

THE ART OF BEING RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

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At times, I proposed contrary ideas.

—from *Hunger of Memory*

1

In 1982, *The Village Voice* book editor asked me to choose my next assignment from a stack of new titles. On top was *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, which I was promptly told I should not review: “We’ve seen this already.” She meant minority testimonials. Nevertheless, as in those days Latin-surnamed authors prestigiously published (Godine) in untranslated English were scarce, I perused the cover and some pages, learning that the West Coast Rodriguez¹, opposed to bilingual education and affirmative action, was a creature unheard of back then, a minority conservative. Deferring to my persistence, the editor agreed to a review on the condition that I, roughly Rodriguez’s educated, East-Coast Hispanic double, also interview him.

He arrived at my Queens apartment and extended his hand but dodging eye contact. Maybe the long subway ride from Manhattan had worn away his smile. When our eyes eventually did meet, glancingly, they expressed displeasure over what I suspected was the *Voice*’s choice of reviewer.

We sat at my dining table, and I asked if he was familiar with then-emergent Chicano writings. “No, I’ve never read any,” he answered in a tone bordering on boastful.

“You start out dissociating your book from a hypothetical Hispanic model. ‘I write of one life only,’ you wrote, but otherwise your book tells a familiar story. I identified with much of it.”

“Well, I really wouldn’t know about that. I see it in the tradition of *The Education of Henry Adams*.” I almost reminded him that his book, a paean to what Chicanos call Anglo culture, was also in the tradition of Phyllis Wheatley: “Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land / Taught my benighted soul to understand.” But that citation, I sensed, would have been counterproductive.

In Adams’s third-person autobiography, the protagonist reflects on his nineteenth-century education on the cusp of the twentieth century; Rodriguez’s book spanned the sixties and seventies. Adams traveled throughout Europe; Rodriguez’s trip to Europe was treated as unrelated to his central conflict. For Adams “education” meant both schooling and the “accidental education” of experience; for Rodriguez “education” also referred to schooling but as a euphemism for, in his words, *mimicking*, being *submissive* to, or *emulating* Anglo culture. “Education” in the subtitle invites our comparing Rodriguez’s putting behind him Mexicanness with Adam’s putting behind him the obsolete nineteenth century.

Different from Adams’s two centuries measured in calendars, however, Rodriguez’s time was mythic. “You create of your parents and Mexicanness a figurative Old Country,

a past, even though your parents are alive in California, and Mexico is the land to which California used to belong, on which Mexican culture is still native. This seems a strained application of the traditional immigration mythos, which does not really fit the Latin American situation. The Old Country of Latin American immigrants is America itself. Can you really say that Mexico as a Chicano's cultural past is no different than Germany is for an immigrant New Yorker from Germantown?"

He paused. "Well, I guess I just didn't think of that at the time." The admission was nonchalant: he had been assaulted like this before; his assuredness transcended what details may break down.

Rodriguez and I reached adulthood on the same American tracks. From working class backgrounds we grew up bicultural, came of age in the sixties, and benefited from post-civil rights opportunities, studying to the doctoral level (he bailing out as an "ABD"). His story of being caught between cultures could have come out of my own mouth if not for the way he chose to tell it, making of the distance between Anglo and Hispanic a rhetorical Atlantic that he crossed to reach Americanization.

Rodriguez uses that transatlantic implied metaphor apparently to stay within a "public" tradition whereas most Latino writings do not see it as applicable. A notable exception is Oscar Hijuelos who, like Rodriguez, recognized that success as a mainstream American writer meant rendering obeisance to this convention. Oscar Hijuelos ended his novel *Our House in the Last World* (the title emphasizing distant worlds) with a Cuban character crossing ninety miles of water to "come to America" even if only from another part of America.² Later, in *The Mambo Kings*, Hijuelos unburdened himself of a character with no Anglo American purpose, the younger brother nostalgic for Cuba, by resorting to a literal *deus ex machina*, a wrecked car. Being truly American, the convention dictates, behooves saying goodbye to the "past" even if not understood chronologically. This convention is central to *Hunger for Memory*, in which standing on the Anglo American side of a figurative ocean and consequently so far from his "past," Rodriguez narrates a story of being dramatically reinvented.

His starting point had several interchangeable names "Mexican," "disadvantaged," "poor," and "Spanish," from whose meager prospects he was rescued by grade school nuns who, by imposing their English, began his remaking of himself until, as a highly educated adult, he no longer considered himself Chicano or Mexican or a member of that "disadvantaged" class understood by *minority*.

From the Prologue on, however, one stumbles over inconsistencies and not the ones that he was eager to flaunt: "There are those in White America who would anoint me to play out for them some drama of ancestral reconciliation. . . . But I reject the role. . . . Aztec ruins hold no special interest to me." Instead, I refer to his asking the reader to consider him "a victim of two cultures," who now writes surrounded by "Montaigne, Shakespeare and Lawrence," living in fashionable Bel Air because "education . . . Carried me far." Exactly where in that sequence of imagery were we supposed to see victimization? As in this illustration, throughout the rest of this book rhetoric implies or suggests inferences not supported in the narrative.

Ironically, this questionable use of language is also foreshadowed in his prologue's declaration that his book was "about language." English, he wrote, "determined my public identity." *Public*, we had to figure out for ourselves, was his private usage to avoid the Chicano-aggressive "Anglo," a semantic connection made explicit somewhere else, once parenthetically inserted, "public (gringo)." But what was *determined* intended to mean?

Surely English *informed* his identity, but did English *decide* it? We eventually discovered a sustained implication of a helpless linguistic and cultural change *imposed* on him even though a parallel thematic thread took pride in its being his *choice*.

2

Rodriguez's conflictive stylistic signature was consistent with his bicultural mind: the *Mexican* masked with Catholic secrecy and the *American* anxious for a Protestant public confession. To be "gringo" he gave evidence of being brutally frank, even citing his mother's pleas that he not publish the unkind things he had written about his family. His frankness extended to his acknowledging being contradictory and even possibly wrong. But his frankness was also artifice, a Mexican mask of secrecy: being boldly frank about certain things encouraged us to assume that things he did not reveal must have been unimportant.

When he described himself as a college-burnished young man who returned home to parents with a much humbler level of education: how many before him had not confronted this estrangement? Generations of children of working class immigrants across the American centuries were the first of their line to attend college and graduated overly self-conscious of their parents' humble origins. As this is an American rite of passage, so every college-educated Latino experiences a separation. Nevertheless, Rodriguez wades in lyrical isolation: "I could now read García Lorca and García Márquez at my leisure, but what consolation can that fact bring against the knowledge that my mother and father have never heard of García Lorca and García Márquez?" The separation implied but not explained is repeatedly referred to as his "loss" without elaborating on *of what*. For any possible illustration of "loss" would later be trashed by his more exuberant celebration of his gain.

He was, or course, being frank about the separation he felt from his parents, but this lament of their ignorance of literature was actually intended as a melodramatic synecdoche of his greater conflict with their being *uneducated*, Rodriguez's private synonym for "Mexican." Manipulating the reader, he was also winning sympathy for his rationalizing that on the premise of an encoded and implicitly racist semantics—educated as the opposite of Mexican—he was about to tell the story of his own *Education*.

