



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

Iorio Sandín, Lyn Di

Latino rage: the life and work of ed rivera

Centro Journal, vol. XIV, núm. 1, 2002, pp. 169-181

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37711290014>

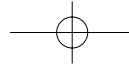
- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative



CENTRO JOURNAL

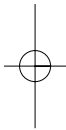
VOLUME XIV NUMBER I
SPRING 2002

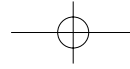
Latino Rage: The Life and Work of Ed Rivera

LYN DI IORIO SANDÍN

ABSTRACT

In her personal reflection on—and critical reading of—Ed Rivera’s literary work, the author searches out an aspect of the fragmented Latino psyche. Because “Latino rage” expresses itself indirectly, it is overlooked not only by mainstream America, but also by Latinos themselves. The first part of her essay, “Egolessness,” shows how Ed’s humility—which his friends saw as his defining trait—masked anger. The second part of the essay, “The Saintly *¿baro* and the Madwoman in the *Bob o*,” demonstrates that the character of the madwoman in Ed’s novel *Family Installments* (1982) represents the repressed and angry aspect of Latino identity. “In Hiding,” the final section of the essay, analyzes how the protagonist of Ed’s novel rages against the passivity and humility, bred into him, by projecting them onto his father, whom he then angrily rejects. The essay holds up Ed Rivera’s life and work as a kind of mirror for Latinos. Like his novel’s protagonist, Ed only partially expressed his rage, which tended to haunt his life and work, preventing him from fulfilling his brilliant promise as a writer.



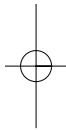


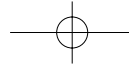
Latino rage expresses itself indirectly and goes unrecognized in U.S. culture. It is unlike African-American rage, which arose from centuries of subjugation, and has been absorbed into America's cultural consciousness. Although Latinos are seen as a quickly growing minority group, suffering socioeconomic ills similar to those suffered by African-Americans, our struggles are not viewed as equally relevant. It's not just the mainstream, however, that denies Latino rage—we ourselves don't recognize it. The direct expression of anger goes against the normative behavior passed down from our islands or countries of origin—*hospitalidad*, *dignidad*, courtesy, humility—codes of conduct that encourage us to hide our rage. In this way, Ed Rivera, the New York-based Puerto Rican writer, is exemplary—in both his work and life. Ed published various stories and articles, but he is best remembered for the *bildungsroman* *Family Installments* (1982). The novel tracks the effects of suppressed rage in both its protagonist, Santos, and in his father, Gerán. A poor but hardworking *j barito*, Gerán constantly fails to better his family's situation on the island and in New York. The father's patient humility, in the face of continuing disappointments, astounds the son. As the boy matures, his incredulity turns into rage, which he's never able to understand or completely express. The result is a kind of self-deprecatory irony that helps the boy withstand pain as much as it prevents him from fully accepting himself. In his own life, Ed's self-lacerating wit similarly masked suppressed rage. Perhaps the best proof of how crippling was that rage is the simple fact that—for all his talent and ambition—Ed wrote only one book.

Egolessness

On Nov. 26, 2001 colleagues, friends, and former students—as well as Ed's brother, a sister, and their families—participated in City College's Center for Worker Education's celebration of Ed's life and work. In the early fall, Ed had died of a massive heart attack that doctors saw as the result of his prostate cancer, a terminal condition that many of Ed's colleagues—myself included—had not known about. As the celebration progressed, the majority of Ed's grieving friends named characteristics that spun variations on a theme. Ed was humble, ironic, generous, sardonic, erudite, funny, passionate, self-effacing, a punster. One young woman, Leigh Shulman, who had worked as Ed's teaching assistant in a City College creative writing class, noted with sad wonder that “Ed had no ego.” Ed's brother, Richie Rivera, about whose status as a judge in Brooklyn Ed had boasted to me, described a heroic, muscular, belligerent—to me unrecognizable—young Ed who protected his little brother from El Barrio's meanest hoods and raised rooftop carrier pigeons. Ed—after death even more the heroic and stoical barrio tough to his brother Richie—had apparently contemplated writing a novel that in some way would include the pigeons. Abraham Rodríguez, whose words were read by Juan Flores because Abraham could not be at the ceremony in person, struck the angriest note that evening wondering why Ed had been forgotten by other writers and scholars in the Latino community. In my own speech, I too expressed my sense that Ed's work had been ignored by his peers—Latino *and* mainstream writers and scholars—although not by his Latino readership, as the healthy shelf life of *Family Installments* has shown.

