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Reseña de "His Panic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S" de Geraldo Rivera

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The book ends with two pictures, taken in 2000, of the graves of Puerto Rican musicians Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera. This is the crowning oddity of the book. Cortijo and Rivera were both island-born and their musical legacy is intimately tied to Puerto Rico's musical tradition. Yes, they had an impact on the music that developed in Spanish Harlem, but it is a stretch to suggest that they are part of Spanish Harlem's legacy. It is not only peculiar that they would be featured in this book, but also that the author would choose to use pictures of their graves. The symbolism may have been unintended but it is hard to ignore. Are we to believe that Spanish Harlem's legacy is at this point only documentary in nature? Is the cultural symbiosis of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean traditions that took place in Spanish Harlem during the first half of the twentieth century over? I doubt Alava believed this. The images of Cortijo's and Rivera's tombstones are nevertheless jarring. At best, they reflect Alava's arbitrary selection criteria.

In sum, many of the pictures in this book are fantastic but its conceptualization is poor and its organization is a mess. Where the responsibility for this lies is beside the point. To the knowledgeable reader the flaws of the book will be annoying. Cultural outsiders, if they even bother to buy it, which is doubtful, will have a hard time understanding what this book is ultimately about. Ironically, the flaws of the book will mean nothing to them because they will have no frame of reference. Whether Yomo Toro is playing a tres, a cuatro, or whatever will be of no importance to someone who has never heard of Yomo Toro or a cuatro or a tres before. Hopefully, these readers will enjoy the images, learn something from the captions, and come away with a greater appreciation of the richness and diversity of American musical history. But, how many copies is this book likely to sell? Well, if you are reading this review I encourage you to buy it because, despite its flaws, it has tremendous documentary value. If you know about Puente, Bobo, and Machito only through their recordings you'll enjoy seeing them in action, as it were. Maybe you are old enough to have seen them live. If that's the case, this book is for you as well. Alava's contribution needs to be supported; the musicians he portrays must be remembered. This book is not the best of its kind but its value outweighs its imperfections.

His Panic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.

By Geraldo Rivera

New York: Celebra Books, 2007

272 pages; \$24.95 [cloth]

REVIEWER: HOWARD JORDAN, The City University of New York—Hostos Community College

On March 2008 in a packed art gallery room at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, faculty, students, and administrators gathered to hear a presentation by one of the most recognized media personalities in America: Geraldo Rivera. Geraldo, an Emmy-award-winning journalist and a fixture on American television for four decades, chose Hostos, which has one of the highest enrollment of immigrants in the City University, to discuss his new book *His Panic: Why Americans Fear Hispanics in the U.S.*

The central thesis of Rivera's book is that at the heart of the immigration debate is a nativist prejudice against the growing number of United States-born and foreign-born Latinos.¹ He writes: "the contemporary debate over immigration is a surrogate for the deeper, more fundamental concern, the mostly unspoken but widely

acknowledged fear that America's essential racial and ethnic character, indeed our national identity, is being altered.... To many there is a gnawing feeling that we are all 'foreign,' that we don't belong here whether we are born in this country or not" (p. 36). The book proceeds to debunk prevailing myths about Latino immigrants, namely, that they cannot assimilate, refuse to learn English, are would-be terrorists, steal American jobs, and breed crime and disease.

Threatening American identity and English only

Rivera begins his discussion of the Latino threat to American identity by citing Samuel Huntington's book, *Who Are We: The Challenge to America's National Identity*, which calls for a "reaffirmation of the national white Anglo-Protestant heritage" and maintains that the "single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity comes from...continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico."² Rivera argues that Huntington's fears are unfounded because most Latino immigrants will end up assimilating. Moreover, he states that given the changing demography of this nation, the genie has been let out of the bottle and, as go Latinos in the United States, so goes the future of this nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 1950, there were fewer than 4 million Hispanics in the country. By 2007, there were more than 45 million. In Los Angeles, whites are already the minority, representing just 30 percent of the population, compared to Hispanics at 48 percent. The author concludes that "the browning process" (p. 45) is inevitable and if the current trend continues, Hispanics will make up the majority of the nation's population by the end of the twenty-first century.