"You describe 'loss' as your break from your parents' Mexican world. All biculturals face that crossroads while growing up. Given that your fellow Chicano students were confronted with the same choice as you, why do you think they held on to their Mexicanness?"

"Well, as I say in my book, they chose to cling to the past."

"Which you also equate with clinging to being poor. Do you mean that being Mexican gives them a gene that drives them to want to be poor?"

"Well, *you're* saying that. I meant that I had to commit myself to the future as someone who grew up in California."

"In your book every Chicano classmate got easy grades and every Chicano student you taught expected easy grades. Wasn't there one who elected to identify as Mexican and was bright?"

"Well, as I wrote, that's how I saw my academic experience."

"You were a teaching assistant during the years of the Latin American literary 'Boom.' But the only Mexicans or Chicanos you describe are family, laborers, and students. Didn't a Hispanic scholar, sophisticate, or intellectual make even a cameo appearance in your life? No Octavio Paz, no Fuentes?"

He paused to reflect before answering, blithe, immune, "I guess I just hadn't thought about those things at the time."

"What I'm getting at is that you are always exceptional among Hispanics, including when you caution that your book isn't another 'representative model' as found in those writings you say you never read. But the authority that you later invoke to attack affirmative action and other policies implies that you thought of yourself as representative and had contemplated the consequences of your advocacy to others like you. Don't you find this contradictory?"

He paused and reflected. "Well, I guess I hadn't thought about that at the time."

I considered scrapping the review of *Hunger*, which at this point seemed like a hoax, but persevered only because I did not know how the *Voice* would react to my killing a review that I had insisted on writing. I returned to a question I had skipped after being sidetracked by Adams. "I can only sympathize with your aversion to being labeled *minority*, which corrals you and me into the same holding pen as some drug-dealing L.A. *vato*. But our recognizing this distinction individually doesn't change the conventions of the language, and your anger at Anglos for not seeing you as different and not minority seems transferred to Chicanos, which only confirms your minority mindset. What I mean is, don't you think that such a desperate need to convince that one isn't *minority* seems to be the ultimate proof that one is?"

"I don't agree. I was middle class and educated. And, as I said before, my students chose to live in the past. I didn't do that. I wasn't minority. They were minority because they clung to Spanish."

A childhood linguistic theory he first developed in grade school identified Spanish as his "intimate," "private" language while English was "public." That theory remained unchanged when he grew up, except that he figured out that by "intimate" he meant marginalizing and by "public" he really meant "*gringo*." His telling us about these childhood ruminations more importantly revealed how early he had exhibited a penchant for translating his experiences into euphemism. Reading Rodriguez required that one constantly decode his diction that produced declarations like this: "Following the Americanization of their children, even my parents became more publicly confident." The sentence added a nuance of overcoming a social dysfunction simply to describe his parents' feeling more comfortable around Anglos.

Some feelings, however, he could not camouflage with clever words, as was illustrated by his last remark about students who still spoke Spanish. I was about to ask him to elaborate on his evident anger toward Spanish, but at that moment the *Voice's* photographer arrived. Pressed for time, she requested to shoot right away, positioning him in front of my living room window.

That was where he was posing, his back to me and about four feet away, when my telephone rang. The caller was my then-wife, whom I had married in Puerto Rico and with whom I normally conversed in Spanish. After hearing my first words, Rodriguez swiveled and gave me a homicidal glare. In the gravest, thespian delivery that elongated every syllable, he corrected me: "In En-lish, please."

Bewildered, I remembered his suggesting in the Prologue that his linguistic demons were behind him now ("I . . . speak Spanish today"). I also recalled his claim of being angry at his parents "for having encouraged me toward classroom English." I pointed to the telephone mouthpiece, "I'm talking to my wife."

I did not think I had presented myself as an ethno-prankster anxious to trap him just to see if he spoke Spanish, but apparently he did not see me as I thought I had presented myself. I concluded that his overreaction was to finally carve out the necessary demarcation—I Hispanic, he more highly evolved—that had been looking for any reason to come out, having been contained since our eyes hardly met at the door.

3

Growing up in structurally identical American minority communities, Rodriguez and I were informed by the contrast between the mystique-enhanced mainstream and its self-serving mythologies about unprestigious cultures. On the West Coast, brown Mexican is not prestigious, and on the East Coast, neither is Puerto Rican—brown, black, or white. Both these cultures share an ancestry of conquistadors and explorers but are more famous for the black legend of low school grades and high crime.

Like Disney's Ariel the Mermaid, many of us start out believing we were born into the wrong world and grow up aspirants, studying the humans. That anxiousness, whether active or dormant, abides in every U.S. minority consciousness, driving it until it is driven out. In adolescence, we have all stared into the mirror at damning complexions, sometimes not even ours but of socially marginalized faces with whom we are linked, and wanted to crawl out of our names or skins. What cultural wealth we possess may wait for us forever smothered under the sloppy seaweed of our generic minority story. Social mobility vindicates individually but does not redeem from that story. Seeking redemption in his "public" identity, Rodriguez embraced the overcorrectness of an American pre-sixties, the conservatism he espoused against the cultural politics and educational policies he encountered both as student and teacher in the seventies.

From that decade, informed by the Civil Rights Movement, one radical wisdom would outlast now defunct entitlement programs and affirmative action: the realization that socially acceptable cultural division into "mainstream" and "minorities" is a scam, oppression with soft shackles. American descendants of non-Europeans were alerted to rethink the mainstream's teachings on the disposability of their regional cultures, which although marginalizing in the mainstream mythos, spiritually nourished and strengthened.

From that revision of this "minority" business in the context of the Vietnam War emerged Third Worldism. Seeing a common struggle all over the globe, young radicals—both white and nonwhite—began to interpret American racism as domestic colonialism and the civil rights struggle at home as simply one theater in a worldwide rebellion of non-Europeans who had been inculcated cultural self-doubts to facilitate the accumulation of Eurocentric wealth and the longevity of white supremacy. The choice for every Third World, in other words, minority person was to either debunk the mythologies of supremacy or continue to be the servile colonial.

Rodriguez, however, properly "educated" to dismiss anything minorities said, fancied himself the possessor of a superior ignorance of his generation's overwhelming question surely dropped on his plate many times. Consequently, with a modesty intended to characterize him as above the fray, he conceded that he was "not the best person to evaluate the Third World Student Movement." That admission was also supposed to relieve him of having to reconcile yet another contradiction: his self-characterization as, at once, dismissive of minority radicals' causes and also opposed to the Vietnam War.

In *Hunger* Rodriguez stated that he stood with “most students and teachers [he] knew” in opposition to the war, marching, signing petitions, and writing letters to senators. But, if he was unequipped to “evaluate” (yet another blurry usage) the Third World Student Movement, then what about that war did he find indefensible? Whatever the rest of the country’s reasons for opposing that war, in academe students and teachers denounced it for being an imperialist war, a neo-colonial war, a racist war, and a metaphor of American minorities before white supremacy. On campus, in other words, Third Worldism and opposition to the war were synonymous.