Kathy Roe, a novelist-turned-psychoanalyst-in-training and arguably Ed's oldest friend, struck the most profound note at the celebration in her uncompromising sincerity about her friend of thirty years. Ed was supremely gifted, she said, but crippled by suffering and neediness. In psychic pain himself, he often could not help hurting his friends by distancing himself from them. In conversation with me, Kathy





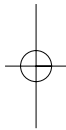
was more explicit. Ed was emotionally very demanding. If you failed to meet Ed's demands, he could turn on you. And then if you were taken aback by the surprising edges of Ed's anger, he would pull back far and deep, anticipating rejection with rejection. I asked Kathy why Ed had never married. She pointed out that she'd seen him at his happiest and healthiest when he lived with one of his girlfriends for three years. Ultimately, however, he had felt overwhelmed by the demands of that relationship. Time and time again, he had run away when confronted by another person's desire for intimacy. Kathy and I talked about Ed, discovering little bits and pieces we hadn't known about his life. "He kept so many things secret," Kathy said, adding that he also tended to tell friends different things, as if deliberately trying to keep everybody off track. He had lately told me, for example, that he was working on a book of autobiographical essays, but he told Kathy he was writing a novel inspired by the suicide of a childhood friend.

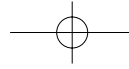
I had not dared speak myself about Ed's anger, his caginess and his suffering, surmising that these topics were too "heavy" for what, after all, had been touted as a celebration. In an attempt to delve into a darker aspect of Ed, I briefly spoke about his frustrated writing life and the nightmare demons he had described to me as both stirring and tormenting his creativity. At the celebration I chose only to speak of Ed's need for "dreamtime," days upon days of solitude, reading and writing, or just sitting around doing apparently nothing (as a nonwriter might see it), the proper gestation period for authoring articles and books. Teaching tended to rob Ed of his dreamtime—this had been one of the explanations he'd given me for not having produced more than one book.

The dreamtime, however, had its abysses where Ed's demons flourished. I learned this apropos of Irene Vilar's memoir *The Ladies Gallery* (1996), which I was writing a lecture on for my 1999 Latino writers class at City College. The book details Vilar's descent into madness and her relationship with her grandmother, Lolita Lebrón, the Puerto Rican nationalist icon who took part in the 1954 shoot-up of the U.S. House of Representatives. The book also chronicles Vilar's attempts to understand her memories of Gladys—Lolita's daughter and Vilar's mother—who committed suicide by throwing herself from a moving car when Vilar was a child. One of the hallucinations that Vilar experiences during her madness involves the image of a grotesque, squat, familiar resembling her grandmother. This demon version of Lolita pulls the blue, elongated veins out of a wound in its wrist, thereby frightening and tormenting Vilar.

Ed said he'd been plagued by a demon similar to the Lolita apparition in Vilar's book. He used the term "succubus" to describe this creature, which would sometimes crouch on his back and bear down on it, as if trying to suffocate him. In the perfect lucidity that hindsight brings, I now wish I'd dared to ask Ed about the sexual implications behind his use of the term, which I wasn't clearly aware of at the time of our conversation since then my main focus was understanding Vilar's hallucinations (hallucinations which, when traced in writing, undermine the straitlaced ideology of Puerto Rican nationalism represented by Lolita Lebrón).

It was only recently, as I pondered my American Heritage dictionary's definition of the succubus as "a female demon supposed to descend upon and have sexual intercourse with a man while he sleeps," that I wish I had asked Ed more questions about the creature that he described. *Succubare* is Latin for lying under, but Ed emphasized that his night time visitor practically crushed him from above. "Are you sure it wasn't an incubus," is how I would query Ed's ghost, since it is the incubus—the





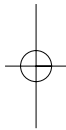
male demon deemed responsible for fathering many bastard babies during the Middle Ages—which descends upon its victim. Yet the dictionary also allows that the incubus can be, in a more general usage, “something oppressively or nightmarishly burdensome.” Ed, like most writers, was precise in his use of words, so when he said the word “succubus” he must have meant a female demon. My consternation at failing to completely understand his reference would have amused Ed. I can just hear him, chuckling ruefully over my ruminations. “Ah, come on, Lyn. Don’t read too much into it.” That would have been his way of avoiding an analysis that hit too close to home.

