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**Becoming a Man in a Minority Setting:
The Stories of Piri Thomas, Pedro Juan Soto and Jack Agüeros**
Antonio Medina-Rivera

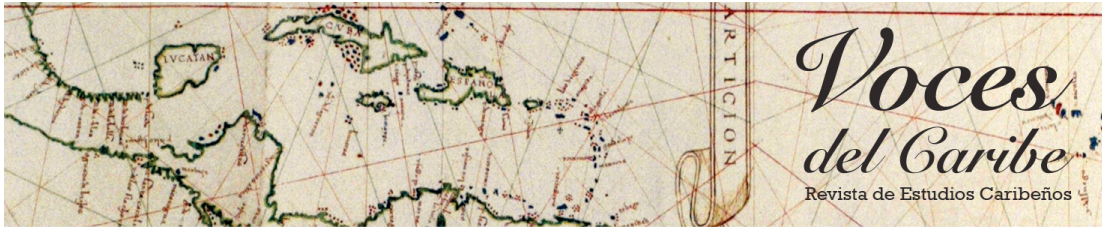
Introduction:

The process of becoming a man is presented as a painful experience in the stories of Piri Thomas, Pedro Juan Soto, and Jack Agüeros. Their stories take place in New York City; a world in which Puerto Ricans are one of the minority groups that needs to survive in an overwhelming and violent environment. While Piri Thomas sets an autobiographic note, inserting himself in his story, Agüeros and Soto write as observers of the harsh and cruel reality of New York City. One element the three authors have in common is their representation of male characters, giving the reader an idea of how difficult it is to become a man in a minority setting, where scarcity, poverty, discrimination, and violence form part of their daily life.

Thomas, Soto, and Agüeros are three writers of Puerto Rican origin who show in their stories the life of Puerto Ricans in New York. While Soto writes his stories in Spanish, Thomas and Agüeros generally tell their own stories in English. They are genuine representatives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora literature and their stories help Puerto Ricans living on the Island to understand and examine the reality of “the other Puerto Ricans.” Recently there has been an effort to acknowledge the contributions of Puerto Ricans who write about the U.S. reality in either Spanish or English. Roberto Santiago in his collection *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings—An Anthology* of 1995 and Joy De Jesús in her collection *Growing Up Puerto Rican* of 1997 are two examples of that significant effort. However, there is an important need to continue studying the Puerto Rican literature of the Diaspora, to examine more in depth the messages these writers are trying to communicate beyond the classic topic of cultural identity, and to extend the definition of Puerto Rican literature; a literature that exists in two languages, that includes 3.8 million living in the Island and 3.4 million living in the U.S. (Census Bureau 2000).

In the following pages I will analyze some of the stories written by these authors: “The Konk” by Piri Thomas, “The Champ” by Pedro Juan Soto, and “Johnny United” by Jack Agüeros. The main characters of these stories are men whose lives have been marked by the agony of growing up in a disadvantaged





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community and/or family. The three writers selected for this study present the process of becoming a man as a reality that is painful, interesting, dangerous, amusing, traumatic, and engaging in many ways. All of them focus on the experience of minority males – Puerto Ricans in this case – who try to survive in mainstream U.S. culture and society.

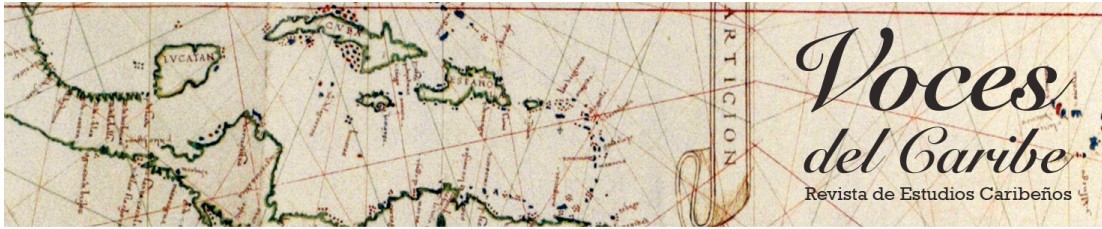
Male studies perspective:

In the past two decades, male studies in the United States have provided some basic elements to better understand and examine the reality and behavior of males in society. Robert Bly, in his book *Iron John*, presents the image of the hero/warrior as the main archetype that explains the male psyche in today's world with references to previous generations. Although highly acclaimed, Bly's work received many criticisms from feminists, ecologists, and pacifists who saw the hero/warrior archetype as a way to justify violence and male dominance. Allan B. Chinen, a minority male, argues in his book *Beyond the Hero* that Bly and his followers "insistence on one law, one culture, and one doctrine for everyone" (1) is limited. Chinen mentions what Bly called "the deep masculine," but instead of limiting his view to the hero/warrior figure, expands the representation of males by analyzing men's tales from around the world showing "painful struggles with fathers, secret doubt about one's manhood, fear and fascination for the feminine, and above all, a search for the masculine soul and a yearning for deep, life-giving male energy" (3). With these elements in mind, one can develop a more complete view of men in society.

Robert Hicks and other Jungian psychologists and theologians make an attempt to rescue the positive aspects that characterize the image of the hero/warrior, such as loyalty, perseverance, and courage. In addition to this, Hicks incorporates the hero/warrior archetype as one of the stages in the process of becoming a man. In this sense male behavior is not a static condition, but rather a process of ongoing development. This process is presented in six stages of male development: the creational male, the phallic male, the warrior, the wounded male, the mature man, and the sage. Since Hick's focus is on psychological development, rather than cultural characteristics such as machismo, it is easy to adapt these stages to men of different ethnic groups. For the present investigation I examine the stages of the hero/warrior, the wounded male, and the sage in order to understand men in a minority setting.

