican," so that he might claim in his native country the equal rights enjoyed by "white" people.

This anecdote about Hughes intrigues me because it concerns an African American's surpassing the black/white binary³ of white supremacy, not by rising above it or dismissing it but by confronting it head-on and working through it in an intercultural contact zone.⁴ Hughes was able to play up his appearance as a "Mexican-looking" man in Texas because of the state's history encompassing Mexican, Native, Anglo, and African Americans.

In 1845 the United States conducted its invasion of Mexico, at least in part to satisfy the interests of those who would extend the enslavement of the black population in the Texas territory, at that time owned by Mexico, in which Mexicans and Native Americans were the indigenous peoples. In this historical contact zone, more than half a century after the U.S.-Mexico war, Hughes created imaginative and real cross-cultural meaning the day he took advantage of the ambiguity offered him in a "Mexican" identity. He "shook up" the one-drop theorem and drew a line to connect African American and Mexican American peoples, bringing both into a simultaneous conjuncture of belonging.

In this book I use a key Puerto Rican literary text, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), to link three literary cultures—Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano—at the time of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. *Down These Mean Streets* is an autobiographical novel by Piri Thomas and the point of departure or metaphor of my book. Although not as well known to a general audience in the United States as Hughes, Thomas knew as well as Hughes that racial identification was a messy business. A New York-born writer, he captures in *Down These Mean Streets* what it meant to be an adolescent, Puerto Rican male on the U.S. mainland in the 1940s. Thomas's protagonist, like the author,⁵ was born in a Harlem hospital in 1928, twenty-six years after the birth of Hughes, and he grew up in East (or Spanish) Harlem, the Puerto Rican neighborhood adjacent to Black Harlem. Outside his home "turf" of East Harlem, the autobiographical and fictional character, also named Piri, was called every name in the racist lexicon for black people because he was dark-skinned, had nappy hair and an Anglo-sounding surname, and knew and liked the walk and talk of black men in Harlem. Confused about his racial identity and feeling compelled to find out what it meant to be

Puerto Rican, he decided to leave New York and travel to the South with his black American friend, going as far as Galveston, Texas.

Both the author Thomas and the character Piri, like Hughes, rejected the hierarchical absolutism in the black/white racial binary that gave no room in which to claim a rightful humanity as Puerto Rican men. Like Hughes, they did not evade it but confronted it head-on. Angry and resentful of the white world that hemmed him in, Piri was determined by the end of his trip in *Down These Mean Streets* to release years of stored-up rage. He devised a plan to gain entry into a white bordello in Galveston, where, as he put it, he could fuck a white woman. A fluent English speaker, he pretended to be able to speak only Spanish. As Hughes had done years before, Piri camouflaged himself as “Mexican.” In a brief, revenge-driven scene, Piri deliberately misrepresents himself to the brothel owner as “Mexican,” lays with a white prostitute, and immediately after unmasks himself to her as a “nigger.” However tactically different, however self-inventive—or, as in Piri’s case, self-destructive—their “stunts” may have been, Hughes and Piri—and also implicitly Thomas—subverted social practices of white supremacy by playing upon a linguistic difference to establish themselves as “Mexicans” and thus sabotage the black/white racial dyad. These men of color, far from being bereft and rudderless, resisted the systems of control set up to secure racial “purity” and turned the perceptions these systems uphold to their advantage.

A Puerto Rican in Texas passing himself off as “Mexican” is somewhat of an anomaly when one considers that the migration of the Puerto Rican diaspora has been primarily from the island to East Coast cities, especially New York. Thomas defamiliarizes Texas as a geopolitical space made up of a Mexican American and African American minority population. Texas represents the disputed boundary over which the United States went to war against Mexico, a war that enabled Texas to do to Mexico what the white segregationist South did to the Union North. In other words, Texas seceded from Mexico in 1845 just as the South seceded from the North fifteen years later. In 1848 the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the 1846–1848 war and sealed the fate of the Mexican borderlands. Texas entered the Union as a slave state, altering the balance of power between the North and the South, and forever became aligned with the South in the U.S. imagination. But the historical memory still holds: Texas in a Chicano imaginary is “Mexican” and is claimed by Chicanos to this day as part of the Mexican Southwest, or *Aztlán*.⁶ In the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century, the city of El Paso became the southwestern Ellis Island of Mexican immigration to the United States. Hughes and Thomas not

only expand the range of our imaginings of Texas; they also help to connect the dots between two of the peoples whose histories are intricately tied to this geographic space.

What would happen, then, if to the list of rivers that Hughes mentions in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" we would respectfully add the unspoken river of his poem? Today, I allow myself to imagine a Spanish-speaking, "Mexican-looking" Hughes "speaking of" the Rio Grande (would he call it by its Mexican name, the Río Bravo?), a symbol of the intercultural contact zone where Mexicans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and ethnic white Americans have met for almost two centuries. Thomas shows us that a Puerto Rican in Texas can also shake up the racial, gender, and linguistic categories that have been negotiated in this U.S.-Mexico border region. His protagonist traveled into Jim Crow territory and learned that if one drop of black blood can make one black, one drop of white blood can make one white. I add the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, then, to Hughes's international geography as a marker of the interethnic, intercultural activity I locate in this book. Let my grafting of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo to Hughes's poem stand as a space of symbolic possibility for an intercultural history among Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano ethnic groups that has yet to be written.

“SHAKIN’ UP” RACE AND GENDER

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