

ADMISSION AS SUBMISSION: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS AN
EPISTEMOLOGY OF PENETRATION

BY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation is a study and contextualization of the three ethnic autobiographies of Chicano public intellectual Richard Rodriguez: *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982); *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992); and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002). Since the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez is identified as being against such political programs as Affirmative Action and as being a “poster boy” for right-wing politics. I argue for a more critical approach to Rodriguez’s controversial role in Chicana/o and Latina/o literature and culture. I explore Rodriguez’s evolution as an assimilated, American character and author and highlight how his struggles are exemplary of postcolonial subjects’ negotiating their Americanization. Assimilation produces discourses that I analyze as particular to a colonized subject’s identity that is at once typically American and that is yet always outside the definition of what it means to be “authentically American.” Building on Octavio Paz’s “penetration paradigm” and expanding the implicitly queer reading of *la chingada* and *el rajado*, metaphors defined in *Laberinto de la soledad*

(1950), in my project I articulate how the concepts of penetration, rejection, and ambivalence have become strategies of resistance that postcolonial subjects manipulate in pursuit of (in)authentic Americanism.

Spanning the U.S.-Mexican border, Rodriguez discusses the role that the impure, brown subject assumes in historical and contemporary narratives of nation formation. He presents a colonized American subject who openly defends and explores various ambiguous processes of acculturation and assimilation. Instead of adhering to Paz's notion of an impervious national masculinity, Rodriguez narrates his experiences as prototypical of the life of a culturally mixed, deviant and dark subject who acknowledges the benefits and losses of openly admitting to inhabiting an ambiguous space in American society. Recognizing the ambivalent relationship that nations and individuals have in regards to penetration and rejection becomes crucial in the epistemology of penetration that interprets admission as submission. Through a close reading of Rodriguez's autobiographies, I identify a subtext of desire: a desire for memory and for the creation of alternative narratives and alternative spaces for postcolonial American life and subjectivity.

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Introduction

Decolonizing the Author and Character Richard Rodriguez

If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it,
go back to Mexico where you belong.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

I. Richard Rodriguez as an American Speaker and Writer

The autobiographies of Richard Rodriguez—*Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982); *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992); and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2003)—are often misread or ignored because of the more than twenty-year-long debates centering on his stance on Affirmative Action. Rodriguez has been labeled as aligned with right-wing politics because of (mis)interpretations that arose from various interviews on public television and National Public Radio. Since the 1980s his works have been for the most part critically attacked and ignored because they have been read as suggesting assimilation as being the sole means for attaining authentic and appropriate Americanization. By “authentic and appropriate,” I am referring to the notion that being a white English speaker in the United States guarantees that subject’s assumed official location in culture. Conquest brought with it the very real ability for different cultures to mix in ways that produced anxieties about miscegenation (read contamination). Therefore whiteness is about color in America but it is also about more than just color. It is a symbolic representation of purity and chastity that is privileged over its counterparts.

In this project I investigate the double meaning of admission (as “entrance into” and also as “confession”) to highlight the ways in which Rodriguez’s public/open narratives of American assimilation place him in a submissive role in the dominant public culture. He has been accused of being a traitor to his ethnic past,¹ and has been compared by critics to La Malinche, a well known symbol of Mexican weakness and feminine betrayal, because he is seen as a colonized subject who not only embraces but also submits to the demands of the larger, dominant society. I disagree with this facile understanding of Rodriguez as purely submissive subject without agency. I argue, rather, that his “admission” speaks to the ambiguous role he assumes in culture: submitting to its demands only to reposition himself later as an authoritative speaker and writer in America. Though he is still a contentious figure in Chicano/Latino studies, Richard Rodriguez’s works have evolved greatly in the past three decades. Considering all of this, the purpose of this project is to offer a nuanced rereading of the contributions that Rodriguez’s autobiographies make regarding Americanization, postcolonialism, race, and queer theory in the effort to understand contemporary American literature. I argue that the way critics approach his autobiographies reflects gender essentialism, as well as a heteronormative understanding of dominance and submission. I interpret the works of critics who critique Richard Rodriguez as a character and as an author. I also analyze Rodriguez himself in order to outline an “epistemology of penetration.”

¹ In this instance, although speaking of an ethnic past, I want to suggest clearly from the beginning the intersection of race/gender/nation that creates cultures and normative customs. Emma Pérez (1999) notes how the “gendered history that many women of color contemplated ... claimed that one could not study women of color without reflecting upon their intersections of race and class with gender” (22). I agree with that statement and extend it to include not only women, but any identity that is marginalized or labeled inferior. Thus men, too, should be included in this intersectional approach to unmask biased histories and its effects on subjects.

Richard Rodriguez has been a figure of controversy since his debut in American culture in the 1980s as a writer and public speaker. My aim here is to re-present Rodriguez to past, present, and future scholars through queer and postcolonial lenses in order to unmask what I believe is a prevalent subtext of desire for authentic admission into dominant culture. This desire to gain authentic admission into public American culture unites all three autobiographies. I believe the thread that connects all of his texts to be that they can be read as offering an epistemology of penetration that broadens the intersections between postcolonial and queer theories. The focus in academia and in reading his texts should shift from Rodriguez's relationship to Affirmative Action to the analysis of the evolution of his frustrations due to his problematic admission into mainstream American culture both as a queer and postcolonial subject.

Language is clearly the starting point for Rodriguez. Not always considered, however, is that speaking English is, at least theoretically, a form of entrance into the dominant culture in the United States. Initially, Rodriguez felt that his goal was being accepted into and gaining access to American culture. Over time, however, he realized that authentic acceptance was nearly impossible because he was a colonized, brown other. It became clear that the process of admission for marginalized/colonized subjects, like him, hinges on a gendered notion of submission as inferior.

By close reading Rodriguez's autobiographies and tracking the links that produce this paradigm/paradox of admission as submission, one can identify Rodriguez's construction of an epistemology of penetration. The most pivotal scene in all three autobiographies is found in *Hunger for Memory*, when the nuns from his Catholic school

enter and disrupt the intimacy of his Mexican-speaking home, bringing with them public language, education, and indoctrination at once into the domestic space. The colonial mission of religious and educational officials in this scene will be touched on more directly later as I develop my argument. For now it is important to consider how colonized subjects manipulate their way through acculturation and Americanization in order to meet the demands of hegemonic culture and to become (in)authentic members of society.

Unfortunately, what Rodriguez, his family, and many other immigrant families realize quickly is that, for social mobility to occur, they must first assume a passive stance—that is to say, they must submit to the demands of the dominant culture. They must accept the American culture in which they live if they are ever to be accepted by it. Gloria Anzaldúa warns of the danger in seeking entrance into the ideological and physical borders in the United States if you are a border crosser/queer/*los atravesados*.² She notes, “Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot” (25). Subjects must either maintain this passive posture in the dominant culture or, like Rodriguez, accept a submissive stance only later to imbue it with agency to transform and reposition it. Rodriguez did not heed the warning that Anzaldúa gives, but rather aggressively desired and sought out entrance and admission. It is through his push for admission into the hegemonic culture that Rodriguez confronts his past and present not only to redefine but also to open alternative spaces to decolonize the future of all brown, colonized subjects struggling with a non-normative identity in postcolonial America.

² Anzaldúa defines *los atravesados* as “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (25).

II. Rodriguez's Autobiographies and the Question of Colonialism

Colonialism is a term that evokes images of force, violence, and domination. Issues of conversion, subordination, and violation also immediately come to mind when one thinks of the objectives of conquest and its oppressed subjects. Anzaldúa warns against the dangers and threats that culturally submissive individuals encounter as they dare to cross the geographic perimeters and ideological parameters of the hegemonic culture in the United States. It is clear that, although the act of colonization is transformative, we must explore texts concerned with negotiations of the aftermath of colonialism; that is the case of Rodriguez's autobiographies, which negotiate American identities in the aftermath of conquest. There is an urgency to analyze texts that engage questions of colonialism and postcolonialism, I think, because these social and cultural formations affect all the subjects under their dominion—colonized or otherwise. Postcolonialism “postulat[es] itself as a theoretical attempt to engage with a particular historical condition”(Gandhi, 4). The particularities of this historical condition are highlighted throughout Rodriguez's autobiographies if they are read as uncovering an epistemology of penetration. Rodriguez's public, spoken, and written admissions detail the complexities and ambiguities that mark his identity as the Other in the United States. Interestingly enough, although Rodriguez is narrating his colonized subject position in culture, it is possible to understand how other marginal subjects are also affected as they negotiate their inferior identities in their culture against some mythical standards of purity and authenticity.