But neither ideology nor principle was Rodriguez’s steer; he was driven by the winds of vogue. His retrospective summary of that period asked us to believe that, while on a minority scholarship, he marched against the Vietnam War, echoing the chants of “Third World” student leaders whom he had summarily described as not belonging in college and whose cultural positions he never took seriously. Meanwhile, he was refining his views of affirmative action and minority scholarships, which after the war he condemned along with his former anti-war allies, winning the support of conservative mentors.

Rodriguez never actually labeled himself a conservative in *Hunger of Memory*; he just read the lines, discovering that the national media deemed as newsworthy a Chicano’s repeating conservative responses to liberal policies. The script he chose, opposing minority entitlements in education, was a means of vindicating his being exceptional among the minority hoards who did not really deserve to be in college.

One did not have to be an emulator of “public” culture to see the absurdity in minority students given scholarships they did not merit and of meaningless good grades awarded out of leftist solidarity. Having been a graduate student and teacher during those same years, like him I questioned the madness even as I too benefited from the fawning over minority students, also knowing that I was not representative of what was generally understood by that epithet “minority.” I also had to teach classes where a disproportionate number of minority students (but not every single one) could not write a sentence or read or comprehend beyond simple phrases and wished like Rodriguez I could peel myself of that social association between those students and someone so unlike them as myself: “Minority” homogenizes entire cultures in their humblest social class. But the protagonist of that injustice is the culture he emulates.

Rodriguez articulates his opposition to Affirmative Action in a personal tone, validating with his own experience. In argument formulated to sound objective, he writes in the best interest of “disadvantaged” students. Chicanos around him who merited financial help should have received it, he conceded, but not just for being Chicano. Also, he added, the “disadvantaged” student was not helped by easy grades from supportive professors. “Disadvantaged” students were actually deprived by policies resulting from what he called the liberals’ “decadent romanticism.”

This rhetorical sympathy comes near the end of book in which many more words had already underscored the hopelessness of those “disadvantaged” students. His having made so strong a case for his identity and adoption of its biases as a way of becoming a “public” person makes all this verbiage sound politic, revealing underlying cynicism. For if we apply the semantics already imposed in preceding chapters, the “education” that Rodriguez would have wanted to see for the “disadvantaged” was not a question of writing effective term papers or becoming literate in poetry. His true position on this subject was encoded in his never referring to these students as explicitly poor or culturally marginalized—suggesting another cause for their problem—but always vaguely as “disadvantaged”: in his heart of

hearts, the consistency of his diction confessed, students lacked the advantage celebrated in *Hunger*, becoming “public (gringo)” persons, which no public policy would have brought about. In short, suggesting the wholly incredible claim that had those Chicano students deserved to be in college, his view of them would have been rehabilitated, Rodriguez only uses the fortuitous dismal statistics to the contrary to celebrate the leitmotiv of his book, his dissociating himself not only from Chicano students but from being Chicano.

Throughout this discussion, mimicking as he had done since grade school, Rodriguez borrowed the diction of those English professors who looked down on what Rodriguez now also called “exotic” literature. While speaking like his models, he saw no contradiction in being a Humanist and dismissing an entire culture simply because it was represented on campus by an ill-prepared generation of students. (How should we grade American culture if all we knew were today’s generation of “average” students?) And like his mentors he perceived Chicano Studies not as an unexplored area for all Humanities students but as a reserve in which to contain the Hispanic “disadvantaged.”

Seen from such a supercilious academic height, the nascent ethnic studies programs were easy targets. Off in the margins, they developed their own subculture that, in a hostile environment, offered kindred support over stern scholarship or sought out budgetary self-perpetuation by trading academic rigor for supportive students’ political pressure. The academically untenable situation provided a rationale for trivializing a local ethnicity that Rodriguez called in his traditionalist pose, “exotic,” an intellectually authoritative way of unloading crass prejudices against a population “disadvantaged” not by its culture but by Anglo attitudes toward that culture. Acting out his loyalty to his “public” identity and without intellectual examination, then, Rodriguez merely recited the traditional faculty’s arrogance.

The influx of poor Chicano students as totally responsible for lowering standards was a canard and, although the argument may sound absurd, an issue separate from the creation of ethnic studies programs. For when a national debate arose over academe’s obligation to acknowledge non-European achievement, the traditionalists had the power to introduce this new material at a level of scholarship commensurate with familiar subjects. But that invading cultural history was already deemed of little intellectual worth. Seeing such studies as being of value only to that new barbarian hoard of invading students and unessential to American Studies, the traditional faculty refused to learn or apply their expertise or expose their mainstream students to the new subjects. As a result, like every other minority studies program, Chicano Studies became the sole purview of besieged, often new professors informed by self-defensive, politicized pedagogy.

Over the years, pointing out the deficiencies of those programs has been a favorite deflection from the fact that academic standards were for the traditional senior professors to uphold and not just hold over the heads of the newcomers. The course materials were never a measure; “academic standards” were measured by research, argument, and methodology as we see from serious mainstream courses cropping up on themes in pop culture. But the traditional faculty did not care enough about the encroaching demographics to nurture those standards in courses and programs that they assumed were designed to cater to only those unwelcome students. As a result, at first necessarily too many mediocre or politically motivated scholars filled in the ethnic studies gap, making possible a facile camouflage with which the traditional faculty could cover its original failure.

In sum, if poorly prepared minority students and sympathetic, grade-trading professors contributed to the lowering of standards, so did the mainstream Humanities faculty

that did not assume its academic responsibility to all subjects in its discipline. This mess, in other words, was a grand collaboration of a single, divided American culture. Standards trashed for minorities were also trashed for all. Thus, one legacy of that collaboration is the present culture of grade-inflation even at the most prestigious universities. And as important, by resisting the nation's advancing toward its American promise, the traditional faculty let it be known henceforth that the business of American "Humanities" had never really been knowledge for its own sake, that its real enterprise was a Euro-lineage ethnic studies program.

4

Rodriguez's policy positions were like everything else in *Hunger*, not meant to survive close scrutiny as they were foremost characterization of a "public" persona. We were reminded of that stylistic signature by an exceptional episode in the same chapter, "Profession," which contained the one honest moment of *Hunger*, his description of feeling trapped between his inability to identify with Chicano students and his department's expectations of his working out as a minority mentor.

Notable was the scene in which a group of students requested that he teach a "minority literature" course at some barrio community center on Saturday mornings." He listened to their appeal, then spoke, trying to get across his view: "I didn't think there was such a thing as minority literature. Any novel or play about the lower class will necessarily be alien to the culture it portrays." He went on to cite extensive literary examples of his meaning to students rigidly in shock. Confessing to knowing how ridiculous he seemed ("I was regarded as a comic. . . a 'coconut,' . . . someone brown on the outside, white on the inside"), he accepted the ridicule only to discover that no matter how crassly he expressed his inability to identify with the Chicana, colleagues remained sure he would be a perfect mentor and invitations to speak would arrive addressed to *Señor* Rodriguez.