Hicks' categorization of male development helps in the examination of male characters in literature and society. The male characters in the stories of





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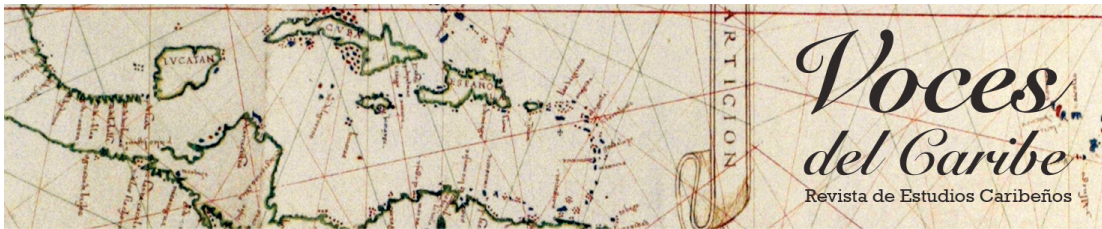
Thomas, Soto, and Agüeros go through the same process described by Hicks. However, these characters struggle in progressing from one stage to the other because of the socioeconomic conditions in which each of them has to grow. The essence of the warrior is inherent in the struggles of the characters to survive in a difficult and adverse world. The process of becoming a wounded man seems to be unavoidable destiny in the lives of these men. And finally, the sage appears in some of the stories to give new direction to the main character or to the audience. However, this minority perspective presented in the stories of Thomas, Soto, and Agüeros generally makes becoming a mature man or a sage unattainable in the male journeys of their characters.

From a Latin American perspective, other male studies' investigators such as Espada, Mirandé, and Ramírez, propose examining men beyond the limited views of machismo. Espada indicates that "While Latino male behavior is, indeed, all too often sexist and violent, Latino males in this country are in fact no worse in that regard than their Anglo counter parts" (88). Mirandé proposes not looking at Latin American males from a homogenous perspective because "there is not one masculine mode but a variety of modalities" (17). He also clarifies that "though much has been said and written about machismo or 'excessive masculinity' among Latinos in general and Mexicans in particular, until recently such generalizations were based on meager, nonexistent, and misrepresented evidence" (5).

Ramírez observes that in Latin America the vision "of masculinity is excessively partial toward oppressiveness" (113), which again is a way of limiting the Latin American male to the image of the violent and the aggressive macho. In the conclusion of his book *What It Means to Be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity*, Ramírez challenges his male movement colleagues to transcend the limiting images and definitions we have on manhood and suggests some direction to the analysis of men in society: "In contrast to theoretical deficiencies of the literature on machismo, more recent studies on sexuality, masculine ideologies, and the construction of masculinity offer better explanations of how we become, or are made into, men" (25-26).

In the process of becoming a man, machismo is evident in one way or another in the characters presented by Thomas, Soto, and Agüero. Nevertheless, in order to represent male characters, each one of these writers explore male personalities beyond the machismo boundaries by depicting men in agony, men in relationships with others, men at different stages of their lives, men with no





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hope, and men lacking something to complete their maturation process, as Chinen and Hicks suggest in their books.

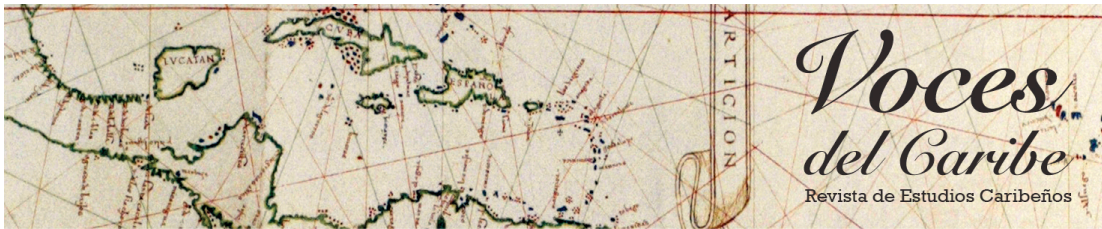
Piri Thomas' "The Konk"

Piri Thomas was born in 1928 of Puerto Rican and Cuban parents in New York City's Spanish Harlem. In 1967 Thomas received national recognition with his first book *Down These Mean Streets* in which he tells the story of his life from the time he was a boy until the time he was released from jail after seven years. He was able to free himself from a world of violence and drugs, and started writing about the harsh reality of living in New York. Thomas describes in a cruel and graphic, but at the same time poetic way, the daily life of many Puerto Ricans living in New York. He is definitely one of the pioneers of the Puerto Rican literature of the Diaspora. He expresses himself in English and gives his prose some taste of the Hispanic culture by using phrases and words that characterize the speech of Puerto Ricans of New York. Other books by Thomas include *Savior*, *Savior Hold My Hand*, *Seven Long Times*, and *Stories from El Barrio*. In the present study I analyze the story "The Konk" included in *Stories from El Barrio* and draw connections between it and *Down These Mean Streets* to illustrate the reality of males and the hard process of becoming a man in a place like New York.