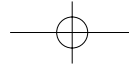
Ed was remarkably generous, one of those rare friends who will read a book that you are reading just because you need to discuss it. He would do this despite the fact that his course load at City College and the Center for Worker Education had him “reading up the wazoo” as he would put it. He was as eager a reader of my fiction—which he loved—as he was of my academic prose—which he candidly hated (“Too much *jargon*, Lyn!”). Because he was so honest about the second judgment, I could often trust him about the first. He was my first, and for a long time my closest friend in the City College English Department, where I was hired in 1997 as his colleague in Latino/a and Caribbean literatures and Creative Writing. I was immediately drawn to Ed’s erudition, his humor which so often focused on the linguistics of Spanglish, and, of course, his passionate, omnivorous devotion to literature. And then the fact that he had been born in Puerto Rico but had grown up in New York, whereas I had been born in Brooklyn, but had grown up in San Juan, was endlessly fascinating to both of us. Perhaps in each other we saw our own reflections—age and gender distorted—as if in a fun house mirror. I encountered, too, as others did, his mask of apparent humility.

He was so different in the flesh from what I had expected. I read *Family Installments* for the first time in 1996 when, as a Five Colleges Fellow at Amherst College in Massachusetts, I taught a class in Puerto Rican Literature (from New York and the Island). I extended a written invitation to Ed to come visit at Amherst—his expenses would have been paid on top of a sizable honorarium. Ed never answered the letter—it turned out he simply had never gotten it. (One of the many hazards of teaching at City College, we later joked about, was “the dead letter” situation and the many Bartleby the Scrivener types who “preferred not to” deliver messages or sort mail). Ed didn’t attend any of the interviews or presentations I gave at City College as part of the job application process. I assumed, at the time, that this Ed Rivera must be very busy and perhaps more than a bit standoffish.

The developing personality of the young Santos in *Family Installments*—whom I couldn’t help identifying with Ed—takes up so much psychic space in the book that I assumed Ed would have a narcissistic, solipsistic personality, the kind displayed by so many writers I have met, particularly male writers. How wrong I was. Ed’s personality was so different from those of his Latino—and non Latino—writing peers, young and old. He had a humble demeanor, as many have noted. And he seemed physically frail, this despite the fact that he had trained with weights all his life, a fact I gleaned, after his death, from Kathy Roe. It was only after his death, too, that I saw pictures of a younger Ed, beaming with vitality, and sporting a mop of gloriously springy dark hair and black rimmed owlsh glasses that made him look like Hector Lavoe, another talented and tragic *boricua*.

During the time I knew him, Ed looked pale and ashy skinned, like the ghost of the joyous young maverick of the photos. In one of the photos that we have highlighted for this issue, Ed looks like a self-conscious rebel, his left hip jutting out

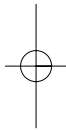


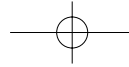


rebelliously at an angle, the corners of his mouth upturned in what might be the start of an expressive sneer, cigarette idling in the left hand, the left hand jumpy, just waiting for the photographer to finish taking the picture to scoot the cigarette back to where it belongs. So much hip, hair, and smoke: the self-confident bravado of a young writer. The Ed I knew, on the other hand, was gentle to the point of passivity. For example, he never said anything during faculty meetings (I didn't either, though, for the most part). We both had a sense of being outsiders, much more so than our African-American cohorts, only one out of the four of whom was as silent in meetings as the two of us.

One thing that struck me about Ed was how he literally looked *down* during the meetings, sometimes this was because he was jotting down notes—not about something on the agenda, since he never looked up or spoke—obviously in preparation for teaching an afternoon class. The fact that he never looked up during the meetings underlined the fact—for me, the aspiring younger colleague—that he was obviously not looked up to. This pained me. The looking down, and the silence, were signs of humility, perhaps, but more probably of weakness. I could not help feeling strongly that his weakness somehow reflected a weakness I suspected in myself, an incapacity to stand up to those in power. The mask of humility contrasted strikingly with the high-flown masks worn by many of the writers and scholars of City College's English department—so much so as to be remarked upon by Leigh Shulman, who, as a graduate student in the City College master's degree program was well acquainted with most of the writing faculty. Leigh told me that Ed was the striking—and only—example of a type she wished she could have encountered more often in her creative writing classes and workshops—a gentle, erudite teacher who seemed to collapse his own ego in order to nurture those of his students and advisees. But soon after I met Ed it seemed clear to me that the so-called humility was a cover for a side of him that Leigh—who only knew him for a few months—never saw: the angry, frustrated Ed. Leigh never saw Ed as Lucifer, only the angel before the fall into paranoia and rage.