What distinguished this discussion from the rest of his book was the language in which he openly dissected his contradictions, his limitations, his existential determination to choose his life among professional alternatives. Missing were the baroque wordplay of private meanings and the intentional ambiguities that characterized his writing on his family, Mexicanness, his "past."

When writing about those "intimate" subjects, he consistently gave self-characterization pre-eminence over clarity and sense. The following paragraph well illustrated characterization's primacy:

But it annoyed me to hear students on campus loudly talking in Spanish or thickening their surnames with rich baroque accents because I distrusted their implied assertion that their tongue proved their bond to the past, to the poor. . . I spoke in English. . . I had been submissive, willing to mimic my teachers, willing to re-form myself in order to become 'educated.' They were proud, claiming that they didn't need to change by becoming students. I had long before accepted the fact that education exacted a great price for its equally great benefits. They denied that price—any loss.

"Great benefits," we were told, came from his being "educated," written within quotation marks to half-admit his self-conscious euphemizing to say *becoming Anglo-Americanized*. That stylized meaning, conflated with the meaning *schooled* subse-

quently appeared in “education” without quotation marks. So in essence we were being told that becoming Anglo and acquiring knowledge were synonymous, making the converse true: remaining Mexican made it impossible to be “educated” in both senses. This limitation doomed Chicano students if they did not “change.”

Education, it is a truism, does imply change but not necessarily to Anglo. Delivered in this duplicitous semantics is a racism made a shade more explicit—although once again duplicitously—in his defining that “change” as a willingness to “re-form,” whose hyphen might highlight a reshaping but does not remove the nuance of correcting—as in *reform school*. But what produced his *annoyance*? He wrote: “because I distrusted their implied assertion that their tongue proved their bond to the past, to the poor.” Rodriguez had answered me that *he* equated the students’ clinging to Spanish as staying in the past. Belonging to that generation of Hispanic students, although not myself Chicano, I believe myself authorized to clarify that Spanish was indeed an important symbol back then, but not of the past; it was an affirmation of an identity. Rodriguez projected onto the students a symbolic celebration of his subjective notion of Spanish as “past.”

More important, this “because” clause did not explain why he was annoyed: “because I distrusted their implied assertion. . . .” Why would he be *annoyed that he doubted* that they believed this bond with the past existed? Would his trusting their implied assertion make him less annoyed? Or responding to what he thought that sentence said, why would he get annoyed that they could be so wrong? One could have understood his annoyance at a community that did not “get it,” the cultural rules that this country imposed on those aspiring for upward mobility. His annoyance could have also logically followed from his realizing that he felt obligated to mimic while the Spanish speakers seemed free of that pressure.

Neither, however, was his gist. His declaration of annoyance did not actually have nor need a rational motive; it was merely a rhetorically elaborated sigh like those of a certain Anglo who might complain to a neighbor of hearing Spanish chatted at the supermarket, the kind of annoyance that required no explanation when vented into a sympathetic ear. Ultimately, his ostensible contemplation was merely a voicing, neither well written nor thought out but nevertheless a melodramatic reaffirmation of his “public” identity, like his gratuitous acting out the histrionic line in my living room: “In English, please.”

5

Finally the *Voice* photographer left, but just as Rodriguez sat for another question, the phone rang. It was for him, a woman from NBC. Speaking to her was a different, charming personality, who jotted something down. He returned to the interview buoyant because he would be appearing the following morning on *The Today Show*. He waited for my next question but mentally absent, understandably transported to Rockefeller Center and before national television cameras. Surely only because this interview was for a *Voice* book review did he control the urge to leave, betraying that restraint with glances at his watch.

I read from my notes and realized that the question I had been about to ask before the photographer arrived was on his anger toward Spanish. I looked for another question. “You completed your undergraduate and graduate studies on minority scholarships, so why did you put down other Chicano students because they received financial aid?”

“I had accepted the aid out of necessity, but I am still opposed to giving minorities special scholarships.”

"Do you mean that those other Chicanos, like you, needed the aid, but in their case their school work didn't measure up?"

"No. I understand that I am being contradictory. I happened to receive aid because I was a minority student, but I don't believe in it." He looked at his watch again. His face all over said he couldn't take any more of this, but he did append: "I can't explain the contradiction. But all I saw were students who wouldn't have deserved scholarships and got them only because of what they were."

How could you be certain that, in a world without affirmative action, your gifts would have justly been rewarded at the level they were? That was my next question, which I did not get to ask because he had to leave. After he left I read over my notes, feeling disappointed as I read to myself the one question that I most wanted to ask but could not: what he meant by, "at Stanford . . . I began to have something like a conventional sexual life."

If Rodriguez did not introduce his sexual orientation into his story, I did not want the sexual-identity-sensitive *Voice* audience to think that I, who was not writing from the perspective of a gay person, had tried to "out" him as a put down to retaliate against his conservative positions. I also suspected that the interview would have ended right there. And without his spoken words on his sexuality, from the veiled language of *Hunger*, I could not make a credible argument in the words allotted to me, however strong my sense of a different protagonist under the characterization he offered, of his being different because he was studious, "a scholarship boy."

In the chapter "The Achievement of Desire" he described his discovery of this identity while doing research in the British Museum. Having second thoughts about writing a dissertation that few would read (again the fear of not being read), he picked up *The Uses of Literacy*, in which he learned of a psychological type that its author Richard Hoggart called the "scholarship boy." Seeing himself in that model, Rodriguez wrote of this product of nurture as if it were a genetic type, a nature that freed him of any responsibility to communicate with his parents: "It no longer seemed very important to me that we had little to say." This realized, he also felt liberated to admit to himself that his parents had nothing of substance to say anyway: the great gap between him and them was that he was "able to consider experience . . . abstractly," unlike his parents, "who did not pass their time thinking about the cultural meanings of their experience."

A point of clarification should be made that his parents had pushed him to learn "classroom English" in grade school and then later, after her children learned English, his mother reminded them not to forget their Spanish: "Once she was sure that her children knew English, my mother would tell us, 'You should keep up your Spanish.' Voices playfully groaned in response. 'Pochos!' my mother would tease." [*Pocho* is the derogatory word for an assimilated Mexican American.] At another point, his parents were described as "thinkers—persons aware of the experience of their lives."

Nevertheless, now freed of any obligation to them, he could "turn unafraid to desire the past and thereby achieve what had eluded me for so long—the end of education." Throughout this book, "the past" had meant his childhood, Mexican, and being poor. The loss of that failed past was his gain. So what did he mean by claiming here to have desired it? Also, did he mean "end" as in the *cessation* or the *objective* of "education," which has consistently meant his Anglo-Americanization? Did this cutting of the cord to his parents signify his graduating as an accomplished "public (gringo)" person and therefore the end of that "education"? No more refinements or explanations as the chapter ends there.

Such rhetorical escape hatches from treacherous complications, especially at pinnacle moments, were built into the blueprints of this book. The Prologue first described it as "Essays impersonating an autobiography," at first priming us to expect some analytical rigor but quickly introducing a release clause that the author also thought of his book as a memoir of feelings: "I consider my book a kind of pastoral." So when clarity became threatening, he resorted to the voice of an honest, if confused narrator, and we were expected to remember that he was not a debater but a persona: "I guess I just didn't think of that at the time." As in that repeated response to my questions, his favorite argument technique was tonal sincerity, a sincere tone as the rhetorical mask for an artful discourse, a virtuosity of circumventions and omissions.

