Ethnic Authenticity, Class, and Autobiography: The Case of Hunger of Memory
Author(s): Henry Staten
Published by: Modern Language Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/463412
Accessed: 26/01/2011 16:02

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HENRY STATEN is professor of English and adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Utah. His essays on literary theory, philosophy, modern art, and ancient and modern literature have appeared in Critical Inquiry, New Literary History, PMLA, Representations, and other journals. His most recent book is Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan (Johns Hopkins UP, 1995). This essay is part of a study in progress with the working title “We Ethnics: The Identities of Human Groups.”

WHEN Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez was published in 1982, it immediately became the center of a heated debate that has continued to the present. The book consists of a brief prologue and six loosely intertwined, loosely chronological autobiographical essays. In the prologue, “Middle-Class Pastoral,” Rodriguez declares himself a fully assimilated “middle-class American man” (3) and cautions against the “pastoral” impulse of the middle class (by which he apparently means the Mexican American middle class) to “deny its difference from the lower class” (6). The first essay, “Aria,” recounts how Rodriguez struggled to learn English as a child from a Spanish-speaking household, an experience from which he concludes that all children must abandon the language of origin in order to enter “public society” (27) and that bilingual education is therefore misguided. “The Achievement of Desire,” the second essay, describes how his education, which culminated in a PhD in English from Berkeley in 1976, gradually alienated him from his uneducated, Mexican-born parents. The third essay, “Credo,” contrasts the communal Catholicism of his childhood with the “Protestant” isolation of his present relation to God. In “Complexion,” the fourth essay, Rodriguez broods on his dark skin and “Indian” physiognomy, different from the “European” looks of his parents and during his childhood an object of intense concern to his mother, who tried to whiten his skin with lemon juice. The fifth essay, “Profession,” is an account of his decision at the end of his graduate studies to turn down an academic post (at Yale) as a protest against affirmative action, from which he had benefited throughout his higher education. The book ends with “Mr. Secrets,” which describes his and his equally assimilated siblings’ alienation from their parents at the time of the book’s writing.
Published to widespread acclaim from the mainstream press, which praised the book for proclaiming truths about the “universal labor of growing up,” Hunger of Memory drew fire from defenders of bilingual education and affirmative action and most heatedly from advocates of Chicano-Chicana identity, who charged and continue to charge that he had abandoned his ethnicity and aligned himself with the conservative political forces in the United States seeking to stifle the self-empowerment of the Chicano-Chicana people. These critics routinely contrast Rodriguez’s stance with that of other authors of Mexican descent, such as Tomás Rivera and Ernesto Galarza, among whom there is, as Rivera himself writes, “little hunger of memory, and much hunger for community” when they write about their ethnic group (“Antithesis” 412).

Not that Chicano and Chicana authors cannot criticize aspects of what they conceive as their culture. Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, strongly criticizes its patriarchal and homophobic character, but she does not conclude that the culture must be abandoned. Rather, she digs deeper into its historical resources (Aztec mythology, in particular), retrieving archaic elements that can counter its prevailing patriarchalism. Rodriguez, by contrast, derives from his experience of what he uncritically calls “assimilation”—as painful as it was and despite the nostalgia with which it left him—the conclusion that Mexican Americans must either “assimilate” completely or remain “alien,” powerless and silent on the fringes of United States society (Hunger 27). This argument, provocative enough for those who desire to affirm Chicano-Chicana culture, is made incendiary by Rodriguez’s contempt for self-identified Chicanos and Chicanas (for example, he refers to the “clownish display” of Chicano college students who wore serapes on the Berkeley campus in the 1970s as a mark of their ethnicity [159]). Furthermore, he flaunts the wealth and jet-set lifestyle he has attained through his writings (“I wear double-breasted Italian suits and custom-made English shoes” [136])—a success based in part on the appeal that his opposition to multiculturalism has for a conservative white audience. Like the protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Rodriguez seems to have sold his inheritance for a mess of potage and, in return for a life of luxury, to have given up the chance to play a role in his people’s world-historical struggle for dignity.

I believe, however, that Rodriguez’s critics have not sufficiently noted the irony in his view of himself when he describes his remade mode of being. He is a detached, isolated individual, severed from the world of his family and of Mexican Catholicism, who remains anomalous in the new social contexts on which he has been grafted. But he has not forgotten his origins, and his dark skin is inescapable. Hence his self-perspective perpetually makes a circuit through an alien gaze:

The registration clerk in London wonders if I have just been to Switzerland. And the man who carries my luggage in New York guesses the Caribbean. My complexion becomes a mark of my leisure. Yet no one would regard my complexion the same way if I entered such hotels through the service entrance. (137)

Similarly, he sees himself through the eyes of non-Catholic friends who wonder why he is late to Sunday brunch (110), of Mexican laborers on a construction site who quietly watch him while he laughs with his Anglo coworkers (134), and of Chicanos who see him as “some comic Queequeg, holding close to my breast a reliquary containing the white powder of a dead European civilization” (162). Observing himself in this way, he accentuates the situational irony that defines his being.

This irony belies the absoluteness of the cultural either-or (either Chicano or American) that he proclaims; his cultural situation lies, rather, at the complex intersection of a both-and and a neither-nor. He does not map this intersection accurately, but neither do those who would define the authenticity of his selfhood strictly in relation to an “organic human collective” called “la raza” (Saldivar 169). For who in fact are Rodriguez’s people? What does it mean to claim him for Chicano identity, to assert that this ethnicity is “his”? To say someone is a Chicano or Chicana is minimally to say that his or her forebears were Mexican. Since Mexico is a duly constituted political entity and has been so (under various forms) for centuries, the question of who was or is a Mexican is easily answered (“a subject or citizen of Mexico”), and it seems to follow that Chicano-Chicana identity is secure in its historical
derivation. Because Rodriguez is the child of parents who were Mexican-born and -raised, he must be a Chicano (see Rivera, "Antithesis" 410). Yet there is a tangled relation between Chicano-Chicana identity and Mexico, a relation sedimented with contradictions at the intersection of race, nationality, and class in Mexican history. Because the same contradictions have been carried over to the United States, the population of Mexican descent in this country is and always has been riven by deeper differences than theorists of Chicano-Chicana identity have allowed. Instead of merely betraying a presumed Chicano identity, Rodriguez’s life narrative mirrors the tensions and contradictions of the Mexican and Mexican American societies.