The first time I encountered in Ed this quality I want to call rage, and more specifically Latino rage, was towards the end of 1998, when I neglected to call him back during a busy week in the school term. I often felt incapable of returning Ed's calls immediately because whenever we spoke it was hard to get off the phone with him. This was something Leigh and another friend of Ed's, Krysia Jopek, also experienced, and spoke of during the celebration speeches. Was it only with women that Ed exerted so much phone tyranny? If I tried to be polite, merely hinting that I had somewhere to go, or something to do, Ed would not acknowledge this. He would edge in a question or comment, and thus keep the conversation going. Our conversations were always interesting—about books we liked, writers we knew, about Puerto Rico, about Puerto Rico in New York, about our favorite writers (his all-time favorite was García Márquez, whom he called “the master”). We also talked about Latin music; he loved the “old stuff,” such as Rafael Hernández's compositions and Los Panchos. I introduced him to slightly newer oldies such as Silvio Rodríguez and Caetano Veloso. Ed left a message on my home voicemail in the middle of the week, but I let a couple of days pass before answering it. At week's end, he'd left an irate message on my voicemail at school—he wanted an explanation about why I had not returned his previous call. I called back immediately, and he was at home. I tried to set the tone with him through a joke. “Ed, I didn't know you had such a bad temper.” And then, somewhat reluctantly but with humor lightening his tone of voice, he told





me he supposed he did have a bad temper. I told him I had been busy but that I would have answered his message eventually, of course. Of course. Then his voice which tended towards tinniness, cracked a little. He told me he disliked dishonesty, having people lie to him and otherwise take him for a fool.

I laughed nervously for, of course, technically speaking, I was being dishonest. I didn't want to hurt him by telling him the truth—that I had known we would be on the phone for a couple of hours and that I hadn't wanted to spend so much time chatting. I hemmed and hawed, but we were both uncomfortable. Later, I realized that Ed's anger was not just about a phone call that had not been returned. It had to do with his disappointment at the level of intimacy in our relationship. Quite possibly, he wanted more, but he couldn't, or didn't want to, articulate that. He got off the phone quickly, a glaring measure of his disenchantment. We didn't speak for a very long time after that. A summer went by, and perhaps a whole semester, and when we spoke again, it was I who called him. Thereafter, for the most part, I would have to call him; he rarely called me first unless there was a pretext (the CD I had loaned him, the book he had loaned me). The phone chats continued, of course, to be very intense and long and, as before, it was hard for me to end the conversations—Ed seemed capable of talking forever.

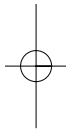
The Saintly *Jíbaro* and the Madwoman in the *Bohío*

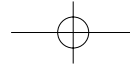
The first chapter of *Family Installments*, “Antecedentes,” is in many ways one of the finest in the book, for its deft expository characterization of both sets of the protagonist's Puerto Rican grandparents, for its vivid, almost naturalistic, portrayal of the Puerto Rican countryside during the 1920s and 1930s and, most of all, for its textured examination of the effects of machismo on Puerto Rican womanhood:

At night, when Gigante was home, she bestowed herself on him, put his seed in private storage, and watched her belly swell right on time year after year. She was pregnant nine months out of twelve for ten years running, and in the tenth year her overworked womb quit on her. I think of her dying with a scream in her gaping mouth, or even a curse on her husband and that all-fours life she'd led. But my mother said she never cursed.

Gigante's neighbors envied him his success in rearing such close-to-perfect daughters almost by himself. What hard workers they all were! What obedience and loyalty! What humility! The Hernández girls were known as *las hermanas humildes*, the humble sisters. And all eight of them, or at least seven, were proud of it, to the point sometimes of *orgullo*, pride. But this the village cleric helped them overcome in the confessional.¹

In this passage, the narrator-protagonist, Santos, records his outright protest of the “all-fours life”—that the arch-father, Papá Gigante, forces on his wife and plans for his daughters (much to the town's delight). More interesting than the protest itself, however, is the tone employed by the narrator, a tone through which irony tempers anger, without letting go of empathy.² Santos deals with his own anger at the abuses of Papá Gigante by identifying with “the saint” and “footstool,” his grandmother Socorro. At the same time, he is also criticizing her for being too humble, for letting herself be debased by her husband. The narrator takes on the





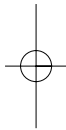
mask of the character (in this case his dead grandmother) but judges her reality with his own eyes. This sensitive, complex approach allowed Ed to create one of the most interesting and also—since she takes up barely five pages of the novel’s first chapter—the most short-lived female character in U.S. Latino/a fiction: Josefa, the great-grandmother who in her madness completely flouts the saintliness and *humildad* touted by her town—and her husband—as the supreme human virtues.