I suggest a gendered reading of admission as submission as important to understand Rodriguez's location in the American imagination. His texts highlight the

importance of activity and passivity in the roles that subjects play in colonial history. Whether one is the colonizer or the colonized—or, rather, an ambiguous amalgam of both, as is generally the case—penetration as a trope is useful in examining colonization and postcolonialism. To enter into a new colonizing culture and to survive in it requires submission. All that one is left with are the memories of a past and a hope for agency as one submits to the demands of a colonizing force. The memories and histories that are told and retold from various colonial vantage points—of colonizer, of colonized, and of those subjects who are ambiguously positioned at the interstices of both—are the public acknowledgment of how certain subjects historically came to occupy one position of authority while others occupied one of inferiority.

Penetration itself has an interesting etymological history, which invites an investigation of how it has evolved to inhabit a space in postcolonial discourses about desire, possession, and dominance. The *Online Oxford English Dictionary* offers over six different definitions, some with sub-definitions that trace the origins of this term's becoming part of public discourse. The first date for its chronicling in discursive history is c.1425, when it implied an act of passing through or piercing. In 1605 “penetration” was said to have implied ideological and emotional effects on the body; and in 1613 it was first said to have been connected with sexual acts involving penises, vaginas, anuses, as well as other sex acts. It was not, however, until 1903, in its fourth definition, that “penetration” became connected with the sociopolitical infiltration of a country. In the context of Russia's international relations with Persia, it was chronicled as a way of

gaining power over an inferior or less powerful region.³ The point of this etymological review is to establish clearly how I am using the word penetration. I define penetration as an act wherein subjects are either influenced by, coerced by, or freely embrace a foreign force ideologically and/or physically. Anzaldúa presents the dangerous side of traversing boundaries, especially if one is unwelcome, whereas Paz fears it wholeheartedly because of how it made Mexicans forever submissive in the American imagination. I believe that Rodriguez's work, however, can be read as offering an epistemology of penetration that both converges with and diverges from the works of both Anzaldúa and Paz. The major difference lies in how Rodriguez seeks admission through voluntary submission. Though I see this act only as a strategy to enable him to assume a position of power later, it is nonetheless what frames this reading of Richard Rodriguez as both a character and a writer alongside his memories and experiences as an ambiguously penetrated/penetrating or colonized/colonizing American.

For Rodriguez, memory is formative in the way he openly retells the story of a "scholarship boy." For Rodriguez, the act of remembering is not simply a passive act. Rodriguez creates for his audience the act of remembering as a painful and conflicted act that forces him to consider concurrently his past, present, and future conditions as a colonized subject in the United States. The concept of memory is explained by Ghandi as inevitably contained in forgetting as a negotiation of one's historical condition. Ghandi calls postcolonial amnesia the "desire to forget the colonial past," and also labels it a

³ What is interesting in this fourth definition offered by the *OED* is that, as penetration was first framed, it was coupled with the notion of a potentially peaceful absorption of a weak culture by a dominant culture and its political ideologies and laws: "1903 E. GREY in *Hansard Commons* 18 Feb. 245 Russia seems undoubtedly [...] to be carrying on a process of absorption in Persia, [...] by what, I think, a French writer has called peaceful penetration." Later in chapter two, I also theorize a connection between an epistemology of penetration and absorption.

“will-to-forget” (4). This “will-to-forget” is motivated by a “need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination” (4). As I see it, the desire to forget and erase painful memories incurred through a colonial encounter is not always about forgetting, as in Rodriguez’s case, but, is instead about the negotiation of one’s relationship to a submission to dominant demands. The will-to-forget is perhaps more about managing the losses and gains through submitting to mainstream culture than it is about completely negating one’s past. To reapproach Rodriguez’s stance on his historical and present condition in public, American culture is essential to decolonize his memories in ways that open up new and alternative spaces where his marginalized subject position can find agency; reinterpreting his story as such allows readers to see his transformation as a character and writer.

The desire to produce a clean-slate identity that is often times negated to postcolonial subjects is represented through Ghandi’s figuration of postcolonial amnesia. This mythical *tabula rasa*, however, does not allow a space for the agency and ambiguity of colonized subjects that the epistemology of penetration suggests. This investigation is not about erasing the past and its effects but rather it is about understanding how colonial interactions produce alternative positions for subjects. Because of the structure of conquest, subjugation and submission by colonized subjects represents a survival strategy that, as Rodriguez exemplifies, is necessary for their success. Rodriguez also shows how in some instances, indoctrination comes from national institutions like the church, the state, the educational system, or all three. Negotiating relationships of empowerment and disempowerment in the United States has produced various reactions from colonized

subjects, such as the construction by Latinos of a *mestiza consciousness* (Anzaldúa), a methodology of the oppressed (Sandoval), and a decolonial imaginary (Pérez). Chicanas/Latinas in the United States have been theorizing disempowered sexual subjectivities for at least a decade now.

III. Richard Rodriguez the Character and the Author as Queer

American public intellectual Richard Rodriguez never seems at a loss for words. He always has something to say concerning a perspective on his singular American life. It also seems as if though talking about his own experiences, the confusion and conflicts he faces in his process of Americanization relates to various other immigrant and queer communities' histories. Rodriguez does not exhibit Ghandi's postcolonial amnesia. Rather, he embraces memories that reflect both his failed and his successful negotiations with his historical condition that is ambiguously internal to yet external to his location as part of both the United States and Mexico. It is from these interstices that Rodriguez narrates his memories to show how his location in culture arises at once through political, cultural, and metaphorical border battles of two countries in North America.

As I previously suggested, Rodriguez does not heed Anzaldúa's warning about not crossing borders and entering hostile lands. Instead he desires admission into mainstream American culture while making public confessions. Thus, for Rodriguez, it is through writing and remembering that he negotiates and experiences the ambivalence of his postcolonial subjectivity. Rodriguez, in an interview with Hector Torres, notes, "You learn the language of public life. You learn your oppressor's language, you learn to spit it back at him" (170). Spitting is an aggressive act that Rodriguez performs in response to

colonization. Because colonization was forced down his throat, he figuratively spits at the dominant culture in their language. For Rodriguez, it is the penetrative act of spitting back at and contaminating the master and his domain that is paramount. Rodriguez's self-fashioning as an initially submissive yet powerful agent later is a radical conceptualization of the ambiguity of admission as submission. Ghandi (1998) writes that postcolonialism "is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized" (4). I equate the colonial scene with the penetration event because in both there is an encounter and exchange wherein one party must either attack and fight to death or submit to the demands of the dominant subject. In the colonial scene, the colonizer is the penetrator and the colonized is the penetrated subject. Through a reevaluation of Rodriguez's open admission of his memories of a life defined by historical border battles, one can see how he queers notions of postcolonialism and unmask an agency inside an allegedly passive act like submission.

Rodriguez also destabilizes facile gendered notions of the colonizer as always powerful and the colonized as eternally disempowered. He, through the creation of an alternative discursive space, acknowledges the profound effects of the penetrative colonial act on subjects. For Rodriguez remembering becomes a way of re-visioning the past and empowering oneself in the present and future. Chicana and Latina feminists have accomplished this queering through the refashioning of La Malinche not as a victim but as a woman who did what she had to do with the means available to her. In a way, I see

Rodriguez and La Malinche as marked similarly—that is to say, as traitors. However, both, through repositioning, can be seen as exhibiting various forms of agency that disrupt or queer facile gender and sexual norms.