The term Chicano or Chicana has always been ambiguous. On the one hand, it was deployed in the 1960s primarily as a performative, of a type I propose to call an identitive. To declare oneself a Chicano or Chicana then was to participate in the creation of a new group identity tied to the oppressed working class of Mexican descent and differentiated from the assimilationism and ameliorationism of the middle-class group that called itself Mexican American or even dropped the reference to Mexican descent altogether. But on the other hand, behind this performative use was a constative dimension with blurry edges according to which the term reflected a preexisting identity that included all United States residents of Mexican descent, no matter how wealthy or assimilated. Such persons could then be denounced as vendidos ‘sellouts’ if they failed or refused to cooperate in the creation of the new identity. As Chicano-Chicana nationalism waned in the 1970s and 1980s, the vague constative sense of Chicano or Chicana gained ascendancy, and the term replaced Mexican American as the label of choice for United States residents of Mexican descent, a change that aggravated the confusion in the 1960s use of Chicano and Chicana.

In what follows I sketch the origins of the ideology of la raza in the immediate postrevolutionary period of the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico and discuss the transposition of this ideology onto United States soil in the Chicano movement of the 1960s. I then turn to Hunger of Memory to show that Rodriguez’s parents sharply distinguished themselves from the group at the center of the most influential definitions of Chicano-Chicana identity—the laboring underclass of Mexican descent—and that his identification with his Mexican parents is crucial to his refusal to consider himself Chicano. I then suggest that Rodriguez’s intense sense of class distinctions results in his arguably valid left critique of affirmative action but that Rodriguez links this critique in an obviously invalid way to his rejection of bilingual education. To justify this rejection, he articulates a “phonologocentric” metaphysics of language of the type Derrida analyzes in Rousseau, by means of which Rodriguez both affirms his attachment to the familial language of his childhood and denies any connection with the ethnic group whose language his family spoke. Despite this denial, however, his family reveals the same splits of class and race as does their ethnic group, and his identification with his father in particular entangles Rodriguez in the contradictions of the group in a way that will not allow him cleanly to dissociate himself from it. There is, in fact, in a complex and ambiguous sense, a Chicano Richard Rodriguez, but because of Rodriguez’s familial and personal history, this identification exists for him only as an object of mourning memory. I conclude that Rodriguez is not as detached as he thinks he is from the Chicano identity he rejects; but neither can it simply be declared “his.”

II

The fundamental contradiction of Mexican history is of course that the Mexican “race” is constituted by a mixture of blood between the Spanish invaders and the native population they enslaved. Today almost all Mexicans are mestizo, of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, Mexicans began attempting to validate their mestizaje, but it was not until following the “democratic” revolution of 1910–20, which established the modern Mexican state, that the Indian inheritance was accepted at the highest official levels as the root of the distinctive racial character and cultural greatness of Mexico. This ideology, indigenismo, established the principle that Mexicans are not only a nation but also a race, “la raza cosmica” in the phrase coined by José Vasconcelos. This principle, adopted by the Chicano movement,
or chicanismo, defined the Mexican as someone whose descent is tied to the political entity called Mexico but who is also a mestizo or mestiza, and in the more aggressively nativist forms of indigenismo, pride of place is given to the Indian element. To assert the Indian essence of the mestizo or mestiza is to raise one’s fist against the oppression of the European invader: originally the Spaniard and later the Anglo.

The activists who developed chicanismo in the 1960s transposed Mexican indigenismo to the United States by appealing to the ancient Aztec belief in a northern homeland called Aztlan, the location of which was disputed by scholars but assumed by Aztlanists to be in the area of New Mexico.10 Generalizing the notion of Aztlan to include the entire American Southwest, which the United States had taken from Mexico under the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, and stressing the notion that Chicanos and Chicanas are mostly Indian (Lux and Vigil 100; Chávez 4), the Aztlanists could argue that this region was their people’s ancestral “lost homeland,” stolen by the Anglo not only from Mexico but more profoundly from the indigenous race that had immemorially inhabited it. This claim was militantly and influentially declared in El plan espiritual de Aztlan (“The Spiritual Plan of Aztlan”), a manifesto issued by the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, organized by Rodolfo “Corky” González and held in Denver in 1969. By virtue of this claim, chicanismo could, while affirming Mexican descent and borrowing the Mexican ideology of indigenismo, assert a Chicano-Chicana nationalism distinct from Mexican nationalism.

Other theorists of Chicano-Chicana identity, from Tomás Rivera to Ramón Saldívar, have attempted to define the group without privileging Indian blood, yet there is no politically significant difference between their definition and that of the Chicano or Chicana indigenistas. In both views, the population is bound together by its shared history of suffering and struggle as an oppressed, racially mixed group of Mexican descent (Rivera, “Chicano Literature” 382; Saldívar 10–14), a conception that privileges the laboring underclass, especially the migrant farmworkers whose political struggle in the early 1960s sparked the Chicano movement.11 But since the members of this class are generally the darkest-skinned Chicanos and Chicanas, the ones most marked by Indian blood (hence, as Rodriguez is uncomfortably aware, the socioeconomic group whose racial traits he visibly bears), even a nonessentialist, sociohistorical definition of their people needs to take into account the distinctive racial marking, within the mestizo-mestiza population as a whole, of the most oppressed group.

