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A Puerto Rican story: family installments by Edward Rivera
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A Puerto Rican Story: *Family Installments* by Edward Rivera

**ABSTRACT**

The article discusses the book *Family Installments*, which is a novel written by the late Edward Rivera. The book’s themes and problems, as well as its narrative strategies, are analyzed and described. The book is placed in historical and geographical context, and it is suggested that it forms part of the literary canon of Puerto Rican/Latin American literature.

“*Yes, I must take great pains with my speech because I shall more or less be judged by it.*”
(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*)
I was collaborating with Rosario Ferré on the translations of her stories for what was to become *The Youngest Doll*, when I noticed she had Eddie Rivera's *Family Installments* on her shelf. She remarked then—this was in the mid-1980s—that she thought it had not received the critical attention it deserved. I agree, and I would say that any course that asks students to read, say, *Memorias de Bernardo Vega, A Puerto Rican in New York*, or *Down These Mean Streets* should ask them to read *Family Installments* as well.

Rereading this novel has been for me an exercise in nostalgia and a call to self-awareness. Nostalgia because it brings back Eddie Rivera, a man with a dry wit, a man who could chuckle at his own fate when he developed a fungus around his heart that had to be surgically scraped off. “Why do you laugh?” I remember asking. His response: “What else *can* you do? I mean a fungus? Around your heart?” *Hay que aguantar; hay que reir.*

The call to self-awareness comes because when I first read the book I don’t remember appreciating its humor. I think that with age comes a keener awareness of the power of humor and of its importance in literature as well as in life. Eddie Rivera is one of Puerto Rico’s best humorists. He writes in English but is in the company of gifted island-based writers like Luis Rafael Sánchez and Ana Lydia Vega, both of whom write in Spanish and both of whom are humorists in our best tradition.

The word “Installments” in the title alludes to the payments people make on things they can’t afford. And the family here is caught up in that cycle of payments. But the installments are also episodes in the life of Santos, Eddie Rivera’s persona in the book subtitled *Memoirs of Growing up Hispanic*. Santos lives in New York City’s *El Barrio*, attends Catholic school, and comes of age during the 1950s. But though the book is told through Santos’s point of view, this is the story of the whole “Malánguez” family as they struggle to survive while being “pororican” in New York.

The beginning sections deal with the extreme poverty of the family while in Puerto Rico. Not only are they *j baros*, which is a stigma in itself, given the universal city/country divide, but the grandfather is also a suicide, which brings shame on the whole family. They are very poor. They grow tubers and eat tubers and try desperately to figure out what to do about the lack of money. There’s the whole issue of *la situación*, which is shorthand for poverty.

In the Puerto Rican countryside, the struggle for survival is brutal, and the first three chapters portray the opprobrium of Gerán’s father-in-law toward Gerán, the son of a man who committed suicide. The chapters also show the subtle class stratifications, the personal hatreds, and other unpleasant realities of living in rural Puerto Rico in the 1930s and 1940s. Santos’s father tries several strategies to get money to support his family, but none of them work. The family, like so many other Puerto Rican families of the period, emigrates to New York.

One of the survival structures of the Puerto Rican countryside was *hijos de crianza*, impoverished or orphaned children who were taken in by those marginally better off. Gerán was one of these children, and when the time comes, shortly before Gerán goes to New York, he and Lilia take in one of these *hijos* themselves. His name is Chuito. He is fourteen and becomes the “man” of the family when Gerán leaves. One of the saddest moments in the book is when Chuito gets left behind because Gerán can’t gather enough money to fly him to New York with the rest of the family.