The notion of creating an alternative space for negotiating and re-envisioning one's colonial past is crucial to an understanding of Rodriguez's texts as postcolonial. This idea of negotiation and manipulation of colonial pasts comes from Chicana historian Emma Pérez's work on the decolonial imaginary. According to Pérez, history "is the story of the conqueror, [of] those who have won" (xv). The colonizers have won the right to narrate history in a specific way that makes them appear authoritative. Because they have won that right, they have the power to highlight their roles in colonial encounters. Pérez follows Foucault by emphasizing the shift in the focus of history from the center to the periphery, from the perspective of the colonized/marginal subjects. This shift is important for Chicana history and its effort to "retool, to shift meaning and read against the grain, to negotiate Eurocentricity whether within European historical models or within the paradigms of United States historiography" (xvii). Though Rodriguez may not view himself as part of Chicana/o and Latina/o history, he is part of the Chicano tradition even if only by negation. His negotiations as an oppressed-subject in America, revealed throughout his texts, attest to his being a foundational part of Chicano and Latino history since the 1980s. Moreover, his autobiographies form part of the history of immigrant subjects in the United States, first- and second-generation, who navigate assimilated identities from a marginal perspective because either they have been forced to, because they have wanted to, or both.

Because Rodriguez is a polemical figure for many Chicano and Latino scholars, it is important that I clarify why I see his works as reflecting ambiguity and ambivalence within the trope of penetration. He does not at first see himself as part of Chicano history, or even Mexican history; he clearly sees himself as an American subject because he was born in the United States and because of his decisions to privilege English (the language of the dominant culture) over Spanish (the intimate language of his private home). In *Brown*, Rodriguez describes his cumulative understanding of his position in the dominant culture as an autobiographer describing his relationship to the United States:

By telling you these things, I do not betray 'my people.' I think of the nation entire—all Americans—as my people. Though I call myself Hispanic, I see myself within the history of African Americans and Irish Catholics and American Jews and the Chinese of California. [...] When citizens feel themselves excluded, it is appropriate that they lobby, petition, attract the interest of government and employers. But when Americans organize into subgroups, it should be with an eye to margin with the whole, not remaining separate (128).

Rodriguez views himself as part of the fabric of the United States. He also sees many other immigrant/postcolonial subjects as contributing to the success of American culture. Yet, he is all too aware of how destructive otherness can be within a culture. He suggests a form of cultural homogenization, with brownness as a shared characteristic of all peoples and nations that disrupt standard conceptualizations of difference. If we are all one people, the Chinese-American, the Catholic, the Protestant, the Irish-American, the Mexican-American, then there is room for everyone in the decolonization of the

American imaginary. Rodriguez, I believe, sees the queerness/brownness in us all as the final admission as submission necessary for all subjects to heal together and to progress.

A major complaint of Rodriguez's, which surfaces throughout his texts, is that others identify him as an outsider/foreigner in the United States simply because of his name or the color of his skin. It is his colonial past that comes to define him because of the cultural push to label people simply through visual markers like skin color. I find Rodriguez's text as exemplary to better understanding how certain people are ambiguously positioned in culture. This contradictory placement arises specifically for Rodriguez because of the ways he sees himself versus the ways others categorize him as both part of the histories of Mexico and the United States.

IV. The Rhetoric of Racialization Surrounding Richard Rodriguez

As a character and author, Rodriguez's American cultural authenticity is challenged owing to the history of racial formation in the United States. Michael Omi and Howard Winant recognize that a consequence of centuries of racial dictatorship is that "they [those with hegemonic identities and social power] defined 'American' identity as white, as the negation of racialized 'otherness'—at first largely African and indigenous, later Latin American and Asian as well" (66). In the earlier quote from *Brown* where Rodriguez claims his connection to various marginalized groups in the broader American culture (African, Native American, Asian, Latin American, as well as other histories) he established the link between American subjectivities and the creation of their otherness against normative society. His reasons for suggesting these intersections between his Mexican-American identity and that of other oppressed subcultures in America are on

some level related to color. Yet the intersections he identifies are parts of his historic condition that have the ability to threaten his normative placement in culture: he becomes queer not just because of his sexuality and color, but also because of the ambiguities that arise from his alleged national allegiances.

Among the factors that make Rodriguez interesting are his racialization, sexualization, and nationalization as representing otherness. Because he is different in many ways from mainstream American culture, I believe, this constant reminder of his difference frustrated Rodriguez and caused him at first to pursue a pure/colorless version of authenticity while seeking admission into the United States. On some level, his original submission was about relinquishing ties with his muddied colonial past and replacing it with the norms of the white, English-speaking American future. The historical regimentation of race in America is responsible for Rodriguez's own distorted self-perception because the message he gleaned throughout his life was that merely speaking like members of the dominant culture is not enough to guarantee him access. Rather it was also essential to look like and behave like them to be considered authentic.

Considering publications such as Ramon A. Gutierrez's "Lusting for Power: Richard Rodriguez and the Political Language of White Men," Ruben Martinez's "My Argument with Richard Rodriguez: Or, a defense of the Mexican American Chicanos Love to Hate," and Tomás Rivera's "Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis," it is no surprise that Randy A. Rodriguez notes that "Rodriguez becomes, then, a sign of pathology, or sickness, for his critics. [...] Clearly, according to most critics, he is damaged literary and cultural material" (400). Richard Rodriguez is

seen as a traitor to his race and people because his primary loyalty is not with his racial or ethnic identification—something that Randy A. Rodriguez points to as integral for cultural nationalist movements like the Chicano movement—but, rather, to the dominant American culture (396).

Following Randy A. Rodriguez's lead, I also believe that a reevaluation of Richard Rodriguez's work that investigates the intersections of queer studies and studies of nationalism will enable a significant reconsideration of Richard Rodriguez as a character and author. Rodriguez is a complicated subject precisely because of his role as an autobiographer. Randy A. Rodriguez suggests a need to decolonize the image of Richard Rodriguez as a character and author; through such a process, Rodriguez as a figure that contributes to Chicana/o and queer communities can be developed and rearticulated. As yet, his primary role in those communities has most frequently been as a negation of Rodriguez. To approach his autobiographies as opening up an alternative space from which to understand issues of acculturation, migration, and (post)colonialisms is a different approach to take on Rodriguez as a literary figure. The almost thirty-years'-long debate about his being a poster-boy for the right wing can resonate only for so long until, as often happens in American culture, there is a reintroduction and renaissance of the old viewed with new eyes.

The immigrants coming to America in the twentieth century prioritized assimilatory impulses as the most viable option to adapt to various expectations of the dominant culture. Whether out of fear of violence, fear of being labeled as other, or because of the desire to make of their new geographical location an actual home, many

immigrants had to come to terms with various facets of assimilation as they became Americanized. Although Rodriguez certainly did make his own choices of embracing or rejecting pieces of his past, his decisions were not made with complete freedom. Certain historical elements of coercion, brought on by the thrust of colonization, influenced his decisions. As Omi and Winant claim, it is in “the Americas, [that] the conquest represented the violent introduction of a new form of rule whose relationship with those it subjugated was almost entirely coercive” (66). If this coercion is widely accepted as part and parcel of the various processes of colonization, how, then, can we approach postcolonial texts without an awareness of its enduring strength and presence? It is important to note here that in my interpretation, this quote by Omi and Winant suggests the role of submission in conquest. The new forms of rule that the colonizers enforced ultimately placed them in positions of authority—as the rule makers. Colonized subjects were in many instances, as Omi and Winant suggest, coerced into their passive roles precisely because during conquest and conversion it was an issue of life or death.

To submit to and then emulate those in power was a survival strategy for individuals and families as they attempted to become part of the broader American culture.⁴ Rodriguez’s experience is no exception. However, the blatant disregard and anger that has been directed toward him because of his submission to the dominant culture suggests that there is something particularly threatening and offensive about his persistent desire to assimilate. We saw this crucial deviant/culturally inappropriate behavior occur when we were considering Latina/Chicana feminists like Anzaldúa and

⁴ In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha references the affective experiences of social marginality as productive in acts of social survival (246-247).

Sandoval, who work on issues of survival in relation to gender and sexuality. These marginal groups—identified as culturally passive—become marked as traitors and by extension as committing grave offenses against their own ethnic customs and traditions. Whether we are speaking of Anzaldúa, La Malinche, or Richard Rodriguez, it is clear that a gendered reading of appropriate and inappropriate activities proves important to their placement in or against Chicana/o standards of authentic nationalism. For Rodriguez specifically—his assimilation—his desire for admission into mainstream American culture, is labeled an offense because of its inappropriate national, racial, and gender alignments. Rodriguez’s quest for assimilation is marked as treachery because it reinforces a position of inferiority and effeminacy that is labeled inappropriate for the authentic and culturally appropriate Chicano/Mexicano/American man.