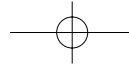
Papá Santos Malánguez was a poor hillbilly, a *j baro desgraciado*, and, said my father, who was his favorite, the kindest man he ever knew. Papá Santos was so good that whenever there wasn’t enough food for everyone—and that was often—he used to steal chickens and vegetables from his neighbors. He always paid them back by doing favors, without letting them know the reason. This chicken-thief Robin Hood of Bautabarro was likely to deny himself a pair of badly needed pants...so that his...grandsons wouldn’t have to walk around those hills looking like orphans. Which they did just the same; but the point was that Papá Santos would do anything for these three orphans. He’d been, in short, a saint.

His wife, Josefa, added much misery to Papá Santos’ hard-luck life. She was a *loca*, and he had to look after her all the time. One time she tried to burn the house down. Another time she tried to kill Santos with his own machete. She put shit in the food, and sometimes, on a crazy whim, she would shit on the floor instead of using the chamber pot or making a trip to the outhouse. Nightmares haunted her. Seven times a week she woke up the house with her screams; she said her enemies—Papá Santos was one of them—were trying to kill her.³

The fact that the novel’s protagonist is named after his great-grandfather, Santos, proves just how important that character’s story is to the novel, however brief it may be. The great-grandfather adopts his grandson Gerán after the latter’s father commits suicide. To be kind and humble to the point of “saintliness” is extolled by the Puerto Rican community, so much so that the characteristic is memorialized in the protagonist’s name. On the other hand, the relationship between Josefa and Papá Santos demonstrates just how big a strain it is to keep up the façade of *santidad* and *humildad*. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s classic study, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the figure of the madwoman is expressive of the suppressed rage of nineteenth-century British women writers who had to be covert about their rebelliousness if they wanted to keep their readers. The madwoman in Ed’s novel performs a similar function, expressing a rage that highlights even more vividly Papá Santos’ abnegation.

Papá Santos might or might not be angry at many things—at a larger social structure that looks on impassively while his family starves; at his neighbors, who won’t willingly share their chickens; even at his grandsons themselves, who can’t earn men’s wages but need to eat as much as wage-earning men. If he’s not mad about this lousy situation, Josefa sure is. Josefa’s seemingly insane actions reveal what is insufficient for the family’s needs: the house (she tries to burn it down) and the food (she makes a succulent *sancocho* for the grandsons using her own piss as broth). Josefa also targets the principal cause of all her stress, the patriarchy as represented by Papá Santos (whom she tries to murder using his own machete) and his favorite grandson Gerán (whom she also tries to kill).





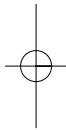
Josefa's craziness parodies the logic of self-abnegation in Latino communities where self-sacrifice and devotion to male children violently overlap. The madwoman takes the self-sacrifice of a Papá Santos to a brutal extreme. By attempting to feed her grandchildren with her own bodily emissions, Josefa shows that self-sacrifice is nothing less than the annihilation of the self for the sake of the family. At a certain point in her madness, Josefa takes to non-stop shitting on the floor planks of the *bacho* so that the three young boys are forced to constantly clean up after her. It is as if she is competing with the boys—her loss of control of her bodily functions infantilizes her and ironically forces an adult role upon them, even though they are the ones who need the caretaking.

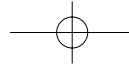
After I read Robert McCormick's dissertation on *ataques de nervios*, or the so-called Puerto Rican syndrome, Ed and I had conversations about whether or not Josefa might have been afflicted with this condition. Ed was intrigued by the idea, but had never heard of Puerto Rican syndrome, which derives its name from a coinage made by U.S. army surgeons during the Korean war. Puerto Rican soldiers, treated by these doctors, exhibited strange symptoms such as partial loss of consciousness; convulsive movements; hyperventilation; moaning and groaning of varying intensity; aggressiveness to the self or to others in the form of biting, scratching, and striking; and a full range of psychotic behavior including coprophagy or shit-eating. Although the term might be a misnomer for a variety of mental illnesses ranging from schizophrenia to dissociative reactions, McCormick notes that "a certain collection of symptoms has had enough cultural specificity to lead observers to designate a unique 'Puerto Rican syndrome.'"⁴

What is most unique about the syndrome is its violence, which might be the result of the difficulty Puerto Ricans have in dealing with aggressive feelings—"when Puerto Ricans talk about feelings of 'nervousness' they describe situations in which they clearly feel angry."⁵ Puerto Rican syndrome seems typical of stressors associated with living in the U.S. Nonetheless, Ed said that his mother had told him that there were many cases like Josefa's (involving men as well as women) in their hometown of Orocovis in the 1920s, a time in which people in the Puerto Rican countryside were literally dying of hunger, or from epidemic diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria. Although the culture change, "from a Spanish tradition where outward assertiveness and aggressiveness is discouraged, to American society where it is valued and encouraged,"⁶ seems to be the principal cause of the syndrome, what Ed intuitively shows in the relationship between Josefa and Papá Santos in *Family Installments* is that the "Spanish tradition" was always already being contested by women, the poor, children, and everybody else except the Papás Gigantes of Puerto Rico.