In the chapter entitled "Will America Be Like Quebec," Rivera tackles the English-Only movement, which seeks to make English the official language of the U.S. He begins anecdotally by saying that he knows of no second-generation Hispanic immigrant child who speaks no English, and by the third generation, most do not speak Spanish and have to learn it as a second language in school. He backs this up by citing the 2000 U.S. Census, which indicated a 25 percent increase in English-speaking ability between Mexican immigrants and their American-born offspring. That is 7 percent greater than the increase from 1980. He adds that children of Spanish-speaking immigrants are learning to speak English at a faster rate than those of previous generations.

These conclusions were recently borne out by the \$2 million study, *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, published in May 2008 by Harvard University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation. This decade-long study of adult children of immigrants to the New York region concluded that immigrants are rapidly entering the mainstream and faring better than their parents in terms of education and earnings, even outperforming native-born Americans in many cases.

According to Rivera, the hostility against Hispanics is no different from that directed against earlier generations of Irish, Italian, German, and Jewish immigrants. In the nineteenth century, nativists blamed immigrants for everything, from crime to disease to terror. Finally, they assimilated, and the next group of immigrants became society's scapegoats. He notes that the golden period of immigration occurred when Ellis Island opened for European immigrants (not, however, for the Chinese). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, people could come to the U.S. as long as they were not convicts, prostitutes or had infectious diseases. But after the passage of laws like the National Origin Act of 1924, most visas were given to those from the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. Italians only received 3 percent of visas, while Mexicans and other Latin Americans received none. There was never an Ellis

Island for Mexicans. The history of immigration policy thus weakens the argument by present-day nativists that the earlier immigrants came here legally as opposed to many Latinos, since the system discriminated against them.

Latino immigrants and American loyalty

Rivera devotes several chapters to the theme of Latino patriotism. In the chapter “Proud to Be an American,” he shares his personal story, in which he details his Puerto Rican-Jewish roots, his love for Puerto Rico, and for America. In 1937, his father, Cruz Rivera, emigrated from Bayamón, Puerto Rico, to New York City, where he met Geraldo’s mother, Lilly Friedman, a Jewish woman from Jersey City, while working at a coffee shop. Geraldo learned Spanish when his parents sent him, at age fifteen, to live with his grandparents in Puerto Rico. His family grew up in the Lower East Side and eventually moved to Long Island. Rivera lovingly criticizes his dad, who, after his Army service in World War II, “was keen on assimilating becoming even more American” (p. 8). His parents sought to combat discrimination by changing their name to Riviera (hoping people would think it was French). Geraldo, on the other hand, chose in the 1960s to live on the Lower East Side, not on Long Island. As a young adult, he rejected this “cautious assimilation” (p. 14), grew his Puerto Rican mustache, and fully embraced his ethnic identity. He no longer responded to those who called him Jerry Rivers, he practiced law at a community legal services office, and later became the attorney for the radical Puerto Rican Young Lords. It was during this period that Geraldo developed his strong belief in social justice and immigrant rights.

The author returns to the theme of Latino loyalty to America in the chapters, “Heroes and Deportees” and “Importing Terror.” There he blasts the love-it-or-leave-it attitude of nativists by exhaustively documenting the Latino contribution to the defense of the country. He notes that Latinos have served honorably in all U.S. wars. For example, 18,000 Puerto Ricans served in World War I and 65,000 in World War II. He points to the heroic 141st segregated Regiment of the 36th Texas Infantry Division, which lost 1,126 soldiers and whose men were awarded 31 Distinguished Service Crosses, 12 Legions of Merit, 492 Silvers Stars, and 1,685 Bronze Stars. In the Korean War, their commander, General William Harris, referred to the service of the 65th Infantry from Puerto Rico—called the Borinqueneers— noting that “no ethnic group has greater pride in itself and its heritage than the Puerto Rican people...nor have I encountered any that can be more dedicated and zealous in its support of the democratic principles for which the United States stands” (p. 207).

The author argues that today, despite 90,000 Hispanic Americans on active duty and 35,000 mostly Latino non-citizens serving in the military, the attack on Latino loyalty persists. He tells the story of an illegal Mexican immigrant, Marine Rafael Peralta of “A” Company, who in 2004, while serving in Irak, grabbed a grenade and cradled it to his body, absorbing the blast and saving the lives of his comrades. Another Latino, Alex Jiménez, from the Dominican Republic, was awarded a Purple Heart for his heroic service in Baghdad, while his wife was facing deportation in the U.S. Another citizen officer remarked, as his “illegal” Guatemalan wife faced deportation, “If I am willing to die for the United States, why can’t I just be allowed to be with my family” (p. 218).