The attempt to define the Chicano and Chicana negatively by contrast with the Anglo and positively in terms of Mexican, mestizo-mestiza descent poses a problem for chicanismo, since the lowest “ethnic” of Mexicans is the same—and is racially marked in the same way—in Mexico as in the United States, and it is even more brutally oppressed there than here (as the Chiapas uprising has recently made the United States public aware).12 According to the Marxist historian Arnaldo Córdova, although the Mexican revolution reconfigured the state along more-democratic lines, it not only perpetuated the fundamental capitalist dynamic that had inspired the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz but also preserved “entire sectors of the old ruling class” (“old industrialists, bankers, businessmen, and even landholders”) while opening the way for the middle-class leaders of the revolution to become capitalists themselves (30; my trans.).13 Since the mestizos and mestizas of the ruling class were more Spanish than Indian, the more Indian mixed-race members of the lower classes remained at the bottom. In the words of the sociologist Raúl Béjar Navarro:

The majority of the population, which made possible the shift from the Porfriano regime to that of the revolutionaries, hardly drew any benefit from the armed struggle. On the contrary, the incipient bourgeoisie that had consolidated itself in the regime of Porfirio Díaz took advantage of the occasion . . . to direct to its own benefit the nascent process of urbanization and industrialization. The result of this was that the groups of Indians and the great masses of mestizos and mestizas remained marginalized from these socioeconomic processes. (215–16; my trans.)

To the present day, the ruling-class orientation toward whiteness is reflected in the images purveyed by Mexican magazines, movies (e.g., Like Water for Chocolate), television programs, and beauty con-
tests (Béjar Navarro 218–21; Friedlander 77–78; Knight, "Racism" 100–01). Meanwhile, the downtrodden, predominantly Indian mestizos and mestizas of the lower classes, who constitute the vast majority of the population, use the term indio as a mark of contempt for the least-urbanized and -Hispanicized stratum—the members of which are for the most part racially indiscernible from them.14

Official indigenismo glorified the Indian as a symbol while on a practical political level recognizing that the chiefly Indian mestizo-mestiza peasantry’s backwardness and lack of nationalism were impediments to the formation of a modern industrial state (Gamio 93–96). As George Sánchez explains, Mexican leaders such as Vasconcelos “focused on changing peasant values and behavior to lead Mexico to greater capitalist productivity and nationalist integration” (119). Manuel Gamio, the leading proponent of official indigenismo (and first director of the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City), advocated racial, linguistic, and cultural homogenization of the population, which he believed would make Mexico more like successful nation-states such as Germany, France, and Japan (8–9).

For Gamio, indigenismo aimed at the absorption of the Indian racial element into the cultural framework established by the “portion of the population of European tendencies and origins,” so that “the national race” (“la raza nacional”) could become “coherent” and “homogeneous” (10; my trans.; on Gamio generally, see Brading). The disciplining of the Mexican masses into a unified force suited to the goals of the government and ruling class was furthered, he believed, by the sojourn of Mexican peasant emigrants in the United States (G. Sánchez 119–21), where they came to identify for the first time with Mexico as their nation: “We have seen frequently that natives or mestizos in rural districts in Mexico have not much notion of their nationality or their country. . . . People of this type, as immigrants in the United States, learn immediately what their mother country means, and they think and speak with love of it.” At the same time, these peasants learned “discipline and steady habits of work” in the United States (qtd. in G. Sánchez 122). They therefore became ripe for repatriation as citizens of a modern Mexican nation.

Having created the concept of La Raza, the Mexican bourgeoisie championed it in the United States. According to Richard A. García, it was conservative upper-class Mexican émigrés, opponents of the revolution, who upheld the concept of La Raza in south Texas in the postrevolutionary era of Mexican national reconciliation. These émigrés tried to establish cultural hegemony over the working-class Mexican Americans of south Texas in the 1930s; the newspaper La prensa, propaganda organ of the upper-class émigrés, encouraged Mexican Americans to remain loyal to the Mexican state, to continue Mexican cultural traditions, and to attend opera and the theater (García 77–78). The hegemony of the émigrés was contested by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a homegrown middle-class organization comprising small businessmen and professionals (79) that pressed for a new “Mexican-American” identity, “Mexican in culture and American in ideas and ideology” (84). Although treated as “anti-Mexican” by the émigrés (83) and dismissed as “assimilationist” by some proponents of Chicano-Chicana identity (Lux and Vigil 94), LULAC was closer to the everyday concerns of most Mexican Americans, “fighting for the poorer Mexican community, fighting against discrimination” (García 88), than were the émigrés who carried the banner of La Raza. The chicanistas who deride LULAC thus inherit their stance on La Raza from a reactionary bourgeois group, even though they champion the most oppressed segments of the Mexican American working class.

If the relation to the dominant Anglo fuses Mexican Americans in a Chicano-Chicana identity that can lead to politically effective organization, this sense of collectivity, based on a reference to Mexican descent, nevertheless mystifies the sociopolitical bond that has historically been an instrument of hegemony for the Mexican ruling class over the very ethclass held to be at the core of Chicano-Chicana identity. It could be argued that for the Anglo, Mexicans are simply Mexicans and that this perception unites them in the United States in a way that they are not united in Mexico. There is considerable truth in this claim. But it should not obscure the racial and class divisions within the Mexican American community, which are palpable and have
at times been extreme—for example, as Rodolfo Acuña notes, the rich Mexican American families of San Antonio in the late nineteenth century displayed attitudes and interests attendant to their class and even emphasized racial differences between themselves and the lower classes, stating that the poor did not belong to the white race. Many old families openly sympathized with the Ku Klux Klan. . . . They seemed oblivious to persecution of their fellow Mexicans. (42)