In Hiding

If there was a Josefa, or a succubus, pressing down on Ed's psyche, it is only because that angry part of him had to contend with the insidious sanctimony of his inner Papá Santos. The gentle, long-suffering *j baro* male is the model for both Gerán, the protagonist's father in the novel, and Segundo, the hero of a longish short story Ed published in *The Nation*, "The story of Segundo and Magda" (later lengthened for inclusion in the anthology *While Someone Else is Eating* (1984) as "Segundo's Benefits"). *The Nation* story was part of a series in which well-known fiction writers were commissioned to write about social issues. In the story a stroke incapacitates Segundo—a head shipping clerk at a dress company—who is then at the mercy of government bureaucrats who constantly deny his claims for disability benefits. Ed





frequently noted in classroom presentations, as well as in conversation, that the American public was more interested in stereotypes of Latinos (the drug dealing male, the female sex pot) than in the less picturesque reality of hard working, lower middle- and middle-class Latinos. The story is a relentlessly bleak depiction of what it is like to meander helplessly through the civil service labyrinth of the Bronx. The irony of Segundo's situation is driven home by the story's refrain of "Segundo sympathized" whenever Segundo plays sycophant to his bosses. These men, on the one hand, lavish Segundo with praise for being their best shipping clerk but, on the other, only demonstrate their appreciation through miserly five- and ten-dollar raises. In the end, Ed's meek, hardworking protagonists complement, as well as contrast with, Piri Thomas' defiant persona in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). Double racism (in American society, and in Piri's self-hating black Latino father) lends Piri's anger the resonance of African-American rage. Ed's frustrated (and light-skinned) Latino anti-heroes have no such recourse. If Gerán's dogged humility infuriates the young Santos in *Family Installments*, Segundo's saintly patience ultimately ticks off the reader of "Segundo's Benefits."

The last time Segundo calls to ask about the progress of his stalled case, he is told for the gazillionth time that his case is pending. "This time he almost lost his temper," the narrator tells us, "but he got hold of himself. Giving some anonymous official a piece of his mind would...only shoot up his blood pressure... So he hung up politely and distracted himself with his dominoes."⁷ The anger in the narrator's tone is unmistakable, but, even so, Segundo is an exasperating character because there is no hint of fury, or protest, in his posture of endurance.

In "Digging In," a chapter towards the end of *Family Installments* focusing on Gerán's lonely experiences in New York before his wife and sons arrive, Santos for the first time notices Gerán's tendency to repress anger. The context is Gerán's recounting of how, many years ago, when his family was still in Bautabarro (Ed's made-up mountain town on the island) a woman named Lilia, like Gerán's wife, sends a telegram to him masquerading as Lilia herself. Upon arrival, this woman wins his sympathy with a story of hardship, and lives off Gerán for a while in order to get by. Then one day this manipulative woman disappears without a word. The young Santos is outraged when he hears this story:

"Did you try to track her down at least?"

"What for? She was on her own now. I have a feeling some man in that import-export place fell in love with her, and that was that."

"And you weren't even angry?"

"For what?"

"For being taken in by this Pompilia Lilia."

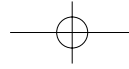
"Lilia Pompilia."

"All right."

"No, I wasn't. What for? It happens all the time."

"Not angry," he repeated, but frustrated, impatient to get his own family over.⁸

Anger is repressed by Gerán because to admit to it would be to acknowledge that he has been wronged by Lilia Pompilia, whose insipidity as a person is implied by her grandiloquent Latinate name. Anger leads to shame, but Gerán avoids confronting his feelings with the commonplace phrase "It happens all the time." What the father



hides from himself becomes a heavier burden for the son who is constantly confronting rage and shame in scene after bittersweet scene in the novel.