After citing these and other examples of Latino heroism, Rivera rebuts nativist attempts to link Latino immigration to terrorism, writing that “there has never been a single verified terrorism penetration of our Southern border” (p. 125). According to the Transactional Records Action Clearinghouse, in 2004–2006, of the 814,073 people charged by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in immigration courts, just

12 faced charges of terrorism, or 0.0015 percent. He critiques the DHS for its misuse of federal power, unnecessary persecution of undocumented immigrants, and unwillingness to suspend raids during the period of census counting. Rivera sarcastically remarks, “Are our foreign enemies infiltrating our nation, hidden among the hundreds of thousands of apricot pickers or meatpacking plant workers...from Mexico? Is Obama or Abdul disguising himself as Juan or Pedro? Don’t we all sort of look alike?” (p. 124).

Immigration, crime, and disease

In his chapter on “Immigrants and Crime,” Rivera confronts the question of whether immigrants are committing crimes at higher rates than U.S. citizens. It was precisely this question that led to his writing of the book. On *The O’Reilly Factor*, the highest-rated cable program in the country, Geraldo and Bill O’Reilly nearly came to a fistfight over this issue. The debate started with a story about a drunk driver in Virginia Beach who killed two teenage girls in a terrible accident. The driver was an “illegal” Mexican and had previous misdemeanor convictions for public drunkenness and drunk driving. O’Reilly blamed Meyera Oberndorf, mayor of Virginia Beach, for making the city a sanctuary for illegal immigrants, and thus felt he was responsible for the girls’ deaths. Accusing O’Reilly of making a “cheap political point,” Rivera roared, “He could have been a Jewish drunk, an Italian drunk, or an Irish drunk, would you still care?” (p. 5).

The book cites statistics showing that immigrants are no more prone to committing crimes than are the native-born. The nonpartisan Center for Immigration Studies reported that individuals who are in the country illegally commit relatively fewer crimes than the rest of the population and the General Accounting Office, analyzing FBI records, found that foreign-born individuals account for about 19 percent of the total arrested in 1985 in six major cities while representing 19.6 percent of the aggregate population. Even more revealing is a five-year Immigration and Naturalization Study that shows a lower recidivism rate for immigrants than for the native-born. Rivera concludes that attempts to link crime with immigrants are the most nefarious type of “fear mongering” (p. 145).

The chapter on “Disease” begins by condemning the mainstream media and policy makers for returning to the days when “The connection between immigration and disease has long been used to generate distaste toward immigrants that sometimes borders on panic...And often the panic is accompanied by anti-immigrant violence” (p. 133). In a May 2007 *60 Minutes* interview by CBS correspondent Leslie Stahl profiling Lou Dobbs, Stahl took issue with Dobbs’ statement on an April 14, 2007, CBN program in which the latter stated that “the invasion of illegal aliens is threatening the health of many Americans.” Dobbs added, “There have been 900 cases of leprosy for forty years...There have been 7,000 in the past three years.” When asked to substantiate these allegations, Dobbs said, “if we reported it, it’s a fact.” But in a *New York Times* interview by David Leonhart with the Director of the National Hansen’s Diseases Program, it was revealed that leprosy was “not a public health problem.” The Southern Poverty Law Center later accused Dobbs with false reporting and creating a climate that led to hate crimes and attacks on Latino immigrants. Rivera observes that this attempt to connect immigrants with disease fosters racial intolerance and notes the irony that many seasonal workers returning to Mexico are infected with HIV/AIDs contracted in the U.S.

They are stealing our jobs

A commonly held myth that fuels anti-immigrant hostility is that Latino immigrants take jobs from U.S. citizens. As the economy worsens, and due to international

treaties like NAFTA, immigrants are often blamed for our nation's economic woes. Rivera tackles this complex topic. First he examines organizations like Numbers U.S.A. and the right-wing Heritage Foundation, which have called immigrants "wage thieves." A Heritage Foundation report authored by senior research fellow Robert Rector argued that it would take "three hundred years of subsequent earnings to make up for the first and second generation of immigrants" (p. 159). Iowa Republican Steve King "accused illegal aliens of causing the death of twenty-five native-born a day" also claiming "that each low-skilled immigrant households would cost the American taxpayer a million dollars" (p. 160).