III

Although the word mestizo seems to refer to a biological reality that would be the solid substratum of the political reality called Mexico, the term subsumes a spectrum of genotypes, and within this spectrum are internalized the same conflicts and unresolved contradictions that before Mexico nominally “accepted the mestizo” (Rivera, “Antithesis” 410) were seen in terms of the dichotomy between the European and the indigene. With the increasing mestization of the Mexican population, the presence of Indian blood became a family matter. The members of Rodríguez’s family mirror this situation: most of them, in particular his parents, are European in phenotype, but the phenotypes of Richard and one of his sisters manifest Indian blood (Hunger 114–15). The Rodríguez family genotype alone implies that their Mexican cultural background would probably not be that of the poorest ethclass, which includes the vast majority of Mexicans. And indeed Rodríguez’s later book, Days of Obligation, indicates that his father, though a poor orphan, had rich relatives for whom he worked from age eight. “The family was prominent, conservative, Catholic in the Days of Wrath—years of anti-Catholic persecution in Mexico” (215–16). Rodríguez’s mother’s appearance (“she looks as though she could be from southern Europe” [Hunger 114]) and social orientation (“Do not judge Mexico by the poor people you see coming up to this country,” Richard remembers her saying [Days 214]) suggest that her family also did not come from the ethclass that she taught Richard to pity as “los pobres,” the poor (Hunger 114).

Rodríguez describes his family as “working class,” which is true in the United States economic context (his father did menial work, and his mother was a typist). But his parents never identified with the laboring underclass of Mexico. Richard’s mother taught him to fear any loss of his distinction from that class, urging him to stay out of the sun so that his skin would not become as dark as that of the Mexican field workers (Hunger 113). In the pictures of his parents on their honeymoon, Richard nostalgically remembers, “there is to their pose an aristocratic formality, an elegant Latin hauteur.” “The man in those pictures . . . was fascinated by Italian grand opera. . . . On Sundays he’d don Italian silk scarves and a camel’s hair coat to take his new wife to the polo matches in Golden Gate Park” (121).16 Rodríguez’s love affair with the wealthy thus follows the cultural trajectory on which his parents had been set by their Mexican background. In the United States, they proudly identified themselves as Mexican, but it is consistent with their identification that they aspired and taught Richard to aspire to the lifestyle of the rich.

In their manner, both my parents continued to respect the symbols of what they considered to be upper-class life. Very early, they taught me the propio [“proper”] way of eating como los ricos [“like the rich”]. And I was carefully taught elaborate formulas of polite greeting and parting. . . . From those early days began my association with rich people, my fascination with their secret. (122)

At his “rich anglo friends’” houses, Rodríguez says, “I’d skate the icy cut of crystal with my eye; my gaze would follow the golden threads etched into the rim of china. With my mother’s eyes I’d see my hostess’s manicured nails and judge them to be marks of her leisure” (123). Rodríguez carries the desires, conservative attitudes, and feeling of distinction (in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense) instilled in him by his Mexican parents and for this reason does not identify with the Chicano-Chicana activists of La Raza.

IV

Yet Rodríguez’s sense of class distinctions also manifests itself in an intense compassion for the plight of the dark-skinned subalterns he sees all around him. At his rich friends’ houses he notices the “vast polished dining room table” and the “small
silver bell” the mother rings to call a servant, but he also observes that the servant is a black woman, and on his way out notices his own “dark self” in a hallway mirror (123). He is fascinated by the “darkness . . . like mine” of the Mexican laborers and intrigued by “the connection between dark skin and poverty” of which he often hears his mother speak.

“I was the student at Stanford who remembered to notice the Mexican-American janitors and gardeners working on campus” (114, 117, 130).

Rodriguez gradually comes to understand, however, that although he carries the visible markers of race that nominally group him with the oppressed ethclass, he is “unrepresentative of lower-class Hispanics” (147). He has been prepared for upward mobility from an early age (“I was not—in a cultural sense—a minority” [147]). Rodriguez’s awareness of the class articulation of society leads him in Hunger of Memory to a left critique of affirmative action that adumbrates John Guillory’s critique of the “representation” of minorities in the “pedagogic imaginary” of the university (37-38) and that critics of Rodriguez like Saldivar, Rosaura Sanchez, and Alarcón do not even mention:

The policy of affirmative action . . . was never able to distinguish someone like me (a graduate student of English, ambitious for a college teaching career) from a slightly educated Mexican-American who lived in a barrio and worked as a menial laborer, never expecting a future improved. Worse, affirmative action made me the beneficiary of his condition. Such was the foolish logic of this program of social reform. . . .

Remarkably, affirmative action passed as a program of the Left. In fact, its supporters ignored the most fundamental assumptions of the classical Left by disregarding the importance of class and by assuming that the disadvantages of the lower class would necessarily be ameliorated by the creation of an elite society. . . . Those least disadvantaged were helped first, advanced because many others of their race were more disadvantaged. (150–51)

On Rodriguez’s analysis, affirmative action in the university was a liberal palliative that allowed “the guardians of institutional America in Washington . . . to ignore the need for fundamental social changes” (152) that would have aided “America’s underclass,” regardless of race (164–65). “The revolutionary de-

mand would have called for a reform of primary and secondary schools,” ensuring enough “good teachers . . . with sufficient time to devote to individual students,” as well as for “jobs and good housing” for parents and “three meals a day, in safe neighborhoods,” for children (151–52).

V

Rodriguez’s critics could have given him credit for this correct, if unoriginal, analysis, but they have ignored it, their attention magnetized by his opposition to bilingual education, a position both they and Rodriguez believe stabs at the heart of Chicano-Chicana identity. As Anzaldúa writes, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (59). For Rodriguez, who is not interested in investigating the benefits of bilingual education empirically, it is self-evident that “full public individuality” requires “assimilation” and that assimilation requires the abandonment of one’s “ethnic heritage,” because (and here Rodriguez makes an astonishing logical leap) the self within the ethnic group is “private” and therefore incompatible with an empowered public self (26–27, 34–35). This conclusion is motivated not by social analysis but by Rodriguez’s religious metaphysics. As his essay on his Christian faith reveals, privacy is for him an unplumbable metaphysical depth. At its limit is the privacy of the Puritan, who stands alone before God (110). Only the Catholic Church of his childhood, before its liberalization drove Rodriguez toward Puritan solitude, could mediate between the individual’s absolute privacy and the community of believers (105–06). “Secular institutions lack the key; they have no basis for claiming access to the realm of the private” (109).