As much of Rodriguez’s concerns in his autobiographies center on his own position in American culture, I find Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* useful in understanding Rodriguez’s texts as part of postcolonial discourse. In discussing the survival of culture, Bhabha notes, “Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South” (245). Rodriguez’s autobiographies, I believe, serve as literary testimonies of a minority subject whose position in American culture occupies the interstices of the North–South divide. Because he is at once American, Mexican, and Mexican-American, Rodriguez’s accounts of the progression of his life navigate a contradictory cultural terrain that places diverging expectations on him. These conflicted expectations reflect desires of both the North and

the South as a means for achieving authenticity. Bhabha identifies “complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres” (248). Rodriguez himself and his works occupy this cusp between North and South. Consequently, contradictions and ambiguities often arise in Rodriguez’s texts. Because he must negotiate ideals, norms, and cultural values both north and south of the U.S. border, I find the ambiguity regarding his subjectification and nationalization in his autobiographies inviting and worthy of revisiting.

Because Rodriguez’s historical condition places him in an in-between space of the North and South, his ambiguity in cultural history is multiple. Though he wants to see himself as solely inside the United States literary tradition, Octavio Paz’s work on Mexicanness and identity inevitably intersects with the reception and cataloging of Rodriguez’s works. In Paz’s essay, “The Other Mexico” he notes that the “Mexican is not an essence but a history” (215). I maintain that it is not only Mexicans but also the Mexican-Americans (because of border battles) who are defined by a particular history and historical condition. I suggest Mexican-Americans are also implicated because of the complicated border history/border battles between Mexico the United States. This complicated, in-between space represents their ambiguous postcolonial condition. Rodriguez’s ambiguous placement as both native and other in America represents the frustration that Paz identifies as necessary for cross-cultural dialogue between the United States and Mexico. Paz notes, ‘If I asked myself, ‘Can the United States carry on a dialogue with us?’ my answer would be yes—on condition that first they learn to speak with themselves, with their own *otherness*: their Blacks, their Chicanos, their young

people” (220). Rodriguez’s autobiographies and their critical reception suggest that the United States has yet to respond affirmatively to that question, which Paz posed more than forty years ago. Rodriguez ambiguously and queerly represents the contentious geographical/colonial relationship between Mexico and the United States; he also represents United States’ own otherness and sameness as he narrates the life of an authentic, hyphenated American subject.

V. Richard’s Ambiguous Location in Culture

One issue on which most scholars agree is that Rodriguez provokes conflicting reactions among his readers. Some read his struggles as inspiring to all immigrants or marginalized subjects; others see him as a traitor. His desired self-representation, coupled with the identification imposed by critics, highlights the contradictions in his life and writings. Discussing Rodriguez’s difficult categorization, Bill Shuter relates, “Rodriguez can hardly be described as an ‘ethnic writer’ in any usual sense of the phrase” (95). I agree with Shuter in the sense that Rodriguez is definitely not the icon for normativity. I see an implicit message of queerness in Shuter’s argument; perhaps describing Rodriguez as an “ethnic writer” in a conventional sense is, in fact, impossible. Part of the problem, however, stems from our questioning the impulse behind Rodriguez’s normative classification. The question for Shuter, Randy A. Rodriguez, and I then is more about why critics would even expect Rodriguez to be conventional in how he expresses himself. Whether because he is a gay writer who avoids directly tackling issues related to his sexuality (until his final, most queer work, *Brown*), because he is a person of color who imagines an alternative colorless life for himself in America, or because he desires to be

included among writers like Walt Whitman or William Faulkner (as opposed to Gloria Anzaldúa or Junot Díaz), Rodriguez can be described as a queer “ethnic writer” or, at the very least, as an “ethnic writer” who flouts the conventions inherent in the category of ethnic American writers.

Rodriguez’s ambiguous location in American culture produces anxieties and ambivalences that can be understood as partially responsible for his queerness. A major concern for Rodriguez centers on the classification of his racialized, sexualized, and textual body. As previously mentioned, Rodriguez sees himself first and foremost as an American (*Brown* 128), yet this is not how people engage him. As Shuter notes, Rodriguez’s subject position in society—that is to say, where he is located in American culture—is a constant source of contradiction and uncertainty. Shuter argues that Rodriguez’s “sense of his own ethnic identity is, as he repeatedly acknowledges, too conflicted, too uncertain” (95). It is not just his ethnic identity that causes confusion but also his racial and sexual identities. I agree with Shuter in the sense that Rodriguez’s ethnic identity causes frustrations and confusion in his narrative representation of his life when viewed as a whole. However I disagree with Shuter’s proposition that Rodriguez’s ethnic identity requires excessive attention. What makes his identity ambiguous is that what he sees or wants to see does not correspond with what others see and want to see. It is an issue of representation versus classification, and this is something that Rodriguez has struggled with throughout his career as a writer.

Much concern about Rodriguez arises when investigating his role in the different communities to which his ambiguous, hyphenated identities link him—Mexican-,

Queer-, Catholic-, Indian-American. As I have argued, Rodriguez is seen by some as a traitor because of his desire to assimilate into mainstream American culture. He and his autobiographies “have been criticized for misrepresentation by members of [his] own ‘ethnic’ group” (Fachinger 112). Again, because he neither openly divulges his sexuality (which in itself would be classifiable as another admission as submission) nor glorifies his ethnic roots, critics question whether or not his works can, indeed, be included in the emergent field of ethnic autobiography. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez argues that ethnic autobiographers employ the literary strategy of retrospection to envision the future (57). Rodriguez uses this strategy in his first autobiography, *The Hunger of Memory*. He also projects nuanced racial/sexual/ethnic community configurations for the future, as exemplified by *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. Although his works fit this definition of ethnic autobiography, there is still some debate about where, or even if, Rodriguez fits within the tradition of this genre.

There is something particular to Rodriguez’s experiences and writings. Fachinger writes that Rodriguez is an “American-born writer whose ethnic group has experienced colonization in a way not shared by any other group in the United States” (112). Though that statement is itself debatable if we include the various Native American groups throughout the United States, it is nonetheless of interest to think about the particularities that Rodriguez remembers, retells, and negotiates because of his historical legacy. Colonization, with its penetrative force, is identified as the major transformative impulse and discursive trope that creates the particularities of Rodriguez’s expressions. It is crucial, then, to locate Rodriguez’s text as forming part of a larger postcolonial discourse

as he negotiates the ambivalences and ambiguities that shape his life and writings.

Rodriguez is constantly between worlds (North and South America) and straddling his past, present, and future. It is this conundrum, of being both colonized and colonizer yet neither completely, that establishes the role of binaries and ambiguity in his life.

Fachinger concludes that such dichotomies—and I add to these Rodriguez's ambiguous placement on both sides of the border simultaneously—play a central role in Rodriguez's life. Because he has dedicated so much time and energy to being part of the American mainstream culture, he is aware of the various ways his contradictory and therefore queer identities complicate his inclusion into this group. It is only logical, then, that he understand the conflicted worlds as binary oppositions of similarity to and difference from the norms. Rodriguez's desire for admission into mainstream culture is at the center of his self-construction. Fachinger notes that consequently Rodriguez begins to see his life as oppositional binaries: "failure versus success, chaos versus order, private versus public, family versus city, past versus future, insider versus outsider, communal versus individualistic, Old World versus New World, loyalty versus betrayal, masculine versus feminine, macho versus effeminate, and language of the past versus language of the present" (124). The necessary elaborations for a better understanding of Rodriguez's ambiguous location in culture emerge when one considers the roles of colonizer versus colonized and penetrator versus penetrated within his complicated view of reality. These are the real and imaginary spaces that Rodriguez the character and author remembers as he describes the ambiguous process of Americanization that began with language but do not end there; I believe the ambivalent feelings produced are, a key point for Rodriguez

in his texts. The Old and New Worlds converge metaphorically in Rodriguez's exposition of his ambiguous self because these particular historical conditions have, for better or worse, played themselves out through his sexual/racial/physical body.