Stories from El Barrio has a more didactic tone compared with *Down These Mean Streets*. The stories are dedicated to a young audience that is in the process of making it into society. In this sense, Thomas is the voice of the wise man, the sage, the mentor, the guide for a generation of young people in the barrio. All the stories have a happy tone: guys sticking together in a mission as in "The Three Mosquiteers," or a guy falling in love and becoming a better person just to gain the attention of a young girl as in "Putting It On for Juanita." In "The Konk", Piri himself is the main character of the story. He delights the reader with a story of his teenage years and presents a world of agony and personal complexes, but surrounded by the presence of a loving mother.

In "The Konk" Piri is afflicted by his "curly hair being called 'nappy,' *pasas* (raisins), or *pelo malo* (bad hair)" (44) and decides to go for a straightened hair process or *konk*. Piri questions his barber regarding why he doesn't *konk* his hair but the man answers "No way, man. *Konks* or *marcels* ain't my stick. I just do it for others 'cause it's part of my living wages" (46). After getting his *konk*, Piri is happy and proud, but when he is approaching his neighborhood he started to hear the criticisms "'Hey, monkey, what's that shit on your haid?" One





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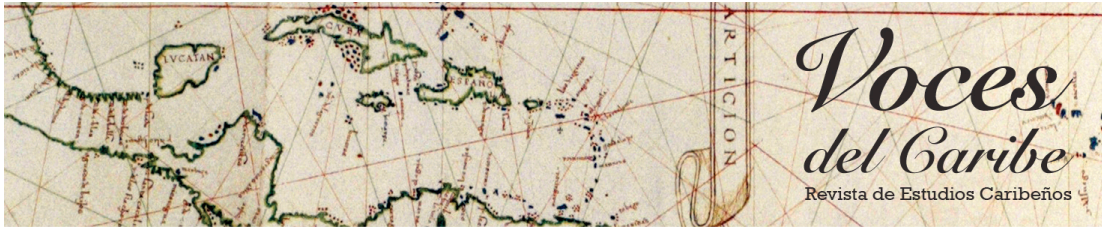
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renamed me ‘Konko Pete’ on the spot followed by ‘Just wait until your hair turns red and your scalp drops dead’” (49-50). The criticism intensifies when he arrives home, and his brother and sisters start making fun of him. The father reacts by remaining silent and shaking his head, whereas his mother hugs Piri and says “Don’t you ever be ashamed of being you. You want to know something, *negrito*? I wouldn’t trade you for any *blanquitos*” (51).

On the surface “The Konk” sounds like a beautiful story of love and reaffirmation of the main character’s identity as a teen of color. However, it is interesting that the father in the story remains quiet and shakes his head. That behavior can only be understood by examining Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*. In this autobiography Piri Thomas goes through the process of becoming a man in a difficult environment. At the beginning of the book he is already a street boy, who is trying to survive in a hard world, and who is looking for respect from the other males in the barrio. His father as shown in “The Konk” remains silent and does not guide or mentor his son. Piri’s father, as many males of that time, is the main provider of the family, and he is represented as a weak image who cannot give guidance, strength, and support to his own son. As a result of that emptiness and lack of a genuine father figure, Piri finds an escape in the world of barrio gangs, and eventually in the world of crime.

Piri is searching for his racial identity in both “The Konk” and *Down These Mean Streets*. He is a dark Latino and many times is confused with an African American. Since Piri’s father is also of dark complexion, he is trying to find reaffirmation and acceptance from his father. In “The Konk” it is the mother who offers that reaffirmation, but Piri is in need of that acceptance from his father from whom he inherited the color. The father responds in the autobiography with a lack of understanding, and a feeling of distance: “Maybe you see something in me I haven’t seen yet, or maybe won’t admit yet. I don’t like feeling to be a black man. Can you understand it’s pride to me being a Puerto Rican?” (150). This response further strains the relationship between father and son. From then, if Piri wants to learn how to become a man, he will have to find the answer in the street. Rodríguez de Laguna suggests that “It is precisely in the home – the family space par excellence at the core of Hispanic culture and values— where Piri ironically initially encounters loneliness, rejection, and invisibility. He is the darkest of all his siblings and because of his color he is the target of his black father’s cold treatment and resentment” (23). Piri’s father is a wounded man (as described by Hicks), a man who cannot accept





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his own skin color, a man who finds refuge in his silence and who is not capable of improving his life in a hard environment, making him another victim of the loneliness and alienation of New York. That separation between father and son resulting in violence and alienation is well described by Gordon Dalbey:

The most sincere critics of male behavior have often failed to see that men have clung to the macho image and remained violent and alienated not because these traits define masculinity, but rather, because they mask an embarrassing wound in men today which crosses all socioeconomic, ethnic and political boundaries...That wound is caused by an epidemic alienation from the father, who is every man's masculine root in this world. (5)