The book *His Panic* counters these unsubstantiated claims with facts. A White House report of June 2007 prepared by the President's Council of Economic Advisors concluded that "foreign-born workers have accounted for half of the labor force growth in the past decade, fueling overall economic output, creating jobs, and increasing earnings for native-born workers by as much as 80 billion a year. The lower paid foreign worker contributed to a suppression of inflation" (p. 161). The book cites several studies documenting that Latino immigrants are not displacing American workers, have had higher incomes than their forefathers, and rarely over-utilize social services. He notes that many so-called "undocumented" workers subsidize white senior citizens by paying into the Social Security system as much as \$7 billion a year and contributing to Medicare in payroll taxes, yet they are unable to collect on the benefits. Rivera sums up his analysis by arguing that "nonpartisan, non-ideological, scientific data proves that immigrants contribute greatly to the America economy" (p. 169).

"Anchor babies" and the attack on the 14th amendment

The 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution established that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States...are citizens of the United States." This amendment overturned the Dred Scott court decision that characterized African slaves as property without the rights of citizenship. Rivera argues that many nativists have abandoned judicial precedent to fuel their hatred of Latino immigrants. Children born of illegal immigrants have been described as "anchor babies," presumably because they further their parents' quest for citizenship by allowing them to drop anchor in this country.

In his analysis, Rivera blasts bills like H.R. 1940, introduced in April 2007 by Republican Congressman Nathan Deal of Georgia, which seeks to amend the Constitution by removing birthplace in the U.S. as automatically conferring citizenship. Such a bill would likely never pass, given the burdensome legislative process of amending the Constitution. According to the author, although Deal does not blame immigrants for seeking refuge in the U.S., he objects to women who come specifically to have their children born here. While the Census Bureau keeps statistics on children born of foreign mothers, it does not break out the data on whether these children's mothers are legal or illegal. The book argues that anti-immigrant forces have inflated these numbers to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. It also challenges the notion that "anchor babies" have a multiplier effect by sponsoring the parents under present immigration law. In fact, under current law, an illegal immigrant parent seeking residence or citizenship cannot use the fact that their child is a citizen, unless the minor would suffer "extreme, exceptional, and unusual hardship" if the parent were deported. Moreover, the child must reach the age of twenty-one. Thus, the book *His Panic* points out, "a baby girl born to an illegal immigrant in 2008 would have to wait until 2029 to start a petition to change the illegal status of the mother" (p. 190).

One troubling dimension of the challenge to birthright citizenship is the criminalization of the parents and the detrimental impact it can have on the children. The book recounts the story of Elvira Arellano, an illegal immigrant from Mexico whose son, Raúl, was born in the U.S. She was given sanctuary by the Adalberto United Methodist Church and became an immigrant rights activist with La Familia Latina Unida in Chicago. When she went to give a speech at Our Lady Queen of Angels Church in downtown Los Angeles, she was arrested and deported to Tijuana. Her son, Raúl, would remain in the U.S. with his grandmother. Rivera cites Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa “when families are torn apart, our communities are torn apart” and asks the rhetorical question, “Is America safer now that this mother is separated from her son?” (p. 194).

Si se puede: Latinos fightback

After this analysis of the anti-immigrant sentiment toward Latinos, the book *His Panic* offers some solutions. First, like most pro-immigrant advocates, Rivera calls for a policy that provides Latino undocumented immigrants with a path to citizenship. In addition, the author calls for Latinos to exercise their political muscle in challenging this attack on their community. In his chapter on the “Two-Party-System Threat,” Rivera warns that the Republican obsession with Latino immigration is feeding a Latino backlash against the Republican Party. The book rightfully points out that Cuban refugees have under the present Republican administration received better treatment than Haitians, due in part to racism, but also because the Cuban-American community votes Republican. The gifted journalist warns that Republicans “have by their actions on immigration reform put themselves on the wrong side of history and an inevitable demographic trend that could cost them dearly in future elections” (p. 243).