Claiming the role of his body and flesh in the development of Rodriguez's identity in America unites his earlier and more recent works. He is complicit, even complacent, in the creation of his subjectivity as desiring sameness (read authentication); however as he grows, he encounters many hurdles that confirm his difference/queerness. It is important to note that the construction of oppositional binaries, where one element is dominant and the other subordinate, is formative in American culture. Rodriguez became aware of this binary through his schooling. It was through his original positioning as submissive to the dominant culture that he became indoctrinated. Thus, it was through submission that he was granted admission to mainstream culture.

My focus here is to uncover how Rodriguez, as a character and an author, functions in the aftermath of his entrance into the dominant American culture. Issues of publicity and privacy, and the importance that culture places on them, became all too clear for Rodriguez. It was then that he decided to privilege his potential public (English) location in culture over his already private (Spanish) location. Nidesh Lawtoo suggests that "Rodriguez's promotion of cultural assimilation [in *Hunger of Memory*] is grounded upon a dichotomic logic which sets the 'private' and 'public' spheres in a relation of mutual exclusion" (221-222). Recall that it was the nuns' demand for English usage over Spanish that exposed Rodriguez and his family to the intricacies and expectations of the dominant culture. Rodriguez believed at the time that his only route to authentic

membership was to relinquish the private Spanish and to replace it exclusively with the public American English—one to the exclusion of the other.

As he matures and his relationships with public American culture shift, however, what he values also changes and no longer does he view the private and public as mutually exclusive. His works evolve from *Days of Obligation* through *Brown* such that binaries still exist—public versus private, Mexico versus the United States, black versus white, penetrated versus penetrating, past versus present—but the creation of alternative queer spaces emerge as important themes in his works.⁵ In extrapolating this epistemology of penetration, it is important to place Rodriguez ideologically, geographically, and historically in both the United States and the Mexican cultures by understanding his postcolonial subjectivity. Local and international scholars like Octavio Paz, Louis Althusser, and Homi Bhabha played a crucial role in my understanding of the construction of Rodriguez’s selfhood in America. Rodriguez’s work engages with these thinkers’ understanding of how nationalization and subjectification are foundational for establishing one’s location in culture. The work of Bhabha, in particular, illuminates the complicated discursive position that Rodriguez assumes in American culture. While discussing ambivalence as an inconsistent structure of feeling and structure of the self, Bhabha notes, “An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (66). The main point here is that ambivalence is generally negated or unacknowledged because it represents a

⁵ In subsequent chapters dedicated to *Days of Obligation* and *Brown* I discuss this at length. For now, suffice it to say that I view Rodriguez as evolving over time from privileging the normative side of the binary (the dominant component) for the queer one (the submissive element).

dynamism and fluidity that disrupts the goal of superordinate and subordinate positionings in colonial discourse. To twist and color, that is to say, to brown and queer, the space of the Other in culture is a threatening act. Rodriguez does not present the colonized others as statically placed in an inferior position, as always and eternally disempowered, but, rather, as always in motion, negotiating their postcolonial location in and outside culture. It is, then, no surprise that the idea of fixity is important to colonial discourse because it keeps those in power unquestionably in place atop the hegemonic order while representing the Others as incapable of assuming any roles other than the subordinate ones that reflect their historic penetrated condition.

Ambivalence and ambiguity, as offered through Bhabha and Rodriguez's texts, challenge these static assumptions directly and further prove useful in establishing an epistemology of penetration. The postcolonial subject in America negotiates an ambiguous historical relationship to its past and present. Ambiguity unites Rodriguez and Bhabha's work also with regard to (im)purity, homo/heterogeneity, and nation formation. The idea that national representatives desire to be seen as culturally homogenous, even though history attests to their heterogeneity, exemplifies an aversion to socio-historical ambiguities. Bhabha argues that the

very concepts of homogenous national cultures [...] are in a profound process of redefinition. The hideous extremity of Serbian nationalism proves that the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and

figurative, of the complex interweaving of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood (7).

Though in the above example Bhabha references Serbian nationalism, the point is nonetheless valid and applicable to the histories of various cultures throughout the world. Attempting to excise any residual manifestations of impure blood, which was the goal of the Inquisition or Nazism, for example, has been a theme for various cultures as they establish their fixed national identities. The third chapter of this project discusses how in *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002), Rodriguez takes up this notion of national purification. Like Bhabha, he believes that admitting to the brown/impure parts of a nation's past is more beneficial than negating it. In a way, *Brown* illustrates Bhabha's point that the concept of pure national cultures is being drastically redefined. To not deny the complicated and contradictory history of a nation and its inhabitants but to embrace it openly is, for Rodriguez, to brown and queer stereotypical expectations that inhibit freedom.

Rodriguez envisions brown as an alternative to queer hegemonic claims of national purity. The word brown as deployed theoretically by Rodriguez is about conflict, contradiction, hybridity, multiplicity and admixtures. It is also however, about being not-white and not-black. For Rodriguez, browning and queering American subjects' condition has historically been a way to engage politically with racial, sexual, and national formations that destabilizes racial binaries in the United States. Bhabha notes, "Here the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] but something else besides*, which contests

the terms and territories of both” (41). This is an act that undoes binary oppositions by creating other paradigms. That neither one nor the other, but rather a product with various components of each, creates something different entirely highlights the ambiguity inherent in such a transformation as well as the utility of in-between spaces in American culture. Since for Rodriguez being the third man, or brown subject, is not simply a matter of skin coloration, his focus on the political transformation offered through a term like brown connects with Bhabha’s work. Rodriguez notes in *Brown*, “There is brown at work in all the works of man” (36). What brown comes to represent is not only a cultural and racial interplay but a material rearticulation of the various colonial histories that create appropriate and inappropriate American subjects. Brown quite literally is not white (“neither the One”) nor black (“nor the Other”) but clearly Bhabha’s notion of “something else besides.”

The something else that brown is besides the One or the Other creates a complicated American identity that transcends traditional boundaries as it queers them. Rodriguez’s theoretical use of brown as a new way to discuss racial, ethnic, and social construction across history is his attempt at translating elements of hegemonic narrations to affirm the lived and ambiguous historical conditions of the subjects involved. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez attempts to become part of the hegemony in American society. In *Brown*, however, it is apparent that this desire has subsided somewhat and now he looks toward the cultural healing and resolutions that theorists like Anzaldúa have suggested.

Rodriguez is much more critical of his inclusion in—or exclusion from—the hegemonic American culture as he reflects on his life. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha points out how

[t]he work of hegemony is itself the process of iteration and differentiation. It depends on the production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other ... [it] is this side-by-side nature...and its effective significations that give meaning (quite literally) to a politics of struggle *as the struggle for identifications* and the war of positions (42-43).

Because Rodriguez has anxiously attempted for so long to be included in it, he is intimately aware of the demands of the hegemonic American culture. However it is through his difference—the production of himself, his brown, queer body, and his browning, queering texts as alternative or antagonistic images to the hegemony—that he realizes inclusion is impossible because the dominant national scheme is limited by the pretense of purity. The national acknowledgment of a brown, queer past is not something that is usually openly admitted. “Most bookstores” Rodriguez comments in *Brown*, “have replaced disciplinary categories with racial or sexual identification. In either case I must be shelved Brown” (35). The struggle for identification that Rodriguez has faced throughout his life as an assimilated and brown American subject has always been for him a war of positions primarily centered on his postcolonial condition. In the foregoing quote, Rodriguez is frustrated with the way his work will be included, or excluded, by the

Academy and the canon. The position he wishes to assume is antithetical to that to which he was assigned because of external identification processes that catalogued him as far too brown.

The tensions that arise from Rodriguez's complicated categorization are what make his autobiographies so important and unique. Rodriguez is among the first Latino/Hispanic authorial voices to be recognized in publications like *Norton's Anthology*. Therefore, that discursive positioning demands that his life experiences be heard and engaged when Latino studies are considered as a field in the United States. He has gained national and international recognition for these three autobiographies and continues to write commentary and criticism for various periodicals on religion and on culture, as well as appearing on public broadcasts throughout the country. It is for all of these reasons that I believe strongly that it is time to revisit Rodriguez and his works to uncover what they do contribute to Latino/Chicano studies. Rather than focusing on his flawed representation of Mexico and the United States, we need to focus on the ways that he as a character and as an author has accomplished something with a strong American precedent: the declaration of self as an independent, empowered subject imbued with agency. Investigating the issues Rodriguez presents in his autobiographies as products of, and inherently informed by, colonization offers a perspective on the trope of penetration that underlies this project.