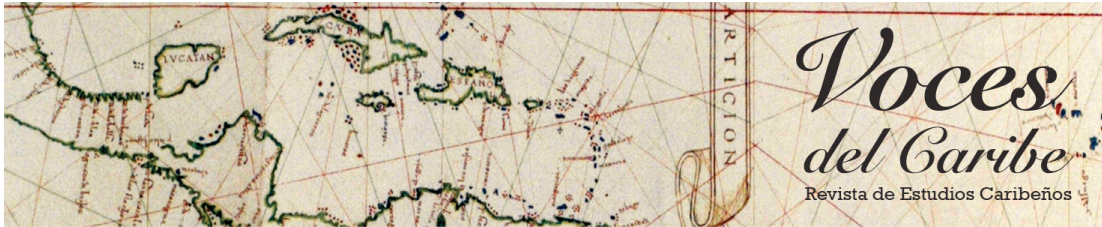
After this incident (as presented in *Down These Mean Streets*), Piri is able to find a sage or mentor to guide him, an African American man named Brewster Johnson. First, Brewster helps Piri to see himself as Hispanic in spite of Piri's dark complexion. Brewster knows the hard life of a Black man at that time, since he himself has been a victim of racism and discrimination. But Piri insists on joining Brewster as a travel companion, perhaps to see inside of himself, to discover who he really is, and because of his need for a father figure in his own life. They travel together to the southern part of United States, and Piri learns about the reality of being a Black man in a time before the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. Brewster is totally aware of that reality because he was raised in the south. Suddenly, Brewster disappears from Piri's life, leaving him all by himself. Piri becomes a criminal and ends up in jail after shooting a police officer.

Piri's process of becoming a man is unfinished because of the separation from his own father, the inability to be accepted in society due to the color of his skin, and for being part of a minority group. He becomes a gangster, finding refuge in promiscuity and crime, without ever being initiated into a complete manhood to live his life to its fullest. He becomes a hero/antihero because of his criminal activity. In jail he is able to see himself as a wounded man, with no freedom and no respect. After coming out of jail he is tempted to go back to the world of crime and violence until he finds a voice for himself through writing.

Pedro Juan Soto's "Campeones"

Pedro Juan Soto was born in Cataño, Puerto Rico in 1930 and died in 2002. He spent some years of his life in New York and was able to capture in his stories the sad and miserable life of many Puerto Ricans who immigrate to the United





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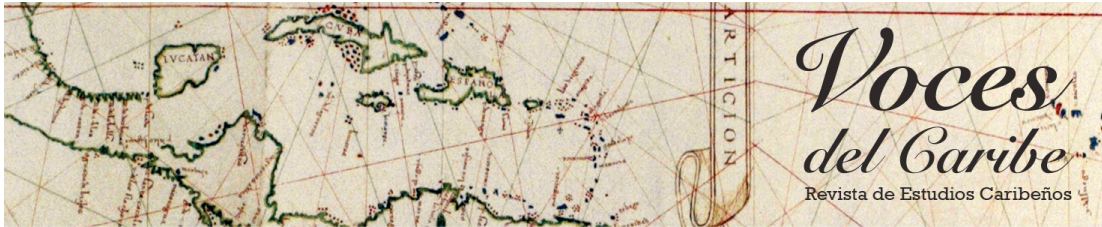
States. Soto's most famous book is definitely *Spiks*, a collection of short stories from El Barrio. His short stories have a cinematic touch with a clear influence of Italian neorealism – in other words, his short stories give the reader the impression of someone who is observing the reality of New York City with a camera lens and without giving us any social commentary about that reality. Soto describes masterfully, and it is for us to judge and try to understand that difficult reality. In the present study, I examine the story "Campeones" ("Champions") to show the struggle of becoming a man in the streets.

The short stories and "miniaturas" (microshort stories) of *Spiks* present a world of struggle, violence, depression, poverty, and sadness. It is very interesting how Soto portrays the psyche and identity of his male characters. In "Garabatos" Soto presents a man who is immersed in his own depression and struggles as a painter, in "Bayaminiña" he shows the agony and discrimination of a street vendor, and in "Campeones" he recounts the story of two pool players, Gavilán and Puruco. Soto's indirect description of the process of becoming a man makes this last story very intriguing.

Gavilán is a man who already spent some years of his life in jail, and whose talent and skill as a pool player is well known in the barrio. His adversary is Puruco, who is only 16 years old, and who has the potential of becoming the new pool sensation after defeating Gavilán in two games. The narrator describes Puruco as "el nuevo, el sucesor de Gavilán y los demás individuos respetables. Era igual...No. Superior, por su juventud: tenía tiempo y oportunidades para sobrepasar todas las hazañas de ellos" (72). Instead of seeing Puruco as an excellent competitor, or as a rising star for whom he could become a mentor and coach, Gavilán perceives him as a rival and menace to his own "kingdom."

In the barrio, becoming a pool champion is a sign of prestige and respect. In fact, Gavilán's reputation as a good player was an easy way to enter into other businesses and to be well connected as a man: "De ahí, a la fama: el macho del barrio, el individuo indispensable para cualquier asunto --la bolita, el tráfico de narcóticos, la hembra de Riverside Drive de paseo por el barrio, la pelea de esta pandilla con la otra para resolver 'cosas de hombres'" (74). Gavilán and Puruco play for the third time, but this time Puruco gets the impression Gavilán is doing witchcraft against him, and that he is not playing a clean game to beat him. Superstition and witchcraft are an integral part in the character of many Puerto Ricans, and many people fear the possibility of becoming the victim of a curse. Puruco decides to confront Gavilán after his dirty moves, but Gavilán, in order to





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keep his reputation as the “macho-man” champion, says:

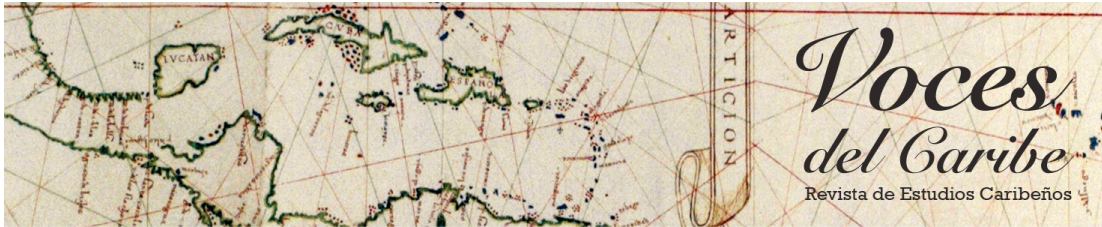
¿Tú te creeh que un pilemielda como tú me va a llamar a mí tramposo? — dijo Gavilán, forzando sobre el pecho de Puruco el puño que desgarraba la camiseta— Te deajo ganar doh mesitah pa que tengas de qué echártelah, y ya te creeh rey. Echa p'allá, infelih — dijo entre dientes—. Cuando crehcas noh vemo. (79)

The process of becoming a man implies, in the case of Puruco and many young men like him, being involved in a world of competition and violence. The champion has to prove himself against other champions, not only by playing the game, but by demonstrating male superiority through physical strength, dominance, and violent behavior. If Puruco wants to become a pool champion, he will also have to play the game of male dominance. He will have to face the wounded pride of the veteran players who do not want to lose their places in that world of dirty competition. Puruco seems to have talent as a pool player; however, he doesn't have the age, the physical power, or the illicit connections of his veteran counterparts. He is ready to enter that world, to be initiated in a ritual to become a powerful man; nevertheless, he cannot find another male to initiate him, nor a father to introduce him to that society of competition. Gavilán, the one who is supposed to take the role of mentor and wise man, sees him as competition. As a result, Puruco has to initiate himself into life – a cruel life in which he feels alone and with no direction.

At the end of the story, Puruco encounters another child younger than himself. The boy is playing and walking down the street, and comes across Puruco's way. Puruco reacts in a violent way by hitting the boy and saying “Cuidao, men, que te parto un ojo” (80). Now is Puruco's chance to show his male supremacy, similar to Gavilán, similar to the way an animal shows his power against other dominant males. Becoming a man means demonstrating strength and physical power, and being part of the cycle in which every male eventually looks for a weaker male to dominate and humiliate.

From Hicks' perspective Gavilán, after being defeated, becomes a wounded man. He wants to maintain his prestige and status as dominant male, and cannot yet undertake the role of mentor or wise man. Puruco, on the other hand, is in the process of becoming a hero, but lacks the support of an elder to help him succeed in society. Without that support and mentorship, Puruco will become another violent man, which begins to occur by the end of the story. Probably, he will eventually find his place in society, but not as part of a natural





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ritual in which the elders make space for the youngsters, and each man maintains a role in that men's world. Instead he will find a negative place in society as a result of violence and dirty competition. Gavilán and Puruco will eventually become defeated males with no role in society, just as Rosendo in "Garabatos" or the vendor in "Bayaminiña."

Jack Agüero's "Johnny United"

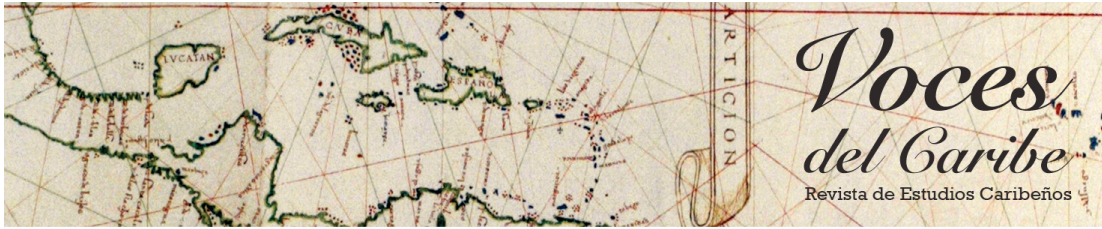
Jack Agüeros is a poet, short story writer, translator, and playwright born in New York's East Harlem in 1934. One of his important contributions is the translation of *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos*. He is also known as the former director of El Museo del Barrio in New York and as a community activist. In *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican*, Agüeros presents the reality of Puerto Ricans in New York, a reality that involves poverty, violence, lack of opportunities and the immobilization of many people living in the Barrio. Following, I focus on the story "Johnny United" included in *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican* to describe the agony of growing up without the love and support of a real father.

Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican is a collection of stories where violence and alienation have a central part. In "Dominoes" Agüeros uses the game as a metaphor of masculinity and male dominance and behavior. The game is supposed to be played in silence, and it is a game for "real machos." However, the silence turns into a shameful and violent scene. "Malig; Malig & Sal; Sal" deals with the reality of living in an uncomfortable low income apartment in New York. Sal is a smart, quiet and studious man, with the potential of becoming a writer but without the luck and angel that Piri had in *Down These Mean Streets*. By the end of the story, the silence and calmness of Sal contrasts with a scene of jealousy and violence he shows when his girlfriend tells him she is planning to move back to Puerto Rico. But, the most intriguing story in the collection is without a doubt "Johnny United."

"Johnny United" is another story of silence, where Johnny works without pay in his stepfather's bodega, and never complains about the treatment he receives from him. Johnny shares his only concern with his mother but she claims:

You have everything and I have everything. You have your own room, and no beatings. Give thanks to your stepfather. When you are older you will understand what it means to have everything. Be grateful, he doesn't beat you or me, and doesn't drink. We're never short of food, or short of





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anything. (58)

The reality is that Johnny has nothing, not even a bicycle, and no money “Which you needed to buy tape, broom handles, and which you needed to bet on your games, bet on your team. Take a girl out for a malted” (59). Johnny’s only escape from this hard reality is playing stickball, a version of baseball played with a broom stick, in which he is a big star. By the end of the story Johnny is ready to escape with “all the money he had saved from tips for delivering groceries” and another \$25.00 from where “his stingy father hid his money” (67).