One major evasion of extenuating details underlies the episode in which, realizing that as an academic he was marked for hiring strictly as a Hispanic role model, he elected to turn down several prime job offers, including one at Yale. His rescinding his applications provoked vehement responses from senior professors who had provided reference letters. Presented as a morality play of high principles, this scene of his aborting his academic career served as the climax of *Hunger*.

Apparently we were not expected to read too closely and remember that, back in "The Achievement of Desire," he had decided in London to abandon his dissertation—because practically nobody would read it and the best he could achieve by completing it was to become an unknown academic—which made applying to such jobs pointless. That decision, we recall, was also motivated—as proved by the publication of *Hunger* within the same years it would have taken him to earn tenure—by his being lured from teaching by the promise of celebrity as a minority writer who challenged liberal policies. "My essays served as my 'authority' to speak at the Marriot Something or the Sheraton Something," he wrote. He had also started publishing autobiographical essays that editors liked because they told a minority story: "At times, I proposed contrary ideas; consistent always was the admission that I was no longer like socially disadvantaged Hispanic-Americans. But this admission, made in national magazines, only brought me a greater degree of success. A published minority student, I won a kind of celebrity."

Solely his "admission" that he was "no longer like" Hispanic Americans, as he coyly formulated that sentence, did not produce his success, nor obviously did the ideas that nobody heard him contradict. Rather, as he obliquely admitted, celebrity was his reward for being a minority student taking an anti-Hispanic position. To summarize, he had not turned down academic opportunities cheapened because he was sought after for being Chicano; he gave up an obscure career as an academic for the blooming prospect of becoming a nationally applauded minority writer.

6

The crescendo of Rodriguez's unreliability as narrator was reached in the final chapter of *Hunger*, in an eerie portrayal of his father, an observing silence at a family Christmas dinner: "It is difficult to tell what he hears (his hearing is bad) or cannot understand (his English is bad)." The dinner proceeded with the usual catching up on new babies and cousins. His brother and two sisters lived away, had their own lives. Throughout the father had not uttered a word, left out by his Americanized children. Coming after his informing his parents of his decision to quit a secure, prestigious career to become ostensibly nothing, this muted family dinner scene suggests a consequential denouement. We were

expected to infer that his decision was one more thing he had done that his family was incapable of comprehending. In this vague way, Rodriguez dramatized his "loss," and the book ended on that vague note.

Fading from view atop the caboose chapter of his son's first book, the senior Rodriguez looked nothing like the younger man earlier described, who planned to live in Australia, "his America," where he had heard that Mexicans were better received. He used to attend polo games and, fashion conscious, was fond of Italian scarves. He was also a lover of Italian Grand Opera. But that person, Rodriguez analyzed, changed when he became demoralized by having to work at a warehouse job. Then, in the final chapter, this complex man—clearly the source of Rodriguez's own hunger for status—was dismantled so he may play his son's simpler Mexican foil.

A concession to his father's real centrality to Richard's life story, however, is the subtitle of his second book *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1993). As we might expect, this book continued where *Hunger of Memory's* final chapter left off but also interwove the same years covered in his first book, only rewriting his household. The family was now more rounded. His aunt, we now learned he had one, was married to an Asian Indian, his uncle Raj, who gave him toys and in adulthood conversed with him on the irony of their both being "Indian." His discussion in *Hunger* of being troubled about his complexion would have been enriched by this window to the wider world, his uncle Raj.

His parents too were different. In *Hunger* they were portrayed as embodiments of the "past" and being poor, even though they appeared modestly middle class. In *Days*, left unclear the exact point of their no longer being poor, they were middle class and embodied denial, with their hearts still in an impoverished Mexico to which they would never want to return. Although we learned that his mother's childhood nickname was Toyita, neither parent yet had an adult given name. As the subtitle instructed, know them as a Mexican mother and father.

The most significant difference between these two books was how Rodriguez's old conflict with his Mexicanness was told with his now redesigned father as titular antagonist. We had last known him at the Christmas dinner as a quiet presence, broken by that warehouse job, speaking little or no English, a subtly parodied silence not suggestive of inner thinking. But in the final chapter of *Days*, "Nothing Lasts A Hundred Years," we met a man who had been thinking all along: "Ask me what it was like to have grown up a Mexican kid in Sacramento and I will think of my father's smile, its sweetness, its introspection, its weight of sobriety." This father, who in *Hunger* also symbolized secretly—confessed Catholicism against publicly-confessed Protestantism, now embodied pessimistic Catholicism beside his son's newly adopted, optimistic Protestantism. Shedding Mexicanness would not have been complete without shedding Catholicism.

More important still, in the chapter "Late Victorians," about San Francisco's gay pride parade, Rodriguez came out of the closet: "To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets and within secrets. In no other place are those secrets more closely guarded than within the family house." His language remained generic; the cited "Victorian house" was an implied metaphor in which, he postulated, gayness is kept *in the closet*. Beyond that observation, he neither elaborated on nor explained why he was knowledgeable about living "with secrets and within secrets." Prompted by Rodriguez's gay persona and the rounder characterization of his father in *Days of Obligation*, I returned to *Hunger of Memory's* final chapter. I had not remembered that its title was "Mr. Secrets," whom now *Days* revealed to be the ironic, ostensibly frank narrator of *Hunger*.

Rodriguez was presumably still in the closet that Christmas recorded at the end of *Hunger*, but that his sexuality was not open did not mean that his father did not suspect it. In other words, contrary to what "Mr. Secrets" suggested in *Hunger*, his giving up job offers or his becoming Anglicized or too intellectual for this family was not the only reason for rift between son and father. The tough Mexican traditionalist unimpressed by this culture would most likely have also been a strict traditionalist in sexual attitudes. Conversely, if a Mexican father either rejected or ignored his son for being homosexual, that son would be strongly inclined to best his father and reject him back, including everything about him, especially his homophobic culture. For deep down that son must despise those tightly held Mexican mores that would banish him from his father's love. In fact, for someone in this difficult family situation, *Mexican* and *Anglo* had to become practically sexual terms.

This sexual key also unlocked the mystery of Rodriguez's estrangement from his brother and sisters, who attended the same Catholic schools he did, and from all appearances were as Anglicized and did their part to marginalize their father at that Christmas dinner. Practically nothing is said of his brother. One sister, we were told, had married a man "of German descent." So how were his also "educated"—in his favorite sense—siblings culturally different from Richard and why was there still distance between him and them? The reason Rodriguez suggested was that they were not intellectuals ("at least he's a reader," Rodriguez says of his nephew). But the coming out of "Mr. Secrets" and his giving that final chapter that title suggested another divisive scenario.

Finally, his homosexuality also permits our deciphering in retrospect the encryption of his sexual experiences: "Fifteen, sixteen. I was a teenager shy in the presence of girls. Never dated. Barely could talk to a girl without stammering." In college, he said, he had experienced "a conventional sexual life," suggesting a heterosexual one. His trivializing the importance of sexual identity to his story of language and culture by reducing it to those two statements had originally signaled that something was lacking in his appreciation of the minority experience.