This backlash is borne out by data provided in the book. In contrast to most Americans who in the 2006 elections identified the Iraq war as the single most important issue, for Hispanics, it was immigration policy. So, while in the 2004 elections, 40 percent of Hispanics voted for Republican congressional candidates, in 2006, the number dropped to 26 percent. This shift led to major losses for the Republican Party. Rivera adds, “as a live-and-let-live libertarian who has often voted Republican, I will never vote for any Republican (or Democrat) who opposes rational immigration reform and seeks to score votes on the backs of illegal aliens” (p. 246).

Second, Geraldo embraces the New Sanctuary Movement that began on Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2006, when Cardinal Roger Mahoney called on American Catholics to defy attempts to criminalize illegal immigrants and those who help them. Rivera draws historical parallels to the sanctuary movement of the 1980s that harbored Central American refugees fleeing civil wars in their homelands. Mahoney vowed a campaign of civil disobedience in the archdiocese’s 288 parishes in the majority Hispanic Los Angeles Catholic archdiocese. The movement now includes representatives in 18 cities, 12 religious traditions, and 7 denominational and interdenominational organizations. In a call for moderation he writes “[t]he fact that holy places are still considered sacrosanct in this country gives me hope that a middle ground [on immigration policy] will be found” (p. 203).

A third solution offered by Rivera is more Quixotic. He calls on President George W. Bush to act as a latter day Lincoln and issue his own Emancipation Proclamation, in which he would pardon illegal immigrants and grant a general amnesty if the legislative branch fails to pass meaningful immigration reform. Such an act would “short-circuit this pending social collision...save racial and ethnic amity, and rescue bipartisan politics” (p. 260). This presumes that President Bush, who has the lowest

popularity rating of any President in recent history, would expend what little political capital he has left on a defense of Latino immigrants.

Geraldo: The warrior

Rivera shows himself willing to jeopardize his own career by taking on the media for stoking anti-immigrant hysteria. He names Rush Limbaugh “the dean of the academy” of conservative right-wingers in leading the most savage talk radio campaign in history against illegal immigrants. He refused to shake hands with CNN news spokesman Lou Dobbs at the William Morris annual reception, “so destructive have his editorial choices and solemnly delivered bullshit been to the cause of sensible dialogue” (p. 23). He openly criticizes Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity on Fox Television, his own employer, for their ultraconservative views on Latino immigration.

One of the shortcomings of *His Panic* is that, while rich in information and verifiable sources, it lacks footnotes and a bibliography. While the reader can Google these sources, it leaves the work subject to attack for its reliance on secondary sources.

To the standing-room-only crowd at Hostos Community College attended by immigrants of many nationalities, Geraldo remarked “I have had a good life and been very successful in my profession, which is why I ...must present this defense of Latino immigrants.” The comment brought applause and a standing ovation by the participants. Within the media arena, at the age of 65, Geraldo Rivera has truly emerged as a true warrior in defense of the Latino community and immigrant rights.

NOTES

- 1 “Hispanic” is Geraldo’s preferred term, but he recognizes, as does this writer, that “Hispanic” and “Latino” are interchangeable. For the purpose of this review, I have chosen the term Latino.
- 2 Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We: The Challenge to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004).

Los bembeteos de la plena puertorriqueña

By Ramón López

San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 2008

260 pages; \$15.95 paper

REVIEWER: MELANIE MALDONADO, Northwestern University

Cultural anthropologist Ramón López unpacks the AfroPuerto Rican music genre of *plena* through a detailed analysis informed by his multiple roles as intellectual, plena practitioner, and *barriado* (from the *barrio*). In addition to his research of plena, López has examined the Three Kings of Puerto Rican lore, transnational Boricua movements, and other manifestations of cultural identity and memory. As a *plenero*, the author utilizes an auto-ethnographic perspective to delineate the hybridization of plena and its translocality. He also employs archival research and historiography to unveil plena’s generational shifts, theorize hegemony, and deconstruct romanticizations of this creole genre.

This monograph is an important contribution to Puerto Rican, diasporic, and Caribbean music studies. López’s book builds on the work of Félix Echevarría Alvarado’s *La plena: origen, sentido y desarrollo en el folklore puertorriqueño*. Whereas that 1984 text serves primarily as a historical survey, *Los bembeteos* expands this body of knowledge with