VI. Rodriguez as a Corrective to Paz's Notions of Impenetrability

For many, the foundational paradigmatic text on Mexican national identity formation is Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*. The reach of this text was, in its day, unsurpassed by any

other book coming out of Mexico and perhaps even Latin America. With its focus on the stoic, closed-off, impenetrable masculine “macho” man as representative of the nation, Paz’s influence on Rodriguez merits some attention. As Rodriguez declares himself an authorized American speaker and writer, it is clear that the impetuses for Rodriguez and Paz’s texts dealt with the idea of authenticity—the idea of describing the exemplar national subject. Paz becomes the iconic Mexican figure, capable of narrating the crises that Mexicans have in relation to the rest of the world. Rodriguez, perhaps not as glorified as Paz by critics, attempts also to narrate the crises Mexican-Americans encounter as they try to become national subjects in a land that does not know how to understand their complicated history. José Limon notes that “for the first time, we have a U.S. literary intellectual who speaks of Mexico to a broad public almost as a series of ‘notes of a native son.’ In this respect, Rodriguez also singularly joins this American tradition of cultural criticism to its counterpart in Mexico, exemplified always by the late Octavio Paz” (389). In Rodriguez’s work he makes reference to Paz both directly and indirectly. For example, in *Brown* Rodriguez mentions Paz by name when discussing “the dialectic posed by the proximity of the United States and Mexico—their shared difference” that unites his and Paz’s writings (159). Later, in the second chapter of this project, I explore how Rodriguez’s second autobiography, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, is a direct conversation with Paz as an iconic paternal figure for both Mexico and Rodriguez. However, the importance of Limon’s comparison of Paz and Rodriguez is to establish that Rodriguez writes not just in the aftermath of colonization but also under the paradigm established by Paz: through close reading

Rodriguez's second autobiography as in conversation with Paz establishes, I believe, that not only Mexican men but all browned subjects must be understood as valued and valuable in the conflicted roles they play in the formation of United States culture in the aftermath of colonization.

Paz's work in *El laberinto de la soledad* facilitates an understanding of the history that influences Rodriguez's work. Rodriguez narrates an ambiguous Mexican-American character that I read as affected by the trope of penetration that imbues all his autobiographical texts. Inevitably he read and came across some of Paz's literary texts; and therefore, I argue that as a result Paz's understanding of the historical condition of *lo mexicano* filtered into Rodriguez's works relating to Mexican-Americans—even though Paz identifies those individuals with Mexican origins but not living in Mexico as different. For Paz, history plays an important role in understanding Mexicans. Colonial history is central to unpacking how the Mexican national subject negotiates the complex identities surrounding issues of conquest and submission. Paz writes:

El carácter de los mexicanos es un producto de las circunstancias sociales imperantes en nuestro país. Por lo tanto la historia de México, que es la historia de esas circunstancias, contiene la respuesta a todas las preguntas. La situación del pueblo durante el período colonial sería así la raíz de nuestra actitud cerrada y inestable (77). [The character of the Mexican is a product of the social circumstances that prevail in our country, and the history of Mexico, which is the history of these circumstances, contains the

answer to every question. The situation that prevailed during the colonial period would thus be the source of our closed, unstable attitude] (Kemp 77).⁶

As a byproduct of conquest, Paz articulates the impenetrable national position that Mexican subjects assume as integral to their processes of being legitimate citizens. It is important to note that my reading of Rodriguez's open public admissions presented in his autobiographies is antithetical to what Paz describes as the form of authentic, obligatory stoicism expected of Mexican men. It is because of Mexico's colonial history, and its people's historical condition as subjects positioned submissively, that an impervious and volatile national figure dominates in the cultural imaginary of self and other.

Rodriguez's work represents a departure from Paz's compulsive impenetrability both because Rodriguez is talking about a hyphenated Mexican-American identity, and also because he represents an open subject who speaks freely and defiantly: that is to say, Rodriguez openly acknowledges his emotions, fears, and pain. This openness is an act of defiance for Paz and for Rodriguez's mother, who also shares his notion of privacy. To express emotion is to place oneself in a submissive position because it leaves that subject open and vulnerable. It is precisely through Rodriguez's public admissions that readers can interpret the ambiguous processes that were combined to create his paradoxical American subjectivity.

⁶ This quote is from Lysander Kemp's 1961 English translation. Throughout, I cite both English and Spanish versions of Paz's texts. At times I have translated and in other instances I rely on Kemp's translation. I will designate Kemp's translations throughout. When no note appears, it is my translation.

One of Paz's main preoccupations in response to colonization is that Mexicans remain as closed off as possible in all their interactions with others. Rodriguez appears to take an oppositional stance in his autobiographies as he opens himself up to a broad audience—a defiant and anti-Mexican act, according to Paz. Paz in "Máscaras mexicanas" notes how the Mexican "atraviesa la vida como desollado; todo puede herirle, palabras y sospecha de palabras" (29). [He passes through life like a man who has been flayed [open]; everything can hurt him, including words and the very suspicion of words] (Kemp 29). Because of this inherent openness, he describes an impervious self-presentation on the part of the Mexican to avoid any more damage from external forces. In his autobiographies, Rodriguez personifies Paz's fears of the image of the Mexican man as open and vulnerable through his autobiographies; it is for this reason, I believe, that Rodriguez's works can be read as suggesting an epistemology of penetration. His texts diverge, on a certain level, from Paz's work in *El laberinto* because Rodriguez's admissions are read as open submissions—they personify the real threat that Paz implies is able to make Mexican men suspicious of words and personal interactions involving emotional expressions. Because of Rodriguez's open admissions, a different side to the colonial story is presented for readers. Where Paz warns of the anxieties around expressivity, Rodriguez chronicles not what could happen but in fact what has happened to him because of his ambiguous identity and historical situation in the United States. Paz places limitations on the colonized speaking subject that Rodriguez defies as he shares his writings with a public audience.

To understand better Paz's influence on Rodriguez, a more in-depth presentation of Paz's work on safeguarding the nation and its citizens is necessary. Paz's discussions of national failures (masculine and feminine) are presented historically through a concept that is referred to as the "penetration paradigm" by scholars like Robert McKee Irwin in *Mexican Masculinities*. This paradigm reveals the role that the concept of penetration plays in establishing customs, beliefs, and norms for men/masculinity and women/femininity in Mexican culture. Appropriate gender alignments and displays mean understanding one's role or position in life. Mexican sexuality, for Irwin, is, of course, problematic for women, but there also exist threats for men. Discussing criminal offenses he notes:

The nascent discourse on sexuality spurred both an industry of soft-core pornography and a paranoia regarding sexuality in general. The fear of female sexuality is well documented. The archetypes of the pure sexless virgin and the profane sexualized whore that dominate the literature of the day have been studied fruitfully elsewhere.

However, the fear of male sexuality that arose in this age [in the aftermath of conquest and the formation of modern Mexican society] is less often discussed, and dangerous masculinity was not only present in the unruly and self-destructive classes, but among a class of Mexicans described by Guerrero as "humilde hasta las lágrima" [humble to the point of inspiring tears] (57-58).

It is clear that no one is entirely safe from transgressing appropriate gender and sexual norms valued by Mexican culture. Sexual offenses and crimes are conceptualized around issues of virginity, promiscuity, and are represented as a threat related to penetration not just for women but for men also. Paz's work on understanding the Mexican man as impenetrable becomes a space to investigate how this "penetration paradigm" functions. The basic idea presented in Paz's text is that the image of the nation of Mexico is implicated in gendered and sexualized political discourses. Penetration is the immediate colonial trope invoked in Paz's project of social formation; he identifies foreign geographical and physical colonial advances as the culprits for Mexico's image of weakness. The notion that inhabitants of this region were unable to ward off, and protect their lands, cultures, religions, and women from the *conquistadores*' advances, produces an anxiety, even guilt, around the image of *lo mexicano*.