Minority is popularly synonymous with what our American time has narrowed down to *race*, epitomized by African American, and race is the Anglo American psychosexual obsession: as Eldridge Cleaver observed in *Soul on Ice*, the white woman protected from black men as a forbidden prize became the target of rape as racial iconoclasm. In the same vein, a heterosexual pairing of mainstream and minority citizens is nuanced with taboo sex. In the late sixties, as civil rights marchers dominated the hard news, in the tabloid movie pages appeared advertising for a genre of porn then called "mixed combos"; today pornographic websites advertise sexually engaged whites and non-whites as a category of sexual turn-on.

In my own East Coast adolescence, coming of age also meant learning the ethnography of American courting rituals. At my Catholic high school dances meeting a new girl involved exchanging "backgrounds," which invariably meant a conversation on what I was, which on occasion was the wrong thing. The situation became more confusing when I reached the age of meaningful eligibility in the seventies, a time when being minority came into sexual fashion. I dated many liberal "white" women about whom I had to wonder if I was simply an instrument of social rebellion. These women postponed my learning what was normalcy, which returned in the eighties when being minority fell from fashion and some formerly "liberal" women reverted while others refused to revert to tradition, their difference defining mainstream. And even throughout those years of

“roots”—consciousness, certain ambitious Latinas avoided pairing with someone who symbolized the social powerlessness that they, like Rodríguez, perceived as their past.

So whatever the cultural stock value of being minority during any given period, the one constant has been negotiating a concomitant sexual stigma or mystique. Discovering one's having to participate in these ceremonies just to date the opposite sex awakened you to the power of mainstream mythologies. But as Rodríguez could not write of those sexual experiences, in *Hunger* he told his story sexlessly, implicitly heterosexual but circumventing heterosexual complexities, enciphering his identity conflict in the language of Hoggart's portrait of the “scholarship boy” as the sole explanation for his being different.

7

Hunger of Memory performed a killing of Abel before the cheering, conservative coliseum. By condemning entitlements, pandering to English Only, and advocating that Mexicanness was the cause of the Chicano community's poverty, his book contributed to the eventual erosion of post-Civil Rights initiatives. But by his second book we would discover that he had tricked his ideal readers who in *Hunger* were told that they were about to read “a parable of the life of its reader. . . the life of a middle-class man” when all along it was the marketably censored story of Mr. Secrets. The deception was understandable: in 1982 that reader who cheered Rodríguez's condemnation of minority entitlements would not have sympathized with his being gay. Just as earlier he had completed his studies on minority scholarships in which he did not believe, to advance his career he had also used conservatives with whose sexual views he disagreed.

In other words, even though autobiography is also creative performance, *Hunger* was more artifice than we might have imagined. Rodríguez as artful narrator reminded us of the titular character of Max Frisch's novel *I Am Not Stiller*, who hating his being a middle-class German, in the face of every possible proof still passionately denies being Stiller. Ironically, he imagines himself a ranch owner in Mexico, and so much does he despise being German that in the end he admits that even though he might be Stiller he refuses to accept Stiller's life.

Similarly, *Hunger of Memory* engraved Rodríguez's refusal to accept being Mexican and his determination to be that “public (*gringo*)” person into whom, in another contradiction, he also claimed to be involuntarily “educated.” Hence soundness of argument mattered little; hence his blithe admissions that he had not thought of so many important things. Whom he became was an impassioned effort to be the “public” person created in language in *Hunger of Memory*, so as with Stiller, inconsistencies and contradictions were irrelevant, providing the enriching music of genuine conviction. One could even envision a future edition of *Hunger* with a Borghesian foreword that explains the pain and difficulty of writing the whole truth at the time, thereby ennobling the artifice and duplicitous language to poetic truth that reveals the inner drama of having been born culturally marginalized, a purely civic American citizen, who was also homosexual. Until that time, the narrator of *Hunger* remains closer to Stiller.

Unlike Stiller, however, whom beyond the novel's end we imagine living his reinvention, Rodríguez has had a problem with keeping in character. Soon after the publication of *Hunger*, in which he dissociated himself from his Hispanic past, he contributed the endpage essay of a special edition of *Time* devoted to Hispanic Americans. Furthermore, despite *Hunger*'s broadcasting his not knowing nor caring to know about Mexicans, he

accepted an invitation to “serve as the ‘presenter’ on a BBC documentary on the United States and Mexico.” In *Days of Obligation*, he wrote of this experience in a tone that ridiculed the BBC for inviting him to present but without explaining his inconsistency in accepting their offer.

By the mid-nineties, by then a syndicated columnist and an essayist on PBS’s evening news program, Rodriguez had also evolved into a sort of multiculturalist, reflecting the transformation of the California he had idealized in *Hunger*, whose Anglo mainstream had entered into a decline during which immigrants were exhibiting more energy and optimism—even Mexicans, by his own admission. So when Rodriguez wrote of his paid return to Mexico for the BBC, although described as highly unpleasant, his intellectual disposition had shifted closer to the mainstream’s improving regard of Latin America, he cited great Mexican thinkers, and the book jacket of *Days* prematurely announced a previous book on Mexicans in the United States, *Mexico’s Children*, although in reality this book was never published.

Rodriguez’s evolving personas since *Hunger* provide another explanation for his having forsaken a career as literary scholar, one who measures texts against antecedents and long-distance legacies. Having rejected clinging to his own idea of his “past,” even returning to English antecedents in scholarly investigation would inevitably have prompted reflection on that other, undesirable past. The alternative was to live perennially in the present, a decision reflected in the sum of his personas, a string of present tenses: when being conservative was a novelty, he sounded conservative; in the rise of multiculturalism, he took note and accepted assignments; when gays won media acceptability, he stopped pandering to conservatives and came out of the closet.

In the course of this trajectory, like a character out of Borges, he exists in Humean time, so that today’s gay persona or television essayist has no reason to revisit Mr. Secret’s *Hunger of Memory* and evinces no intellectual obligation to acknowledge that in addition to his wish for a “public” identity, conflicts involving his sexual identity had motivated his politicized portrayal of his parents’ culture. On the contrary, he continues reinventing himself as if the undermining evidence in printed books did not exist.

Recall that in *Hunger* he expressed his annoyance at those who refused to become “educated,” who clung to Spanish, who did not “mimic” Anglo culture as he did. And yet in 1997 he complained to a BBC interviewer of having been introduced at a library convention as someone “favoring assimilation”: “And I thought to myself, I’m not in favor of assimilation any more than I’m in favor of the Pacific Ocean. I didn’t decide when I was a child walking down the streets that I was going to become an American.” Becoming an American, of course, does not address the question of assimilation; most Chicanos didn’t choose to become Americans either. Rodriguez, of course, was imposing on the conversation the standard of American as cultural. But even that denial contradicted his *Hunger* self-portrait of himself as the exceptional antithesis of Chicanos, whose “clinging” to Spanish he disdained as their conscious choice.