From a window of the airplane, just before takeoff, we spotted him standing in the waving crowd: a little sunburned stick of a man with
thick black hair, hitched-up pants, a white shirt that was half-spilling out of his bent waist, and a lost look on his face. He was squinting up at the plane, trying to get a last look at us, but the plane’s windows were tinted and tiny, and he was far off. (69)

After many tribulations involving Gerán’s lonely stay in a single-room-occupancy hotel and anguished letters back and forth between Gerán and his family back home in Puerto Rico, they finally settle in New York. Gerán puts his boys into a Catholic school because public schools are for ruffians, and Santos grows up to be a young man who is caught between his lived reality in the Barrio and the represented reality of the English literature he learns to love when he is given an anthology of poetry from Chaucer to Eliot and begins spending so much time reading that he quits his part-time job. Guilt about not bringing in any money and the disparity between Old English poetry and the neighborhood set him off on long walks to try to integrate being odd.

The Malánguezes, a working-class family, have a high regard for knowledge and learning. They see this as the key to success for their children, and they stress to them the importance of a good education. But Santos’s older brother Tego is already lost to higher education when the New York sections of the book begin. He’s attending a Chelsea vocational school, whose training Tego well knows will not land him a good job. He, like Santos, is vaguely dissatisfied. Ironically, what does finally land him a good job is his *vicio* of gambling, something he has had to hide from his parents because he knows they would disapprove. He goes back to Puerto Rico and works as a croupier in the casinos of fancy San Juan tourist hotels. Santos, for his part, faces the challenges of feeling linguistically and culturally “different.” He is keenly aware of language usage and of the differences between his own use of language and that of his friends and family, and even of one of his teachers, a Christian Brother ill suited to teaching, whose malaprops and misreadings of Shakespeare make for some of the funniest episodes in the book in a chapter titled “Caesar and the Bruteses: A Tradegy.”

When Santos starts to study for Brother O’Leary’s big post-Christmas exam on Julius Caesar, he comes to the conclusion that it probably would take him a full year to look up all the words “that nobody in my neighborhood had any use for. Besides, what good was a dictionary for things like ‘But, as it were, in sort of limitation, to keep up with you at meals’?” (129) He reasons that first he would have to correct the grammar “(as it was, or is, not were! I thought), there was nothing I could do with this—no sense to the nonsense.” (129) If this was what he was going to have to deal with:

I could also forget about “mastering” my adopted language, what Papi, with good intentions, had been telling me and Tego to do for our own good.... But had he ever tried reading this syrupy garbage? I preferred to stick to the blunt, no-shit English I traded with my friends on the block, and to my shrinking Spanish, which Saint Misery’s was helping me lose fast for good. (130)

The chapter on Julius Caesar is a hilarious comedy of errors containing misunderstandings based on every possible aspect of language use. Santos is studying for the Shakespeare exam when Tego comes into his room. He asks, “Who’s this Shakes Pear?” and Santos answers, “A faggot. He wrote strategies.” (132) The boys all have trouble with Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar because (i) many of them have linguistic
interference from Spanish; (2) it is a difficult play written in Elizabethan English; and (3) the Christian Brother who’s teaching the play to these kids is clueless. When all the boys flunk his exam, Brother O’Leary blusters,

What’sa matter with youse, anyway? You gonna end up selling those shaved-ice snowballs off the streets like your fath—you guys wanna disgrace me or something? After the way I sacrifice my spare time working up some real good litrachur and other useful stuff into your heads! Youse know where you’re gonna end up? (Pause.) ‘Huh? Huh? in public school. The buncha youse. That’s a promise. And don’t come blaming Brother O’Leary. (142)

But in the end, the kids’ ignorance proves stronger than the teacher, who winds up in an asylum up the river. Like almost all the characters in the book, Brother O’Leary is a sympathetic figure. This is a very humane portrait of immigrants living in New York. Santos becomes a real stickler for correct English grammar and usage and tries to correct his older brother, which only gains him Tego’s resentment. Santos’s attempts to improve his brother’s English are well intentioned. He wants his brother to speak correctly because he understands that mastery of this language is important. He doesn’t want others to think his brother is ignorant. But Tego doesn’t understand this. After the father’s funeral in Puerto Rico, Tego encourages Santos to stay for a few days.