The title of one of *El laberinto*'s chapters, "Los hijos de La Malinche," makes clear the penetration paradigm's importance. Paz highlights the connection between the names La Malinche and la Chingada. Discussing the true children of La Malinche—Mexicans, the product of Cortés and La Malinche—Paz makes an implicit connection between their national images and the trope penetration: "Los verdaderos hijos de La Malinche, que es la Chingada en persona" (87). [The true children of Malinche, who is the fucked/violated figure incarnate.]. La Malinche is also known as la Chingada. The verb *chingar* is a slang term used to refer to a violation—sexual or otherwise. The subject acted upon would be the *chingada/o* while the active figure would be *el chingón*. *Chingón* also connotes mastery, the one who is in control, and *chingada/o*, the

subservient, submissive one under control. This reinterpretation of the chapter's title from "Los hijos de La Malinche" to "Los hijos de la Chingada" shows how penetration is inscribed in Mexican culture. The nation and its subjects are produced and reproduced as byproducts of the colonization that marks them as always in a relationship to violation.

Paz goes even further in building connections between penetration as a colonial trope and its effects on Mexico and Mexican ideological formations when he considers Mexico as a country produced by the violence of conquest. Connecting the trope of penetration both to the nation of Mexico and to La Malinche (Mexico's passivity incarnate), Paz writes,

Si la Chingada es una representatción de la Madre violada, no me parece forzado asociarla a la Conquista, que fue también una violación, no solamente en el sentido histórico, sino en la carne misma de los indios (87). [If La Malinche/la Chingada is a representation of the violated mother, it does not seem to me forced to associate her with the conquest, which also was a violation, not only in the historical sense, but rather also regarding the flesh of the Indian inhabitants.]

Conquest and violence are immediate bedfellows for Paz. He places the colonizers in the dominant role that engenders Mexico's national passivity through the figure of the violated mother. Paz sees an undeniable connection between the historical violence and the physical violence that colonization caused to the nation and its inhabitants. The recuperative response for Paz is that Mexico must heal from its wounds, embodied in the

figure of the penetrated mother. Anzaldúa identifies shame as part of the national project of institutionalized oppression that changed the La Malinche's true identity to a *virgin-puta* dichotomy (53). This binary positioning for La Malinche stems from the physical and ideological violations that place her image as submissive and disempowered. By a condemnation of the mother, there is a chance that national subjects can distance their identities from hers—they then would not be open and vulnerable, like the mother figure, but rather (as Paz prefers) closed off, and safeguarded in their solitude (86).

Rodriguez, on the other hand, does not condemn fraternizing with the colonizers, nor does he acknowledge his relationship to shame caused by interactions spurred on from colonial contact. Randy A. Rodriguez tells us that, for many, Rodriguez is symbolically “like La Malinche, the traitor to the Mexican people ... Rodriguez is el chingado (the fucked and violated one) because he consorts with the Anglo-American colonizer” (402). A link between the culturally criminal offenses of both La Malinche and Rodriguez is made by emphasizing their “treachery.” They both position themselves passively against the dominant Anglo colonizing culture and thus are both viewed pejoratively. This negative view of both La Malinche and Rodriguez arises not only because of their allegedly submissive postures, but also because of their desires to embrace the Anglo's colonial advances. It seems, then, that Rodriguez, following La Malinche's lead, requests admission through submission (physical, cultural, and oral) to the dominant culture; Rodriguez's offense is almost more threatening and less culturally understandable because it is assumed that his male gender will confirm his allegiance to Mexico's mores and customs regarding penetration. Through the open admissions in his

autobiographies, Rodriguez publicly betrays Paz's formula for Mexican masculine impenetrability.

VII. Repositioning La Malinche and Rodriguez to Reclaim Agency

According to Paz's formula, Rodriguez does not represent an appropriate version of the Mexican man because of how he positions himself as emotionally open—aligning himself with characteristics that describe femininity. For Paz, the role of the man in a gendered society is to protect the assumed weaker women and children, with the overall failure of the nation ultimately explained as a result of the masculine national figure's inability to maintain dominance because of an act of submission. Paz affirms La Malinche as the national iconic image of female weakness. She is multifaceted, representing herself, the nation, and other women. Her failures and vulnerability to Cortés are the potential failures of all women, who are seduced into being traitors because of a provocative, external force. The undeniable anatomical openness and penetrability of women is part of the image of La Malinche/la Chingada/la Madre violada/women. Paz writes, “Ella encarna lo abierto, lo chingado” (87). [She embodies openness, the violated one incarnate.] He writes of the female body:

Tanto por la fatalidad de su anatomía ‘abierta’ como por su situación social [...] está dispuesta a toda clase de peligros, contra los que nada pueden la moral personal ni la protección masculina. El mal radica en ella misma; por naturaleza es un ser “rajado” abierto” (37). [Her social situation [...] and the misfortune of her “open” anatomy expose[s] her to all kinds of dangers, against which neither

personal morality nor masculine protection is sufficient. She is submissive and open by nature] (Kemp 38).

The essential component here is gendered expectations. It is expected that women are weak, penetrable, easy prey, susceptible to being seduced and dominated; their bodies, as figures of the violated mother of Mexico's children (La Malinche), are what connect them to their presumed roles of the eternal submissive national character. It is not, however, expected that Mexican men will be so weak and vulnerable. The blame for Mexican weakness is placed on females.

This depiction of a woman's body as submissive and vulnerable is countered by Anzaldúa through the pre-Columbian serpent image of *Coatlicue*: "The Olmecs associated womanhood with the Serpent's mouth which was guarded by rows of dangerous teeth, a sort of *vagina dentata*" (56). This repositioning of the feminine body's role in history and the nation contradicts Paz's formation of women as weak and helpless. Paz establishes all feminine qualities (like open admissions of expressivity and emotionality) as failures and threatening to Mexican nationalism. It is not surprising, then, that Rodriguez follows Anzaldúa's lead and queerly defies these stereotypical expectations for the appropriate Mexican(-American) national subject and shows how Mexican men can be at once ambiguously active and passive.

Emma Pérez also notes how refashioning the image of La Malinche became a strategy for restoring women's bodies, femininity, and agency; this repositioning of La Malinche is also useful for debunking the myth of their cultural deviance. Discussing the presentation of the nation's maternal body through a figure like La Malinche, Pérez notes,

The last original fantasy, the castration fantasy, exemplifies the difference between the sexes. It elucidates how Indias/mestizas/Chicanas gain their agency. I maintain that women can claim their agency through Malinche. [...] Malinche is the “nation’s” nightmare, the betrayer, the sole reason for the loss of the nation it was. To reinscribe her as a feminist icon, as Chicana/Mexicana feminists have done, is to identify her as an agent of her own desires (103).

As previously noted, Rodriguez is connected to the image of La Malinche for various reasons such as inappropriate gender, sexual, racial, and national allegiances. I believe that if Chicana and Mexicana feminists can reposition the image of La Malinche, then it is only fitting to also consider the symbolic relationship created through Chicano and Mexican discourses as fertile ground on which to build a case for repositioning Rodriguez as a character and author as well as an agent of his own desires. Though such an effort is already underway through Randy A. Rodriguez’s book *Richard Rodriguez and the Aesthetics of Transgression*, it is still important to view Rodriguez and his texts as more than a gender and national deviant.

Not surprisingly, though, this connection between La Malinche and Rodriguez is handled differently by critics because the expectation for men is in opposition to that of women: men’s anatomy marks their dominance, vigor, and allegedly inherent impenetrability. The role of women that Paz describes—that is, their openness—is counter-posed to the impenetrability of men. The female figure as the incarnation of

anatomical passivity juxtaposed against the stoic, impassive, and closed-off nature of masculine national figures is another binary that influences Rodriguez. He, like Anzaldúa, attempts to free the national image of man and woman from a biased, one-dimensional, gender essentialist stereotype; Rodriguez's mission is to subvert social prescriptions that queer official versions of Paz's national/gender expectations. His willingness to express his emotions publicly confirms that a masculine subject can, in fact, have emotions and express them. Paz naturalizes gender difference; Anzaldúa problematizes it.