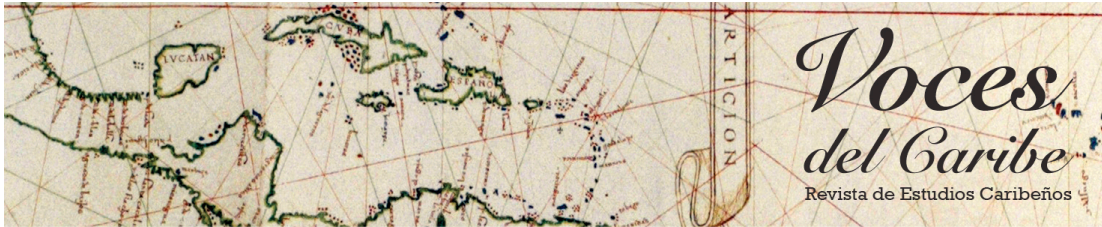
“Johnny United” is the story of a 16 year old lonely boy, who is already obliged to work in his stepfather’s business. His relationship with his stepfather is limited to a working relationship; there is no dialogue, mentoring, or guidance. At the end of the story, Johnny decides to leave as in many stories involving a father and son relationship (e.g. *Pinocchio*, “The Prodigal Son,” *Down These Mean Streets*), and the reader has to speculate about what happened to Johnny.

However, one can recognize the sense of abandonment in Johnny’s life. Dalbey indicates that such abandonment is a characteristic of today’s men’s world: “Whatever the reason, today’s men-in-the middle often feel abandoned by older men, even as by their fathers” (175). In this sense without a mentor Johnny would be completely lost, but with a sage to guide him and initiate him into manhood Johnny would be completely safe.

Discussion:

Piri, Pirulo, and Johnny are characterized by their loneliness and lack of guidance to become real men in society. The elders – Piri’s father, Gavilán, Johnny’s stepfather – are examples of wounded men incapable of leading a young man into manhood, and who did not assume their roles as mentors or sages. Piri’s father does not want to deal with his son’s issues and concerns related to his racial identity. Gavilán perceives Pirulo as a competitor and tries to put him out of sight. Johnny’s stepfather submits him to work at a young age, without pay and without the possibilities of enjoying life. According to Hicks – based on Carl Jung’s ideas– the wounded man is a natural and necessary stage in men’s development because “it is only through wounding that a man becomes aware of many of the unconscious elements in his being” (100). In order to surpass the wounded male stage men “need to feel safety among men who have also suffered pain” and “they need to be honored and valued by both men and women” (120). In “The Konk” the pain is only recognized by the mother, but it is never understood nor valued by the father. In “Campeones” and “Johnny





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United” that pain remained hidden in silence. Pirulo transfers his pain by hitting the younger boy, and Johnny by escaping the reality that is hurting him.

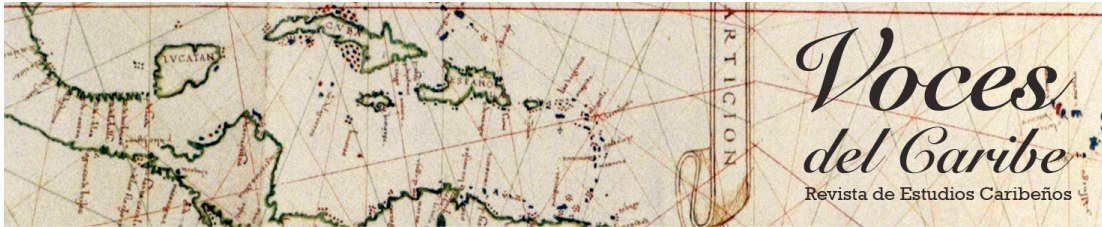
The absence of the father contributes to the pain many young men experience during the process of growing up. Chinen indicates that: the painful distance between fathers and sons is usually the result of a wound in the father’s soul. Some fathers are alcoholics, some workaholics, other are tyrants, or overly timid. Whatever the overt failing, an inner injury prevents the father from nurturing his sons. The father cannot give more to his sons, rather than will not. (15)

Hence, the wounds are presented as a cycle, keeping the distance between fathers and sons for generations. If the father is capable of healing his own wounds, he is then capable of giving new direction to his life and to the life of his son(s).

Each one of the young characters in the stories presented in this study wants to become a hero in one way or another. Piri wants to be recognized, although he takes the road of crime to fulfill that need. Later in his life he is able to become a hero – to be a voice through the art of writing. The prologue of *Down These Mean Streets* shows the voice of the hero who addresses the readers “I’m here, and I want recognition, whatever that mother-fuckin word means” (ix). Pirulo also wants to be a hero by becoming a pool champion. However, that heroic title seems to come with illegal connections, with sex, with physical strength, and male dominance. And finally, Johnny is as well into his search to become a hero in the sport of stickball. But perhaps, his most heroic act is leaving his stepfather and finding a life for himself.