In Chapter Three, “Chuito and La Manca,” a Santos barely out of long pants is initiated sexually by his older cousin Chuito, who forces the kindergartner to have sex with a cow—La Manca. The cow responds to the boy’s amorousness by shitting on him. Although the child is shamed to tears, Chuito’s laughing off of the incident leaves Santos relatively unscathed emotionally. If one is to compare this scene, however, with similar childhood initiation scenes involving bestiality—in the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas’ *Before Night Falls* (1993), and in the Colombian-American Jaime Manrique’s *Latin Moon in Manhattan* (1992)—what is striking is the complete absence of eroticism in the La Manca episode. When Santos is older, he experiences an even greater humiliation, documented in Chapter Four, “First Communion,” in which nervousness and anxiety make Santos pee in public as he is receiving the Host:

Father Matt had his paten under my chin—cold metal—and I felt a familiar warm dribble working its way down my thigh, spoiling my fresh pair of First Communion shorts. The whole place was looking on, except possibly Papi and Mami, who must have been staring down at their hands in embarrassment. Then the worst of all possible things happened: the Host broke in half on my nose. I still had my eyes shut, so I didn’t see just how Father Rooney managed to do it but I could figure it out. I must have made him nervous, and instead of slapping it down on the tip of my tongue, he caught the tip of my nose, and the presence broke in two. One half stayed in Father Rooney’s fingers, and the other floated past my tongue, bounced off the railing...and came to a stop on the symbol-crowded rug.

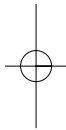
Both priests gasped at the same time and crossed themselves. Everyone in church, except for the sleeping winos in the back, must have done the same thing.⁹

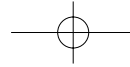
This scene, hilarious and painful in equal measure, is Santos’ induction, not into the mysteries of the transubstantiation of Christ, but into the rites of Latino self-repression. The extremely brief exchange that Gerán has with his son about the incident at the end of the chapter is illuminating:

“You was nervous, Santos,” Papi said in English while we were living it up in the dining room... “Next time,” he added in Spanish, “no more accidents, okay?”

“Okay, Papi.” But didn’t he know it wasn’t up to me?¹⁰

I cannot help but repeat here the assertion in McCormick’s dissertation that “When Puerto Ricans talk about feelings of ‘nervousness’ they describe situations in which they clearly feel angry.” And, of course, if we interpret the nervousness that makes Santos piss his pants as anger it becomes clear that pissing in this scene—and shitting in the La Manca scene—are traces of the rage expressed by the constantly shitting and pissing Josefa of the novel’s opening. The rage—albeit repressed and rationalized as “nervousness”—is a response to Santos’ growing realization of his lack of power, a lack expressed plaintively in the boy’s lament “But didn’t he know it wasn’t up to me?” and in his failure to control his bodily functions.





In Chapter Seven, “In black turf,” Santos is pushed around by a group of black boys whose turf he has unwittingly invaded in Central Park. His powerlessness in this situation awakens ambivalent rage in him. The loss of control is again symbolized scatologically, this time in Santos’ literal immersion in a pile of shit:

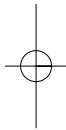
Suddenly the six-foot one stuck his long leg between my legs and rammed the heel of his hand against my shoulder. I stumbled, scraped my back on the wall and collapsed with a squeal on something soft. A swarm of flies...exploded around me, and in seconds I was immersed in the odor of human shit. I sat there, too overcome with disgust and rage to move.

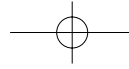
Not because I had been pushed around and robbed of a quarter which had not been mine to begin with, nor even because I had been smeared in shit, which could be washed off, but because I had been humiliated without any possibility of fighting back, of standing up for myself—for that reason I began to cry. I didn’t cry loudly or hysterically; only girls and women had the right to that kind of display. I cried softly, missing my breath once in a while and sucking in the thin, fibrous liquid that spilled like egg white from my nostrils. A slow accumulation of pain, brought on by the strong noon sun, began to tighten around my forehead.¹¹

These episodes highlight helplessness, humiliation, the “slow accumulation of pain.” The young boy’s body seems to break itself down into excreta—snot, piss, and shit—a falling apart that is the physical analogue to the more serious emotional and spiritual breakdown at the heart of *Family Installments*. Bred to be stoical and patient, Santos—Ed’s stand-in—is rent deeply on the inside but denies himself the cathartic scream he imagines, and projects upon, his downtrodden grandmother Socorro. The narrator does not allow himself—or even his father Gerán—the luxury of compassion he feels for Socorro and Papá Santos. That is why when Gerán finally dies at the end of the book, after returning to Puerto Rico to finish a long, agonizing struggle with multiple sclerosis, Santos can only admit to annoyance:

They had already sent him down to the morgue, and I began to lose my temper; he should have waited until I’d finished with my finals. I had planned on making a photocopy of my diploma and sending it to them as proof of something. Not that it would have made any difference to him, no more than that chicken farm he had talked about when the disease overwhelmed him; but it would have made a difference to me, and I was feeling selfish just then. No particular reason.¹²

The hardhearted fury in this response permits Santos to conceal his grief, even from himself. Santos focuses on Gerán all the rage he has not been able to vent on others—his cousin Chuito, the Irish nuns and priests who educate, and miseducate, their Latino pupils, the black boys in the park. The father’s life—and capacity to appreciate the fact that his son has outclassed him—is summed up as ineffectual: “Not that it would have made any difference to him.” The judgment against the father turns into rage against the world. But it is an impotent rage, full of denial. The wounded self goes into hiding.