As late as February 2000, in an interview with *Reason: On Line*, when asked to opine on a protest mounted by Chicano students when he was to speak at their college, Rodriguez’s adroitness at denial and contradiction left one breathless. Since 1982, the year *Hunger of Memory*’s publication, Chicanos have been protesting its underlying racism, but his response to this interviewer was: “I find [the protest] curious . . . because I see myself left of center.” Ironically, in the same year, 2000, that at the Republican Convention would showcase minority conservatives, of whom Rodriguez had been an antecedent, he was

denying any knowledge of his eighties persona who had ingratiated himself with conservatives. Now, no longer fitting in that right-wing camp and explicitly in favor of gay rights, he considered himself "left of center," implying a purview supportive of social policies whose termination he became famous for advocating. No longer Mexican and no longer Mr. Secrets, he answered honestly as his reinvented person: "I see myself a homosexual man—much freer in America than in Latin America." In other words, and out of context, his answer was the real thesis of *Hunger of Memory*.

8

Most recently, on the twentieth anniversary of *Hunger of Memory*, in March 2002 Rodriguez published *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, whose subtitle appears to have been reworked before the original one was already publicizing the book as *An Erotic History of America*. In his words from the preface, this book is "about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America," and as well (from the final essay, explaining the book to a friend), "about brown—not skin . . . as impurity." In the preface too, he had said the book was on impurity but skin was not explicitly excluded, and after stating that his book was about "race," even if to undermine this notion, throughout the book references to Mexicans, Indians, or his color before others do concern brown skin.

The final subtitle *The Last Discovery of America* invokes the Spanish chronicles of discovery as antecedent to this book, but the closest thing to an explorer cited is Alexis de Tocqueville. The two, after all, are in the same tradition of exploration and express the same European view of the races. They both also suggest that the subject of *Brown* is an American terrain across which Rodriguez has trekked and contemplated, a terrain of race and racial attitudes and racial metaphors and racial delusions.

The metaphor puts Rodriguez at a distance, a foreigner seeing the countryside like De Soto or de Tocqueville even though in fact he writes from personal experience as someone brown. So, as in *Hunger of Memory*, within a package of ostensible essays the book reserves the right to be a "pastoral," a flexible compilation of impressions and declarations that range from insightful and even brilliant to pretentious and dishonest. The former—demonstrating the properly acknowledged influence of William Gass's *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*—is attained the farther he gets away from the topic that makes him most jittery and dishonest, things Chicano or Hispanic.

Although not autobiography in the sense that his earlier books recorded stages of conflict with his family, in passing new autobiographical revelations cast light on earlier questions or fill in lacunae. One sister, for example, suddenly figures prominent when before all his siblings had been neutral props: "In 1971 my sister returned from Paris. . . . She went to Harvard Business School, where she evolved a playful theory of haute couture as theatrical parody of the mundane. She filled my head with big ideas. She established in my mind that the only point to becoming an intellectual was to become a public intellectual. She established in my mind that a public intellectual should be glamorous: *Stop dressing like a graduate student*. . . . In 1972, I went to London to study." It was in London that, as reported in *Hunger's* chapter "The Achievement of Desire," that he decides not to write his dissertation and to forsake an academic career. Chicanos, affirmative action, and being hired strictly as a Chicano-student-counseling, "minority" professor surely were his stated reasons, but in addition to the promise of success as a published minority author, we now learn of the influence of his equally ambitious sister.

In this book Rodriguez also reclaims his former personae by introducing *Brown* as the third book in a trilogy—actually citing the first two titles—“on American public life and my private life,” a description so broad as to be inevitably true but changing the meanings of “public” and “private” as these key words were used in *Hunger*. Here “public,” his un-Chicano-sounding euphemism for “Anglo,” made the modifier “American” redundant. His “private life” was really the untold sexual story of “Mr. Secrets,” which *Hunger* covered up with the image of the “scholarship boy” distant from his “private” life, meaning the one with his Mexican family. In *Brown* he inadvertently concedes to this earlier duplicity in *Hunger* when, in referring to those years, he introduced a sentence with, “A scholarship boy and sexually secretive. . . .”

Also obliquely addressing his former personae consisting of literary tropes, slippery semantic latitude, and selective omissions, in *Brown* Rodriguez defends “impersonation” as a dissembled truth, a form of post-Puritan Americanism: “I was studying Puritanism and that, too, interested me, not least for its prohibition of impersonation.” *Puritanism* quickly takes on new meaning, a desire for purity that condemns theatricality or spectacle or, most important here, artifice. The Puritans in his mind, we discover, were ethnic purists, presumably Chicanos: “Ethnic studies departments were forming on some campuses. Such quorums would produce the great puritans of my age. The puritans would eventually form opinions about me, and I about them.”

Theater, including reinventing oneself, is American truth: “My interest is in this intersection—the intersection in America of the private theatrical with the public theatrical.” We have heard this theatricality called assimilation—but that smacks of immigrant, of the past, from where Rodriguez’s persona must shy. More elegantly stated, then, his undergraduate love of British literature and his unspecified “ambition” were, he tells us, an “experimenting with impersonation.” By establishing this distinction between purists and the Americanness of impersonation, Rodriguez implicitly offers a retroactive apology for his bibliography of narrative artifice.

This Puritan thesis truly tries the reader’s patience, a casuistic, intellectually pretentious argument that transparently gets off his chest a familiar internecine gripe with other Chicanos from whom he consistently pretends being aloof. Reading this chapter, one is struck less by the argument than by the driving emotion that would blind him from appreciating its self-defeating gimmickry. One senses, in fact, a rage that his public culture has ultimately failed him by allowing him to proceed, indifferent to sense, because ultimately he is a minority, Chicano writer.

This argument also confirms that he simply cannot write about Hispanics or specifically Chicanos without losing it, and at those low points his discourse never rises to the level of reflection that he devotes to the range of other unrelated subjects pursuant to American culture that easily seduce him to roam far from the book “about Hispanics in America” that he was proposed and agreed to write. On that subject he is eminently superficial, sustaining the characterization he offered in *Hunger* as one who knew little and cared to know nothing of Mexicans and, when I interviewed him, one who boasted of not having read Chicano writing.

But now, two decades later, as he himself seems resigned to accept, he will always be famous for being Hispanic and his career will be grounded on writing on that subject, this know-nothing characterization undermines his ability to write something more than “pastoral” monologues impersonating a “public (gringo)” voice that does not know anything about Hispanics. In *Brown*, in moments that approximate essay, when he addresses either

white or black culture, he makes it a point to show he has conversed with its respective art, music, writing, movies, pop culture. Before Chicano culture, however, with which he is "publicly" identified and a subject of this book on American views of brown, Rodriguez can only refer to the only cultural expression he claims to know: the attacking chants of Chicano students or activists.

Adopting the convention of his "public" culture, he perceives High Brown as only coming from abroad. Hence he has read Octavio Paz and José Vasconcelos. Otherwise, local Hispanic topics are subjected to much irony at best, his discussion bloodless: he wants us to know unambiguously that except as specimens of brown, brown people do not interest him. Tellingly, his chapter "Hispanic" is mainly on the popular semantics and popular sociolinguistic heard on campuses. Almost every paragraph could be introduced by "As you have probably already heard discussed or said, . . ." The hollow elaboration on a subject that really does not interest him enough to write unless he was paid to is evident in his throwing in a posturing critique of a neutral Spanish emerging from international networks of Spanish-language television, a parallel to the nowhere, neutral English.