Hicks characterizes the warrior/hero as the powerful energy in every man, a type of energy that longs for “hardcharging, fighting the competition, winning in the game of life, and being proud of the victories he had won” (72). According to Hicks that warrior spirit is expressed in different ways such as a young athlete on the football field, a man in the business arena, a gay man trying to gain acceptance in the military. Chinen presents the archetype of the patriarch in antagonism with the hero, although they both derived from the same root: “the hero is the patriarch-to-be, the patriarch, an aging hero, and the two fight for dominance” (6). Gavilán represents the patriarch who doesn’t want to give up his dominance and tries to eliminate Pirulo from the scenario. Pirulo, on the other side, is already inheriting the patriarch’s elements of dominance and submission.





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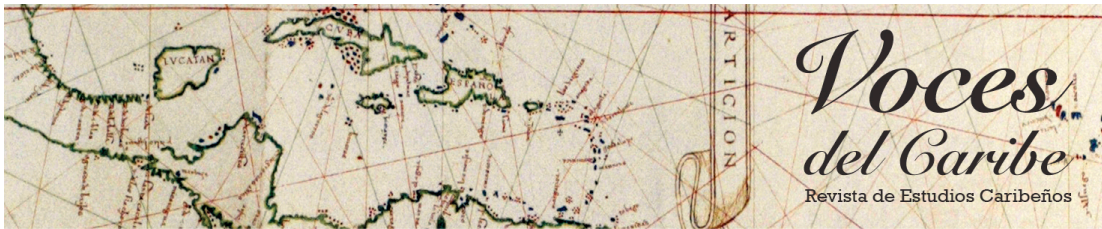
In *Stories from El Barrio*, Thomas presents another reality in the process of becoming a hero. In "The Three Mosquiteers," the three boys from the story are engaged in a Boy Scout adventure where they get lost and end up losing their new uniforms. One of the kids is afraid about his parents' reaction and asks "Ma?...Ain't you gonna ask me where my brand new uniform is?" The mom who receives the three adventurers with good food and "flan de coco" responds in a very supportive way: "No, I already know and so does your Poppa. Your scout leader called to explain and said he would also call Johnny Cruz's parents and a boy named Abraham's family. He said to tell you that you all will be getting new uniforms, courtesy of the Boy Scouts of America (36)." In this story, the three heroes are well received. Both parents were able to clearly understand the situation, and the Boy Scouts supported the three boys after the incident. Finally, they are able to continue the search for their hero inner spirit because as Hicks reaffirms "Men who never discover the warrior aspect of their being are not real men" (76). In this didactic story by Piri Thomas the process seems to be completed.

Brewster is the only sage among the male characters presented in these stories. He guides Piri during a short period of his life, and eventually without that guidance Piri feels alone and with no direction. Eventually Piri receives the guidance of other sages who lead him to become a writer who is able to share his life experiences. The didactic tone of *Stories from El Barrio* brings out the sage in Piri. Personally, after hearing Piri Thomas in a presentation at John Carroll University in 2001, I was able to perceive him as a sage.

Hicks describes the sage as the fulfilled man, who has developed the ability to suffer loss of younger family members and spouses, who has some connection with the community, who has integrated humor in his life, who has faith in God, and who is able to be a mentor to other aspiring young men. Although Brewster disappeared in a mysterious way, he is a sage in the sense that he tries to give direction to Piri's life. Brewster takes Piri to the south on a journey that helps Piri to look at himself and to the reality of Black people during that time. During the journey Brewster disappears:

That was our only laugh in New Orleans. The snatch had separate pads, so we split, and agreed to meet on the ship. Brew never made it. I don't know what happened. Maybe he was gonna pick peas on a prison farm or maybe he went back to Mobile for something he forgot the first time. I waited by the gangplank until they pulled it up and the ship began to





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slide away from its pier; I searched the darkness for my black brother, my ace-boon coon. But he didn't show. I never saw him again. (187)
After that incident, Piri's life collapses. The mentorship process is not completed, and without the support of the father or Brew, he is totally lost with no guidance in his process of becoming a man.

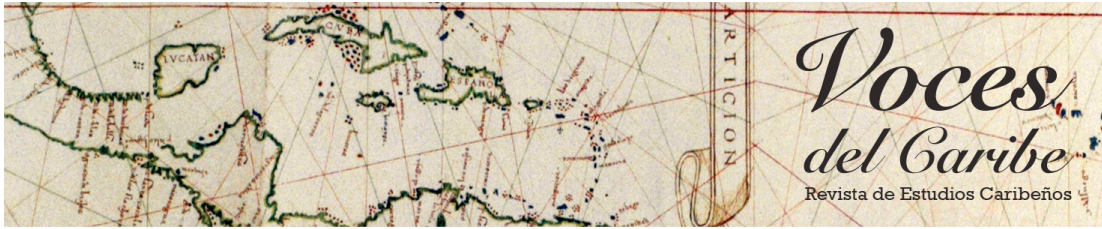
In *Stories from El Barrio*, Piri Thomas (the author of the book) becomes the sage. All the stories are developed in the barrio. The elements of poverty and limitations are there, but the support and unity of the family make a difference in the development and ending of each story. Instead of having stories with violence and tragic endings, we have stories with an optimistic tone. Throughout all the stories the voice of Piri Thomas is present, like saying to the readers "this is the way our lives in the barrio will be if we get together, if we have support from parents and community, if our children are raised in an environment of love and unity."