Since there exists no secular mediation between the private and public realms, it follows that moving from the ethnic working-class family to the life of an educated person must involve an absolute severance of the new, public self from the old, private self and thus from the parents’ culture.

Rodriguez’s logic turns on a simple equivocation: his equation of the ethnic group with privacy, individuality, separateness (34)—as though it were merely the home writ large rather than another public sphere, less vast and anonymous than the official one Rodriguez has come to inhabit but for that reason
perhaps capable of serving as an intermediate circle of sociality between the home and the crowd. Rodriguez’s argument against the possibility of intermediate social formations is self-refuting. Those who attempt to form such intermediate groups, he argues, whether on an ethnic or some other basis, are trying to generalize the intimacy of family language:

Working-class men attempting political power took to calling one another “brother”... But they paid a price for this union. It was a public union they forged. The word they coined to address one another could never be the sound exchanged by two in intimate greeting. In the union hall the word “brother” became a vague metaphor, with repetition a weak echo of the intimate sound.

Rodriguez admits that a public union has indeed been forged here, seemingly refuting his claim that such formations do not exist, but then he shifts ground and takes the public nature of the union as evidence of the failure of the enterprise. From the argument that the private world of social subgroups must give way to publicness he shifts to the charge that such groups violate familial privacy and thus “sin against intimacy” (35). He requires that the public word brother mean the same as its familial homonym if the work of mediation is to be accomplished. But how could a familial word mediate between public and private if its meaning remained strictly familial?

Rodriguez’s critique of cultural particularism is in fact an artifact of his fetishization of familial intimacy, the intimacy that is the object of his hunger of memory. Eliding all social mediation between his early childhood self and the self that he became, Rodriguez views his life as a dialectical movement from intimacy to alienation and then to the sublation of this antithesis within pure individual interiority:

It would require many... years of schooling (an inevitable miseducation) in which I came to trust the silence of reading and the habit of abstracting from immediate experience—moving away from a life of closeness and immediacy I remembered with my parents, growing older—before I turned unafraid to desire the past. . . .

When the process of alienation is completed, it overcomes itself, and the alienated subject rediscovers lost immediacy in a new, reflective, articulate inwardness. In the sanctuary of mourning memory, lost intimacy is sealed off from the possibility of defilement, familial language saved from “public misuse” by labor unionists or chicanistas (35–36).

Overhearing Spanish voices while in solitude at the British Museum brings an end to Rodriguez’s “miseducation,” calling him home to his parents to look for “those elastic sturdy strands that bind generations together in a web of inheritance” and initiating the mature phase of his intellectual life (Hunger 72). This and other references to Spanish (“I envied them their fluent Spanish,” he says of the campus Chicanos and Chicanas [159]) suggest that the language, as the possession of a culture and not of a family alone, is one of the “sturdy strands” binding him in some measure and fashion (neither simple unity nor simple separation) to previous generations. But Rodriguez is armed against such an interpretation. While elegizing Spanish as the language of familial intimacy, he detaches it from any wider sociocultural reference. Like Rousseau in Derrida’s analysis, Rodriguez nostalgically dreams Spanish as absence of articulation; not as speech, strictly speaking, but as spoken sound that conveys emotion rather than meaning (Derrida 225–29).17 Memorating his pleasure in the familial Spanish of his early childhood, before the transition to English, Rodriguez writes:

A word like sí would become, in several notes, able to convey added measures of feeling. Tongues explored the edges of words, especially the fat vowels. And we happily sounded that military drum roll, the twirling roar of the Spanish r. Family language: my family’s sounds.

I have noticed the way children create private languages to keep away the adult; I have heard their chanting riddles that go nowhere in logic but harken back to some kingdom of sound; I have watched them listen to intricate nonsense rhymes, and I have noted their wonder. I was never such a child. Until I was six years old, I remained in a magical realm of sound. I didn’t need to remember that realm because it was present to me.

(Hunger 18)

(38–39)
Rodriguez’s phonocentrism, like Rousseau’s, culminates in melocentrism: in song (including lyric poetry) “words are subsumed into sounds” perfectly; “imitating” the sound of intimacy, song recalls to Rodriguez the intimate moments of his life (37–38). He values the Spanish of nostalgic remembrance to the degree that it, like song, approaches “pure sound” (38). Spanish stands for speech that has not yet fallen into grammar, syntax, the différence and “spacing” of empirical language, and Rodriguez mourns it as an interiorized, idealized object of memory and transcendent desire, not as a worldly phenomenon linked to the history of a people or peoples.

Because his experience of familial intimacy is essentially inarticulate, hence not bound to a specific language, the intimacy that disappears when the Rodriguez family switches to English reappears on the other side of that transition:

Making more and more friends outside my house, I began to distinguish intimate voices speaking through English. . . . After such moments of intimacy outside the house, I began to trust hearing intimacy conveyed through my family’s English. . . . Intimacy thus continued at home; intimacy was not stilled by English. (31–32)

The discovery that intimacy transcends language comes to Rodriguez one day when his mother calls to him in Spanish while he is playing with an Anglo friend. The friend asks him what she said, and Richard cannot reply:

The problem was . . . that though I knew how to translate exactly what she had told me, I realized that any translation would distort the deepest meaning of her message: It had been directed only to me. This message of intimacy could never be translated because it was not in the words she had used but passed through them. (31)

The conclusion Rodriguez draws from this incident reflects the purest Romantic theory of language, criticized by V. N. Vološinov (83–85): the deepest, most authentic meaning pertains not to the material embodiment of language but to the spirit, the inwardness of the individual, and authentic communication is the immediate contact of two subjectivities through the disposable vehicle of a determinate language. This conception of meaning is the key to the political ideology of “separate spheres” purveyed in Hunger of Memory. It produces the most effective lyricism of the book, in Rodriguez’s paean to the familial intimacy of his childhood, but also licenses the most simplistic turns of his discourse, which have magnetized the attention of his readers of the left and the right: the turns on the absolute split between ethnic and public identity and on the consequent necessity of a clean break with the language of the ethnic group.