“Tourists save up all year for sun like this, Santos. They pay through the nose for this mild stuff. They could spend their money worst.”
“You mean worse, Tego.”
“What’s the difference?”
I told him, just to change our mood a little. “Bad, worse, worst, Tego. You should remember that from Saint Misericordia’s.”
He shrugged. “Who the hell remembers that far back?”
“I do.”
“Yeah, I know. That’s a problem you still got. You’re still some kind of show-off, too.” (288)

It’s clear that Santos/Eddie is such a smart aleck that he will probably have to become a teacher, writer, or both. He lives on coffee, which he drinks on an empty stomach. This made me flinch each time I came across it, for I remember Eddie’s stomach ulcer and the meals of white rice and steamed vegetables he was forced to eat, in part as penance for his earlier health transgressions.

This is one of the best books for laughing at our lived bilingual reality, a book that deals with Language, and languages: Spanish, English, “Spanglish,” being bilingual, the fun of code-switching. It takes on the anxiety we bilinguals feel about language loss; it engages with language spoken and literary, with high registers of language(s) and low; it represents language as agony and language as joy. It takes on the misspellings of signs in bookstore windows. It’s a performance in which language itself emerges as a character.

When I read the book for the first time, I became impatient with the word plays and the focus on language, but now I see that the reason language plays such a key role in Rivera’s memoirs is because it’s so central to our experience as diasporic Puerto Ricans. On the one hand, we all know we need to learn English
fast, but on the other, we want to maintain our Puerto Rican identity and that entails knowing Spanish. There is a whole level of anxiety here that the author explores quite nicely.

The lived reality of the Malánguez family represents what happens to all Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Rivera's treatment of this English/Spanish divide resonates because it highlights language as perhaps the most important locus of perceived difference. What makes language problematic is when it is an index of class and intelligence, of who will make it in the United States of America, including Puerto Rico. Language can come to play a role as a marker of "authenticity." The question then becomes “Who is a real Puerto Rican?” Of course, the whole issue of “identity” dissolves as soon as one begins to examine it seriously, but children, who have a keen sensorium for differences, don’t want to be separated from their peers; they know that any difference can be dangerous to their friendships. Santos feels the ambivalence of all of us who have a foot in two cultures. On the one hand, he loves English and has learned the standard form of it as well as some of the high registers (somewhat like his father speaking “fancy Spanish” in the dining room). He has gotten this from his study of English literature. On the other, he knows his superior control of English does set him apart from his peers.¹

There’s a painful ambivalence here regarding identity and the constructed self’s positioning vis à vis the other, and it has everything to do with language. Mastery, Santos knows, is the key to success, to knowledge, to an appreciation of poetry, prose, and drama written in the English language, but then, there’s this nagging guilt. He feels less “authentic.” It’s as if he is “passing.”

In the chapter titled “In Black Turf,” Santos describes his friend Panna:

He was small, undernourished, and about as black a Puerto Rican as I’d ever known. I don’t think he had a drop of white blood in him. Half his ancestors must have been shipped to the Caribbean from Africa, and the other half, the Indian side of his family tree, must have been waiting for them on the island long before Ponce de León got there. He had an immense head topped with an abundance of thick, unwashed, kinky hair and tiny, rotting teeth. People sometimes took him for an American black, but he was as Puerto Rican as I was. Maybe more so, because at least he didn’t try to deny his origins by getting rid of his East Harlem accent.

My own accent was closer, though not really close, to the speech of American disc jockeys and TV-radio detergent pushers. This was a result of having spent eight submissive years under the influence of the hard-driving Christian Brothers, who subscribed as faithfully to the myth of the American melting pot as they did to their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Nobody had ever taken me for someone whose veins might contain Negro or Arab or Caribbean Indian blood. I was too light-skinned for that. On various occasions I had been mistaken for a Jew, an Italian, a Greek, even a Hungarian; and each time I had come away feeling secretly proud of myself for having disguised my Spik accent, and with it my lineage. I could almost feel myself melting smoothly and evenly into the great Pot. (148)
This is the best chapter in the book. It takes on, as no other text I have ever read does, the subtleties of the different “racial” codes, the Puerto Rican and the North American. It also explains to the non–New Yorker how clear the demarcation of geographic boundaries is in the City.

