Chapter Five
Latino Rage: The Life and Work of Edward Rivera

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 not yet recognize it as an American art form. Even Salsa, born in New York City—as true an American art form as any—is considered Cuban or Puerto Rican, Caribbean or Latin American; of the Americas certainly, but not of the United States. Americans do not acknowledge that our literary efforts represent American culture, while the works of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison have been taken—deservedly so—to the bosom of America and there enshrined.

It may also be that because so many lightskinned Latinos have passed for white—or tricked themselves into thinking that they had—that they believed they weren’t angry. I’m not discounting the significant participation of Chicanos and Nuyoricans in the Civil Rights movement. What troubles me is the way that Latinos are so frequently ignored in discussions of the Civil Rights movement, of race, of poverty. We are often treated as if we were barely there, as if we were some kind of modifier of African American identity. We are that ghostly terrain that Americans place between black and white, between American and African American. Latino is that phantom territory.

Our ghostliness, however, has nothing to do with vision. We are not specters. Our ghostliness is aural/oral, an effect of Spanish as the linguistic double of English in the Americas. We are not properly heard, particularly not in our literature, because even when we write in English, Spanish haunts us, whether or not we use those Spanish fragments resounding in our brains.

The fact is that many U.S. Latino/a writers, of fiction as well as music lyrics, try hard to repress their Spanish.1 In African American literature, on the other hand, black English radicalizes standard English. However distorted, extreme, or violent purists may find black English, they can understand it, because it is English. Spanish is an aural/oral ghost of U.S. history. Spanish place names came before English place names.
names in the founding of the Americas. Latin American land—almost half of Mexico’s land mass—was wrested away for the United States to incorporate itself as a nation, and U.S. interventions in Latin America determined the course of most of the Latino diasporas. And Spanish, as the great Other of English in the Americas encroaches upon American English on all sides except the north, a perceived threat to English-language dominance. Even when U.S. Latinos do not speak it properly or at all, Spanish muffles our speaking voices. We are seen, but there is a ghostliness attached to what we say, a doubling effect in language, which pure English speakers would rather not hear. When we are angry, the mainstream cannot properly hear us, because to them our rage is not loud and clear. It is not a roar, but more like a murmur, an echo, a mumbles that makes everyone uneasy, but cannot be clearly addressed because it is not a clear challenge.

It’s not just the mainstream, however, that denies Latino rage. We ourselves, Latinos from all stations, middle class, working class, corporate dons, teachers, musicians, seamstresses, field laborers, 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, Edward Rivera, the New York Puerto Rican writer, is exemplary in both his work and life. Ed published various stories and articles, but he is best remembered for *Family Installments*, the 1982 bildungsroman, which was marketed as an autobiography by his publisher, despite Ed’s protestations that it was fiction. The novel tracks the effects of suppressed rage in both its protagonist, Santos, and in his father, Gerán. A poor but hardworking *jibaro*—a hill peasant from a Puerto Rican mountain town that Ed fictionalizes as Bautabarro—Gerán constantly fails to improve 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 can never understand or completely express. The result is a kind of self-deprecatory irony that helps the boy withstand pain and humiliation, 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 that rage was is the simple fact that for all his talent and ambition Ed wrote only one book, a strange text exceptional among U.S. Latino novels for its figurative and linguistic doubling effects. The bilingualism throughout *Family Installments* shows how Ed attempted to heal an incommensurable rift between Spanish and English, not just as languages but as ways of being through the representation of a doubling effect in language. In addition, the madwoman at the beginning of the novel and the bisexual monster at the end of it represent partial expressions of the protagonist’s and Ed’s rage. As Ed’s friend and colleague, as well as a critic of his work, I believe that this repressed rage haunted him and his writing and prevented him from fulfilling his brilliant promise as an author.

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On November 26, 2001 family, colleagues, friends, and former students participated in The City College of New York 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