VII

And yet, as I noted earlier, despite his family ideology of distinction from los pobres, despite his transcendent metaphysics, Richard feels an intense connection with the most abjected Mexicans and longs to make contact with them (Hunger 126, 134–35). In part, these feelings constitute the very “middle-class pastoral” against which he warns (Hunger 6): a cross-cultural class romance in which the bourgeois longs for the physicality and immediacy of the laborer. But in Richard’s case it is much more than that, for at least two reasons: first, because he shares the phenotype of the laborers and, second, because his father, though “white” and bourgeois-identified, speaks English poorly, has hands worn by labor, and has been humbled by the life of the subaltern (Hunger 119–20)—like the dark-skinned Mexicans that Richard resembles. Richard’s identity splits in relation to this father, who on the one hand represents the self that makes Richard different from los pobres and on the other hand represents those pobres from which Richard is different. There is a Chicano Richard identified (immediately through his dark skin and mediately through his father’s subalternity) with the abjection of the poor Mexican, and there is a Mexican American Richard who is the heir of his father’s sense of distinction and focus on upward mobility.

Rodriguez’s identification with the laborer father and with los pobres is, however, played out purely at the level of the imaginary, in the Lacanian sense—as a relation to a libidinally invested image (the mirror image of his own indio form) that is never translated into the web of the symbolic order. According to Rodriguez’s personal ideology, indeed,
it is impossible for such an identification to persist into the symbolic order (the “public language,” in his terms)—in his own case or anyone else’s. He is thus doomed to carry it about with him as the ghost of a past that he feels with the greatest immediacy but can never touch.

But neither is the father as dandy the model for Richard’s assumption of power in the symbolic order (though this imago appears to be the model for his enjoyment of the fruits of that power); Richard’s identification with this image of the father, constructed from photographs, is even more wispily imaginary than his identification with the laborer father. Neither of these father imagos possesses the symbolic power that in a patriarchal society properly belongs to the father, the power of what Lacan calls the symbolic phallus. According to Lacan, the father is able to play the role of symbolic father because of the authority of his speech (218). The sound of language, to which Richard is extraordinarily sensitive, gives him a peculiarly vivid, shattering intuition concerning Mr. Rodriguez’s lack of this authority. Early in Hunger of Memory Rodriguez recounts a scene of a type that he says was repeated “many times,” a scene in which Mr. Rodriguez’s voice becomes that of a woman or a castrato during a conversation in English. The grown man is talking to the attendant at a service station, an Anglo teenager, while Richard stands “uneasily” by:

I do not recall what they were saying, but I cannot forget the sounds my father made as he spoke. At one point his words slid together to form one word. . . . His voice rushed through what he had left to say. And, toward the end, reached falsetto notes, appealing to his listener’s understanding. . . . I tried not to hear anymore. But I heard only too well the calm, easy tones in the attendant’s reply. Shortly afterward, walking toward home with my father, I shivered when he put his hand on my shoulder. (15)

This stunning scene hints at the psychoanalytic depths beneath the surface of Richard Rodriguez’s narrative. Must not the hysteria his father shows when supplicating this Anglo adolescent manifest something about the psychodynamics within the Rodriguez family that led to Richard’s flight from Spanish?

In his flight from the mother tongue and from the imago of his father, Richard “idolized” and identified instead with the Irish nuns who were his teachers, and it was by means of this identification that he strapped on the cultural phallus. “I began by imitating their accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction”; “[t]heir every casual opinion I came to adopt” (49). “The docile, obedient student came home a shrill and precocious son who insisted on correcting and teaching his parents with the remark: ‘My teacher told us. . . .’” (50; ellipsis in orig.). On a Lacanian reading of Rodriguez, then, his severance from the cultural tradition of his parents seems to be motivated by the failure of authority of his father’s speech in the language of the symbolic order, which results in the scrambling of this order within the Rodriguez household (Lacan 218–19).

But is this not just a sophisticated way of saying that Richard became ashamed of his father and thus of being Mexican? Is Hunger of Memory a painfully honest self-revelation, which we should respect, or a shameless, self-serving display, which his critics are right to blame? The art or artfulness of confessional autobiography is to weave a continual self-inculpation into the text and thus forestall or at least make more difficult the inculpation from outside. It is above all by revealing the humiliating intimate detail, which need not have been revealed, that the autobiographer steals a march on the reader’s accusation. Autobiography is apologia, and autobiographical self-inculpation is the ultimate gambit of self-justification; Rousseau, indeed, proposed to sustain the Last Judgment with his Confessions in his hand. But the anticipatory self-inculpation can never be complete, can never map out in advance the entire manifold of possible criticisms and condemnations, in part because history and the psyche are illimitably complex but also because the text casts new shadows wherever it moves to clear up old ones. Thus autobiography will always, by a structural necessity, be in bad faith. But whereas Rousseau’s self-inculpation is merely moral, Rodriguez tries to articulate his selfhood and its “original sin” in ethicopolitical terms (Hunger 30). The limits of his self-understanding are thus exemplary as the limits not of self-reflexive consciousness but of what we have learned to call
the historically situated subject. Whatever the ambiguities of *Hunger of Memory* and in part because of them, the book presents truthful witness to the complexities facing persons of Mexican descent in the United States and provides a needed corrective to the more edifying and equally necessary truths partially brought into being by those who have invoked the Chicano-Chicana identity.