Given his conflict with Spanish, one has to wonder where he picked up his sensitivity to its variety of accents. Newscasters speak a neutrally formal standard, a convention of television, but all other Spanish-language programs broadcast in the United States are lifted right out of their home countries and spoken in the country's popular speech. A frequent talk show conversation recounted the mistakes of singers or actors who tour in another country and get into trouble for using a word locally understood to be gross. Of course, the higher the educational level of the speaker—as Southerners with PhDs lose their drawl—the more standard-sounding the speaker; if anything the new international Spanish-language networks have made the hemisphere more sophisticated in linguistic diversity. But are we expected to believe that Rodriguez has spent hours listening to television Spanish to posture by making such a pronouncement?

Playing the very same American race card that he critiques in *Brown* (black as symbol of all minorities), as a substitute for his ignorance of brown minority writing, he describes an idyllic time when he was influenced by African American culture, direct influences of specific writers and music supposedly enjoyed by him during a time before "the university began to approve, then enforce fracture," when he felt rejected by black literature, which was now "theirs." This unbelievably ersatz argument is offered as his justification for not having to explain his inability to write about presumably *brown* literature: "Neither did I seek brown literature or any other kind. I sought Literature—the deathless impulse to explain and describe. I trusted white literature, because it did not seem to be written for me." Rodriguez establishes a false distinction between the brand-name Literature, "the deathless impulse to explain and describe," from the generic "brown literature," which apparently lacks that deathless impulse. Only "white literature" has that impulse, which is why he never bothered to read the brown literature. Questions: Does white mean Anglo, does brown mean Chicano? If this book is not about skin, why are we talking in colors?

I do not disagree with the possible argument that a "brown" literature is questionable, understanding that not just writing but a culture of readers creates a literature: writers simply write. If by "brown" he means Chicano, a body of writing exists while a literary culture is yet nascent. But Rodriguez cannot intend that argument as he is proudly ignorant of the body of writing. Rodriguez cannot get beyond throwing stones back at chanting protestors because by choice that is the only public, linguistic expression he knows of Chicano

culture. His illiteracy on "exotic" Chicano writing also deprives him of any authority to make assertions about Chicano culture. His boasting of his intentional ignorance of "brown literature" only underscores yet again that, however bombastic-sounding he may be, his objective is not argument but establishing persona, performing theater.

The reader ponders what it means when both the private and public person are impersonations, a confusion celebrated in *Brown*. Dissembling, he tells us he is dissembling, as he openly admits that he agreed to write on Hispanics so he could also write about other subjects ranging from geography to food. Americans are such fools about race, he says in so many words, and he fools them and tells them that he fools them. If he had not written about being Hispanic from the start, he admits in *Brown*, he probably would have never gotten published. There is great honesty in this contradiction among many dishonest contradictions in this book implying skin but really about impurity, in which he espouses the virtues of an impersonation that reveals truth.

Being Chicano can drive one to this condition seems to be how his sympathetic readers interpret Rodriguez and overlook his words to understand his condition. In *Brown* Rodriguez calls this reading him for the wrong reason—a misunderstanding of his wrestling with being brown or Mexican or gringo, the topic he always returns to writing about for whatever real or rationalized reasons he claims compel him. One wonders, where are his books on British Literature and Art or on being gay? Will the same glowing blurbs praise his writing as generously without the brown mask over the white mask over the brown face? Rodriguez knows the answer and knows that we do too. He also knows that we know that being read for the wrong reason, like being invited to speak for the wrong reason, still qualifies as success, becoming a glamorous public intellectual as his sister challenged him to become. His book is about his knowing this and about our knowing that he knows and his still getting published: this is the ridiculousness of American culture, Rodriguez explicitly critiques and implicitly exploits.

The one drawback to minority fame is the freedom to write aware of not being read, of saying things without fear of criticism that even if severe is ineffectual. This tragic sense of life runs through *Brown* and jumps out in sarcasms, critiques of American culture that now surrenders to its browning from across the border and from all parts of the hemisphere, slowly pushing him toward a Victorian purity, having mimicked "public" culture only to evolve into a homebound ex-patriate, above both the brown and the impending browning. And he seems now too successful to really care when duplicity shot life into the persona of Mr. Secrets in *Hunger*. The secret is out; what much is there to tell that he has not already. His father, the antagonist of his two previous books, had also died by this time. Lacking that underlying if encoded conflict, passionless *Brown* is not just temperate, as he describes his temperature zone; chapters read like a dull version of *Seinfeld*, transiently entertaining anecdotal discourse conveyed with superficial emotion and ultimately about very little of consequence.

In fact, in *Brown* it has become apparent that after years of emulating a mainstream reader whom he feared would pay no attention to his inconsistent words, Rodriguez has become so naturally "public" that he does not listen to them either. In a career that is a monument to postmodernism and reinvention, he has perfected situational argument over consistency and a language of appearances that, more than any mantra about his having achieved a "public" identity, soundly convinces that he has succeeded in embodying contemporary American culture as he aspired at the start of his career; not, however, the more traditional culture of Henry Adams but the fame culture of Andy Warhol.

Public theatricality, as his Harvard School of Business sister taught him, was where the money was. The marketability of minority celebrity has reigned over any criticisms about cultural self-hatred and shifting political stances. The enmity of chanting Chicanos have provided him a home in fashionable Bel Air; rejection has given him the visibility and renown to write as a "public" person on a range of issues from religion to art to architecture even if his changing hats as art critic or religious journalist does not finally replace his foremost being a brown writer. But he can now afford to suffer still being known almost exclusively as the Chicano author of *Hunger for Memory*, and he will gladly parrot whatever American fools want to hear about race: "For a fee, I rise to say I am not Latin American, because I am Hispanic. . . . (For a larger fee, I will add there is no such thing as a Hispanic. *Thank you.*)"

Whether excerpted in college textbooks or assigned as required multicultural reading for future teachers, the original fame of *Hunger for Memory* continues to draw those he called "gullible" readers, all looking for the Hispanic story that its author insisted he was not telling.

Rodriguez, of course, is not to blame that they, not having read him closely, insist on still reading and teaching that book about Mr. Secrets, who he patently is no more. Teaching what they may about him beats silence any time. For his part, he is no longer that Rodriguez nor the one after nor maybe the one after that even though the latest one, call him Mr. Brown, does open the mail addressed to those others, deposits their royalty checks, and accepts invitations that he lecture or be interviewed, if only to take the opportunity to let the world know of its mistake.

Notes

¹I have deferred to Richard Rodriguez's preference on the matter of accent for his surname, which he has Anglicized from the traditional spelling of Rodríguez.

²I advised him that, while making American sense in a mythical map, the phrase strained historical and cartographic verisimilitude. "Elia Kazan in his autobiographical film *America, America* comes to America, but Cubans don't."

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