Puerto Rican sections of Central Park and black sections are clearly delineated in the novel, and Santos and his friend distractedly cross over into the black section and get caught by a little gang of black kids who don’t appreciate it. When it’s clear that Panna and Santos are friends, the black kids let Santos go with just a warning, based on his friendship with Panna, who’s both black and Puerto Rican. To them, Panna is a black kid who happens to speak Spanish. To Santos, he’s a Puerto Rican kid who happens to be black.

The most poignant aspect of Eddie’s memoirs is his father’s struggle to make ends meet. He has to engage in numerous maromas to stretch the meager income he gets from his factory job in Brooklyn. One of them is “El p caro.”

This was a thick, short black wire that stole electricity from the light meter, an antique gray box between the kitchen and the bathroom. He attached el P caro (sic) to the meter in such a way that the current wouldn’t register. He hooked up this thieving wire for a couple of hours every day after sunset. Someone at work, another maromero, had shown him how to do it. “It’s a sin,” he said, “but what’s another sin?” (214)

When Santos’s older brother Tego gets excited and wants to market the stunt so as to make a killing for the family, Papi refuses, appalled that his son would ask him to teach him how to steal. And what makes it O.K. for Papi to do it? Tego wants to know. “I’ll tell you why, Tego. Because I don’t have a HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA! That is why.” (215)

Education leads to a better life. This is the father’s ethos, and it is why the two boys are in parochial, not public, school. The Catholic school children fear the toughies in public school in much the same way that I remember we public school kids feared the ones in parochial school.

If Papi had had the opportunity he would have been a lawyer:

In Papi’s opinion the law was the most useful profession because it gave one the opportunity to defend one’s people against the Judas Iscariots and others, including members of one’s own people, like that so-called schoolteacher who had sold Mami the twenty-four-volume Wonderland of endless installments while he was out in Brooklyn sweeping floors, fetching coffee, donuts, crullers, and muffins for his associates; and against those who accused the innocent of crimes they never committed. (224)

This is the fantasy behind the high-flown speeches he memorizes. He practices them in the dining room over the baying dogs and complaining neighbors. The image of Papi declaiming from a public speaking manual written for a revolutionary society (Mexico) is humorous because the speeches are from a book written for another country, another time. Its appeal to Papi is its high register. This is hablar bonito, what people without an education call the speech of those educated people with a mastery of public speaking. It’s hilarious, but it’s heartbreaking, too. Gerán, the small,
hardworking father who is slowly losing his vision and eventually loses all his faculties to multiple sclerosis, envisions himself well educated and knowing how to speak “fancy Spanish.”

But at least once Gerán makes a speech in which he stands up for la gente and himself. He invites a friend he knows from work to dinner, in part to repay him for teaching him about _el caro_. The man goes on and on about a building in the Bronx that they could buy together with some others under the name of what he calls “The Tenement Syndicate.” This is a running theme with this man, but when he brings it up at the dinner table, Gerán finally tells him: “I also don’t share your interest in tenements. It’s bad enough we have to live in one. I don’t think I’d enjoy being the boss of that super who keeps sticking pieces of carpet in the boiler to save money on real fuel. The smoke poisons people.” (217)

After the man leaves, Gerán’s wife scolds him for having had the poor taste of lecturing a guest at the dinner table. They go to their separate rooms, she to the bedroom to read her encyclopedia, and he to the dining room to work on his leather tooing, his latest hobby. When Santos comes in and tries to flatter him for his speech, he refuses to accept a compliment, calling the whole thing a disaster. But he does spit out “Sindicato! Schemers....” (219)

It is clear that Rivera enjoyed writing this novel and we are fortunate that he did. _Family Installments_ is a book that deserves to be read and read again, especially by those of us who are interested in the experience of those amazing puertorriqueños who managed, against enormous odds, to survive in the belly of the beast.

REFERENCES