**VIII**

*Chicanismo* was conceived as a radical movement of the oppressed ethclass. Its roots in political and socioeconomic realities are blurred when *Chicano* and *Chicana* become simply synonyms for *Mexican American*, as in Susan Keefe and Amado Padilla's sociological study *Chicano Ethnicity* (5). Tony Reyes, for instance, an informant in this study, is the child of Mexican immigrants, but he is college-educated, holds a “well-paying administrative job,” is married to an Anglo, lives in an “attractive, primarily Anglo residential area,” and does not speak Spanish well (86–90). “Nevertheless,” Keefe and Padilla aver, “Tony has a strong ethnic identity as a ‘Chicano’ and he prefers to associate with Chicanos.” Since, however, the Chicanos with whom Reyes associates are “Americanized” (91), presumably similar to him in educational status and social class and with as limited a competence in Spanish, there is little apart from his self-identification to distinguish Reyes’s cultural position from that of Richard Rodriguez.

Rodriguez’s acute awareness of the ironies of such a cultural location (both-and, neither-nor) motivates his refusal to count himself a Chicano. He generalizes these ironies to the Mexican American population as a whole in a passage in *Days of Obligation*:

I saw Cesar Chavez . . . at a black-tie benefit in a hotel in San Jose. . . . How fragile the great can seem. How much more substantial we of the ballroom seemed, the Mexican-American haute bourgeoisie, as we stood to pay our homage. . . . Chavez reminded us that night of who our grandparents used to be.

Then Mexican waiters served champagne.

Success is a terrible dilemma for Mexican Americans, like being denied some soul-sustaining sacrament. Without the myth of victimization—who are we? We are no longer Mexicans. . . . [W]e might as well be Italians. (70)

As usual, Rodriguez directs his irony at himself as much as at anyone else. Mexican waiters serve champagne—to rich Mexican Americans like him. Rodriguez is not saying that victimization is a myth (as Rosaura Sánchez claims he does [171]) but that it functions as a myth for Mexican Americans who claim it as part of their cultural identity but do not experience victimization (and may indeed inflict it, as do the ruling classes of the old country). Sánchez’s misreading manifests the disavowal of class stratification within the Mexican American population that, I argue, Rodriguez helps to overcome and that the synonymization of *Chicano* or *Chicana* and *Mexican American* helps to maintain. The term *Chicano* or *Chicana* points, however confusedly, to a real oppressed ethclass. Since the historical-political link between term and referent has been mystified by appeals to Indianness and Mexicanness, the analysis of the social formations involved should remove these mystifications, first by recognizing the ways in which class distinctions (cultural or economic), in all their complex imbrication with race, cut across ethnic connections.

Rodriguez is thus right to call attention to the necessary tie between Chicano-Chicana identity and the oppression of the most abjected ethclass of Mexican descent. Even a Mexican American who grows up in a middle-class home might suffer from racial or ethnic discrimination in large or small ways, and this suffering might forge some identification with the most abjected group. But the scale of diminishing suffering needs to be taken into account because, as Rodriguez trenchantly observes, once the claim to identity with the oppressed racial substance has been laid, it becomes hard to say “when a person ever stops being disadvantaged” (*Hunger* 150). Rodriguez is wrong to think that someone who grows up in a migrant worker family or a working-class barrio family and then goes to college has no grounds for identification with the culture of origin. On the contrary, it is precisely among this group that the Chicano-Chicana identity grew and flourished (Límón 200–01; Klor de Alva 150–52). While pointing toward the plight of the most oppressed ethclass, *Chicano* or *Chicana* is
primarily available as a self-description to those who have begun to emerge from that condition and who are capable of articulating the potentially Chicano-Chicana population as a community for itself; this stage is not where one stops being a Chicano or Chicana but in some sense where one starts. Yet I believe that at some point the identification ceases to be valid, that one cannot stretch the threads of affiliation indefinitely thin. One can be a Chicano who goes to Harvard, but can one be a Chicano whose parents went to Harvard? (Even empathizing with and working for the oppressed ethclass would not make such a person a Chicano, since anyone of any race can do the same.)

For all of us who exist or will exist in the penumbra of Chicano-Chicana identity, some other language than that of simple identity is called for. I always knew that I was not a paradigmatic Chicano: born on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande and raised on the Texas side, I had the language, the dark skin, and the lower-caste status of the Mexican, but I also spoke fluent English and had the strange power of an Anglo name—though my Anglo grandfather was the only white person I knew as a child—and I quickly moved away from my “roots” into the world of the university. Yet the Chicano identitizing has had its effect on me, an effect I do not know how to name, short of writing an autobiography, as Rodriguez has done. My “identity,” if I can call it that, has existed in relation to the (performative power of the names Mexican and then Chicano yet is not named by them. This is the case with Rodriguez as well, but because he accepts the to-be-or-not-to-be of identity talk, he misformulates his relation to the name Chicano as an absolute non-relation. Yet all Hunger of Memory is a denegation by which Rodriguez acknowledges in intimate detail his essential relation to this name that does not name him.20 In my view, such an acknowledgment is all that anyone can legitimately claim of him.

Notes

1The phrase cited is from Zweig’s notice in the New York Times Book Review. Donohue’s review uses almost the same words (403). The book was respectfully reviewed in such periodicals as Newsweek (Strouse), the Atlantic Monthly, and the Christian Science Monitor, in addition to numerous city newspapers. Praise in the mainstream journals was not quite unanimous; in Commentary Adler called the book “unconvincing” and Rodriguez a “snob” (82).