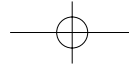


Santos' almost masochistic response to Gerán's death leads me back to Ed's so-called egolessness and his self-deprecatory irony. Ed's irony makes him pun mercilessly and, perhaps to some, opaquely, at the end of the novel, in reference to Thomas Browne's "Urn Burial," a Renaissance essay that is one of English literature's master narratives about death. At the end of the book, Santos, who has traveled to Puerto Rico for Gerán's funeral and who is still thinking about his literature finals as he talks to a relative, cannot recall the text's title accurately. So he riffs, producing the last lines of the novel: "Somebody's 'Brown Burial'? 'Earned Burial'? Maybe 'Bourne Aerial.' Whatever, something silly, count on it. I'd brood about it on the flight back home."¹³ This is pure Ed: clever, cutting, enchanted by language, but ultimately putting down his interest in all this literature—and his own sparkling Renaissance wit—as "silly."

Ed attempted to sublimate rage through this type of self-deprecatory irony. Latino rage cannot be directly expressed. Instead, it is like a language in hiding, refusing and refuting a direct "honest" discourse, the discourse of power. Apparent humility or egolessness then becomes a passive aggressive way of hiding (and yet also revealing) a degraded humanity. Pain defeats and propels Santos, as it defeated and propelled Ed, who was torn by a traumatic self-denial and a stubborn refusal. He was both passive and active, humble and proud. Hungry for intimacy, he often avoided it. His closest friends had the sense of not knowing him. He was driven by the tension between the side of him that thought he wasn't "good enough," and the other side, the side that didn't want to show the world how bright and gifted he really was because people would never understand or appreciate him. So, then, fuck them.



*At Bear Mountain, New York, in the early spring of 1973.
Reprinted, by permission, from Gary Keller.*



NOTES

¹ *Family Installments: Memories of Growing Up Hispanic*. (New York, London: Penguin, 1983) 23.

² Rosario Ferré uses a similar tone in much of her writing, a technique she calls “the art of dissembling anger through irony,” which she points out is also typical of the work of nineteenth-century British women writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters, who “personified in their Gothic monsters and deranged heroines the frustrations they themselves experienced as women.” “How I Wrote ‘When Women Love Men.’” In *The Youngest Doll*, translated by Diana Vélez (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 147.

³ *Family Installments*, 23.

⁴ Robert McCormick, *Personality Concomitants of the Puerto Rican Syndrome as Reflected in the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory* (A doctoral thesis submitted in 1986 to the Department of Psychology at Rutgers University) 22.

⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid*, 26–7.

⁷ Segundo’s Benefits, in *While Someone Else is Eating: Poets and Novelists on Reaganism*, edited by Earl Shorris (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1984) 47.

⁸ *FI*, 186.

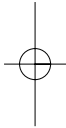
⁹ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 158.

¹² *Ibid*, 286.

¹³ *Ibid*, 299.



Rivera's brilliant composition of intersecting planes creates a cinematic narrative," Garza added. "Two Nudes in the Forest" by Frida Kahlo appears at Christie's auction house in New York in 2016. Credit: Mary Altaffer/AP. The Wednesday sale exceeded the previous auction record for Latin American art held by Kahlo's "Two Nudes in the Forest," which sold for \$8 million in 2016. "The Rivals" was one of many Rivera paintings owned by the Rockefeller family, many of which were donated to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Rockefellers' enormous collection has already become the most valuable sold at auction, netting \$646 million on Tuesday, the first night of bidding. Proceeds will go to charities supported by David and Peggy Rockefeller during their lifetimes. Latino rage expresses itself indirectly and goes unrecognized in U.S. culture. It is unlike African American rage, which arose from centuries of subjugation, reached an apex of fury in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and has been fully absorbed into America's cultural consciousness through art forms such as the blues, jazz, the novel, and the essay. Although Latinos, the largest minority group in the United States, suffer socioeconomic ills similar to those endured by African Americans, America does not view our struggles as equally relevant. Americans avidly consume our music, but do n Marnham, Patrick; Rivera, Diego, 1886-1957. Publication date. 1998. Openlibrary_work. OL1819602W. Page-progression.