Conclusion:

The stories analyzed in this study are a reflection of the reality of male Hispanics who live in conditions of poverty and lack of opportunities in the United States. Thomas, Soto and Agüeros write about life in New York, about the difficulties of growing up as member of a minority group, about the agony and sadness of living in solitude without direction, about the difficulty of becoming a man in a minority setting. Thomas and Soto were born and raised in El Barrio, and Soto lived a period of his life in New York. However, the three authors capture the poor and sad conditions of Puertor Ricans in New York.

Following Mirandé, Ramírez, and Espada's recommendations, I decided not to focus on the machista behavior and violence that supposedly characterizes Latin American males. Instead I decided to look at manhood as a process with different stages and different possibilities. Although taking into consideration the hero/warrior archetype, the study moves beyond the hero image presented by the gurus of the American male movement, and rather focus on behavior and stages in a man's life. This perspective agrees with other more contemporary male studies' writers such as Chinen and Hicks who make an effort to describe the male psyche beyond the parameters of the hero. While Chinen analyzes the elements that help us to understand the deep side of males throughout the world, Hicks focuses on stages that characterize male development. In both cases, male archetypes are useful in explaining the inner side of men and going beyond the limiting hero and the machista image criticized by several





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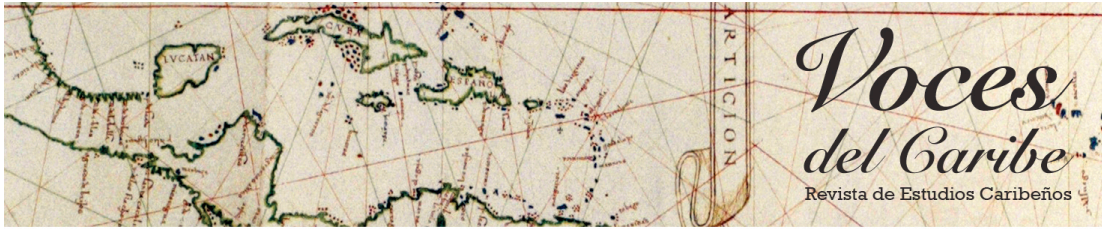
researchers.

This study focus on three stages or archetypes included (directly or indirectly) in both Hicks's and Chinen's works: the hero/warrior, the wounded man, and the sage. The hero/warrior image is useful in looking at the younger characters of the story: Piri wanting to become someone and to be recognized by his people; Pirulo wanting to become the new pool champion of the barrio; and Johnny, a stickball star whose most heroic act is that he decides to escape from the environment that is destroying his life. In the case of Pirulo and Piri, the rising hero is also connected with violence and dominance. The hero/warrior image, as Chinen suggests, goes together with the image of the patriarch who does not allow the young hero emerge. This is also symbolic of the distance and separation that have existed between father (the patriarch) and son (the hero) throughout history.

The wounded man is representative of those same patriarchs who have not been able to give their dominance or are not capable of looking at themselves – with their own agonies, complexes, and failures. Piri's father is a wounded man who cannot acknowledge his and his son's ethnicity, who lives in a world surrounded by poverty, discrimination and lack of opportunities. Gavilán is a wounded man who is not capable of giving up his dominance, and instead of recognizing Pirulo's abilities, he prefers to react in a violent way trying to humiliate the "new champion." And finally, Johnny's stepfather is a wounded man who remains silent, who submits Johnny to his own interest, without helping him to grow and develop like a normal young man. Those three characters are stuck on that stage without the possibility of maturing or mentoring other young males in the future. Piri also became a wounded man, but in his case is was not on a static stage as in the previous examples, but rather a part of his growing process, a condition that eventually will change as long as he successfully faces other realities and experiences.

The wise man or sage is more limited in the stories. There is not a sage in Pirulo's or in Jack's stories. Both are surrounded by wounded males who are not capable of helping them to grow and mature. In *Down These Mean Streets*, Brew takes the role of the sage, but his appearance in Piri's life is very short, leaving Piri with no direction or support in his life. Brew went through years of wounds, wounds that were still part of his life. However, Brew is capable of giving advice to Piri and taking him through a journey that helps Piri look at the reality of minorities in the United States before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.





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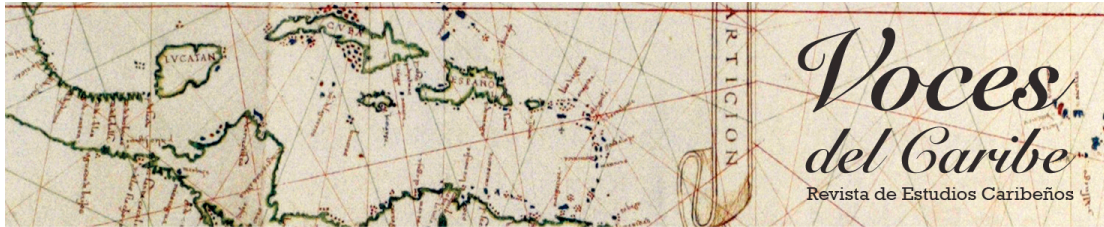
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Piri became a sage himself through his writing, especially through the positive short stories included in *Stories from El Barrio*. He is the wise man addressing a young audience in an entertaining and didactic way.

I did not include the other stages described by Hicks, such as the creational and the phallic male. Further research is needed to postulate more challenging views about Latino males and about men in general. The Puerto Rican literature of the Diaspora contributes to the understanding and characterization of males. Thomas, Soto, and Agüero are wonderful examples for looking at men's journey, because their characters have to grow, develop, and confront difficulties in their process of becoming men in a minority setting surrounded by poverty, scarcity, violence, and lack of opportunities to mature and to become productive men in today's world.

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