2For a representative sampling of such critiques of Hunger of Memory from 1982 to the present, see Madrid, Rivera ("Antithesis"), Flores, Romero, Saldivar (155—63, 169—70), Alarcón, R. Sánchez, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (71—77). (For an early defense of the book as “a valuable contribution to Chicano literature,” see Marquez [141].) The discussions by Rivera and Saldivar are of special interest: Rivera is revered as one of the founders of contemporary Chicano-Chicana literature (his experimental novel about migrant workers, . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra, won the first Quinto Sol Prize for Mexican American literature), and Saldivar’s book Chicano Narrative is the most sophisticated and ambitious attempt to date to present a theoretical overview of the entire span of Chicano-Chicana literature.

3One important theorist of Chicano-Chicana identity to oppose the chorus condemning Rodriguez is Juan Bruce-Novoa, who has consistently objected to what he calls “truncating definitions” of the ethnicity that treat it as a “monological absolute” (94, 139). For Bruce-Novoa, voices such as Rodriguez’s are “representative of the conflicting plurality” within the ChicanolChicana community (130).

4The most theoretically informed articulation of this charge against Rodriguez is made by Saldivar in a direct comparison between Hunger of Memory and Galarza’s Barrio Boy: “The basic plot of Galarza’s autobiography is not the epiphanic revelation of an idiosyncratic destiny, as it is for Rodriguez. . . . The motifs of transformation and identity . . . are transferred instead to the entire community within which individuals exist, by which they are created, and which they in turn dialectically transform” (164). “The interior self Galarza describes does not exist in an empty space but in an organic human collective, in what he calls la raza” (169).

5My sense of the urgency of the question of what it means to possess or lose an ethnic identity has been sharpened by some recent work of Michaels (“Rule” and “Race”), who, however, seems to me to press individualism and voluntarism too far. For a critique of Michaels, see Gordon and Newfield.

6Rivera (“Antithesis” 406), Saldivar (12—13), and Keefe and Padilla (191—92) all note the heterogeneity of the Chicano-Chicana population but do not pursue this observation to any radical consequence. Bruce-Novoa is the only critic I know who comes close to recognizing the depth of what he calls the “interior division” (139) of Chicano-Chicana identity (see n. 3, above).

7Zižek has influentially expounded the concept of the performative function of political signifiers. For a critique of Zižek and further exploration of this type of performativity, see Butler 187—222.

8Paz describes the Mexican as “the fruit of a violation” (80), an “hijo de la chingada,” where the chingada is the Indian woman violated by a Spaniard (86).

9On the complex history of indigenismo in Mexico, see the compendious account in Knight, “Racism.”
The collection by Anaya and Lomeli is an essential sourcebook for the study of the Aztlan debate.

On the history of chicanismo as a political movement, see Chávez 134–55. Its roots can be traced to the strike against grape farmers by César Chávez's farmworkers in 1965. As John Chávez points out, however, César Chávez was never enthusiastic about Chicano-Chicana nationalism, since his concern was with "the poor as a whole" (136–37).

The concept of an ethclass is derived from Gordon, who defines it as the "social space created by the intersection of the ethnic group with the social class" (51). Mapping such intersections is immensely complex; see the discussion and extension of Gordon's concept by Ransford, who applies it to the study of Mexican and African Americans (esp. 56–62, 101–20). Whereas Ransford treats the Mexican American group as though it were racially homogeneous, I use the term ethclass to point toward a racial element in the class stratification of both Mexicans and Mexican Americans. There are ethnic distinctions within Chicano-Chicana ethnicity, and the most oppressed ethclass is doubly abjected: in its relation to United States society and anteriorly in its relation to Mexican society. The abjection in Mexico determines the starting point—at the bottom of the cultural as well as economic ladder—of members of this group when they move to the United States. The ethclass concept is an important contribution to the contemporary exploration of class as "a differential field: a field unevenly structured, with varying relays between the economic and the social, and therefore also with multiple points of action, and multiple registers of experiential effect" (Dimock and Gilmore 8).

For a detailed account of the class makeup and political motivations of the Maderistas who made the revolution, see Knight, Revolution 63–71.

There is broad agreement among scholars that what passes for Indian ethnicity and culture in modern Mexico is in reality a product of the colonial period, during which the Spanish penetrated the deepest recesses of native blood and culture. See Brading 88; Borah 7–8; Friedlander xvii, 71–79; Knight, "Racism" 72–76.

according to G. Sánchez, there existed a similar political situation among Mexican Americans in Los Angeles in the same period: a bourgeois Mexican nationalist group competing with a rising homegrown middle class for leadership of the Mexican American population (115–16, 123–24).

The Mexican ruling class seems to have had a long-standing ideological investment in Italian opera, dating back to independence from Spain (see Vogeley).

Romero has sketched the elements of a Derridean reading of Hunger of Memory, but he does not distinguish between speech as articulated language and speech as pure sound.

In Hunger of Memory Rodriguez never mentions his homosexuality (which he discusses in Days of Obligation, but not in relation to his ethnicity); it is obviously a factor that would complicate the analysis of this work. For an attempt to incorporate gender identity into the interpretation of Rodriguez's writing, see Alarcón.

In the passage cited, Lacan says that the father "who really has the function of a legislator or, at least has the upper hand" is the type most often in the "posture of undeserving, inadequacy, even of fraud" that results in the exclusion of the "Name-of-the-Father" from its position in the signifier (218–19). Does it follow from the logic of these remarks that the subaltern father, who is the opposite of a legislator, would be less frequently in this posture—paradoxically more adequate and less fraudulent because authentically one with his powerlessness? Such a conclusion seems paradoxical; it certainly does not apply in the case of Mr. Rodriguez. So far as I know, Lacan did not address the question of the subaltern father.

Hence Rivera's sense that Rodriguez's book remains "paradoxically" a "part" of "Chicano literature" ("Antithesis" 412).

Works Cited