All of Paz's emphasis on the impermeability of the Mexican man and nation is his reaction to the fact that both are inherently penetrable. It is not just La Malinche and women who can be invaded physically or ideologically; men and the nation are not as impenetrable as Paz wishes them to be. Paz writes,

El mexicano puede doblarse, humillarse, agacharse, pero no rajarse, esto es, permitir que el mundo exterior penetre su intimidad. El "rajado" es de poco fiar, un traidor o un hombre de dudosa fidelidad, que cuenta los secretos y es incapaz de afrontar los peligros como se debe (30). [The Mexican can bend, can bow humbly, can even stoop, but he cannot back down, that is, he cannot allow the outside world to penetrate his privacy. The man who backs down is not to be trusted, is a traitor or a person of doubtful loyalty; he babbles secrets and is incapable of confronting a dangerous situation] (Kemp 29-30).

Public speaking, expressing emotion, backing down, and so forth are submissive states of being that these national subjects cannot afford to assume—particularly after the undeniable correlation made between their position as colonized, and therefore emasculated, subjects. This is why Rodriguez’s work, as I delineate in the first chapter, suggests admission as submission. To admit to emotional openness and vulnerabilities is, for Paz, to place oneself in a submissive, feminine, and impotent position that Mexican masculinity must avoid at all costs. Publicly admitting to one’s feelings is also for Paz a mark of treachery. Rodriguez betrays the gender and national expectations (set forth by Paz) as he publicly and queerly declares the authenticity of his ambiguous Mexican-American life. This is why I see Rodriguez’s works as a corrective to Paz’s formula of impenetrability. Although doing so may come at a price, the Mexican(-American) man should, in fact, open himself up and express his anxieties, fears, and concerns.

VII. Interpellating⁷ Colonial Production and Reproduction

Conquest produces and reproduces various ideological and social formations that a trope like penetration illuminates. I have already suggested how Paz, Anzaldúa, and Bhabha, influence my understanding of Rodriguez’s placement in American and Mexican cultures. I now turn to Althusser’s conceptualization of social formation to extrapolate an epistemology of penetration. Though he is not speaking specifically of colonialism, I find his work useful in investigating the interpellation of colonized subjectivities. Althusser

⁷ Interpellation is a way of folding the subject into a structure of signification. For Althusser, “ideology [...] transforms the individuals into subjects through *interpellation* or hailing” (174). “Hey you, there” becomes the iconic formative expression that interpellates the individual into a self-reflexive subject able to understand his or her identity both singularly and communally. Rodriguez as a character and author is interpellated into the dominant culture through his allegiance to American English and the demands of that culture. Recall that it was the nuns who constructed his public speaking American identity through their entrance into the domestic sphere, but it is Rodriguez who, in his autobiographies, writes into existence his own location in culture.

notes, “In order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce: 1. the productive forces, 2. the existing relations of production” (128). As Rodriguez and Paz suggest, colonization is no exception to this rule. Colonialism is a social formation founded on reproducing subjects and objects in the image of, and according to the norms of, the dominant, colonizing culture. It is easy to see how penetration as a trope can function inside discourses centered on production and reproduction.

Of particular interest is the way in which colonized identities are interpellated as disempowered, passive subjects. Their admission to the real is not just as Other, but as submissive also. Admission is extended through conquest as an act of submission—that is, by submitting to the dominant culture’s demands by force or of one’s own volition. Thus Althusser’s focus on production and reproduction is broadened when we consider interpellation in relation to colonialism. Because the dominant culture is able to (re)produce new subjects in allegedly perpetual states of submission, the reach of this social formation affects these new subjectivities in many ways. Rodriguez’s autobiographies present a written/spoken voice that negotiates the ways his identity is interpellated into mainstream American culture in the aftermath of conquest.

Rodriguez’s autobiographies, I believe, are a point of departure for us to analyze the ways a social formation like colonialism creates not only new subjects, but also new issues pertaining to hierarchicalization, racialization, sexualization, and deviance simultaneously. The way the colonial nations and its subjects are (re)produced are telling

of what it means to be interpellated into a submissive position yet nonetheless still be in a complicated relation to power. With this focus on the creation of new bodies, I believe that production and reproduction are foundational to the way colonization inaugurates various roles subjects assume in culture.

I have noted how the trope of penetration also inaugurates subjectivities during and after conquest. This connection between inauguration and Althusser's concept of interpellation gives form to an epistemology of penetration because (re)production calls into existence the negotiation of new subjectivities. For Althusser, interpellation is a very specific experience related to power—it complicates subjects' relation to power. So far I have been discussing issues of dominance and submission. Power, however, is not only domination. It is a form of communication that must be acknowledged.

Rodriguez's three autobiographical texts center on the processes in his life that interpellated his brown, colonized, queer American subject position in the dominant culture. The connections between Althusser's work and that of Rodriguez remain when we consider the ways in which the reproduction of bodies is (trans)formed vis-à-vis their relationship to power. For Rodriguez, it is during and after conquest that the browning of American subjects begins. The third chapter of this project, "(Im)Pure Identities: Browning as an American Project," focuses on Rodriguez's final autobiography, *Brown*. It centers directly on how colonial instances like miscegenation have initiated a new category of brown, colonized bodies as national subjects. Rodriguez's admissions here are telling of how colonized subjects are interpellated through the original events of colonial impact. Rodriguez narrates a subject who is always aware of the gaze of others

who can at any moment call out to him, “Hey you there.” His anxieties about what they see or assume because of his brown body is fundamental to his evolution as a character and author. Throughout his autobiographies, Rodriguez both responds to and rejects that interpellation.

In his first autobiography, *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez acknowledges that his assimilation into public American life occurs through an interpellation from an educational institution, whose members (the nuns) were subservient to the demands of dominant authority figures. I believe this interpellation through structures of the church and the educational system corresponds, without a doubt, to Althusser’s “ideological state apparatus.” Althusser calls this social formation the “educational ideological apparatus” and argues that this apparatus has assumed the dominant role previously played by the missionary church in nation-state formation (152). The ideological state apparatus is positioned now as the authoritative voice for creating the culture. Ironically, Rodriguez’s work itself has become the nexus offering a transition from the old regime to the new precisely because the nuns represented an educational system and the church’s authority (*Hunger of Memory* 20). Rodriguez writes, “I noted the incongruity—the clash of two worlds, the faces and voices of school intruding upon the familiar setting of the home. I overheard one voice gently wondering, ‘Do your children speak only Spanish at home, Mrs. Rodriguez?’” (19)? Rodriguez’s public subject position is interpellated then through the nuns’ entrance into the Rodriguez home that Saturday morning. The transformative effects on him and his family’s subject positions in the home and in the larger culture are forever altered. The changes occur, according to Rodriguez, because of the nuns’

intrusion into the home. The nuns question his parents' pedagogy regarding their children's acculturation, and in an instant, inaugurate new private and public subjectivities and relationships for the Rodriguez family. By hailing the Rodriguez family as potential English-speakers, the nuns begin an acculturation process that proves irreversible and that positions the family submissively in their new power relation.

Rodriguez, in *Hunger of Memory*, publicly confesses that it was because of that language demand that the Spanish intimacy his family had once shared was lost. His national subjectification (his location in culture) as an English-speaking intellectual burgeoned in direct response to his education. Penetration, then, is the exemplary colonial trope that forced its way into the Rodriguez house; it also had the power to bring into public existence its Spanish-speaking inhabitants. The house and its inhabitants are all assimilated and Americanized through the popular quotidian expression, "You're in America now. Speak English!" The daily interactions of the Rodriguez household were forever transformed through the nuns' missionary-like interpellation, which made speaking English compulsory. The implications of time and space that the Spanish *estar* offer to this colloquial expression "You're in America now. Speak English!" are undeniable. To be located (*estar*) in America suggests that the way to become an authentic or legitimate American is through language itself. *Ser americano*, "to be American," in the characteristic sense that Spanish offers, is less culturally surveyed and scrutinized when brown, queer, postcolonial subjects speak the dominant language. Subjects are interpellated into American culture through their abilities to engage in the standard language—as Rodriguez and his family's interpellation through the educational

ideological apparatus suggests. The public language, which brings with it a structured relationship to power and thought, then becomes the ambiguous penetrating and penetrated system produced and reproduced in interpersonal relations that educational and other sociopolitical institutions provide.

For both Rodriguez and Althusser, familiarity with the dominant language is necessary because it creates a form of social order and acceptance. The nuns interpellated Rodriguez and his family's public identities when they entered the privacy of his home. It is interesting to note how both Rodriguez and Althusser find the institutions that create the nation-state to be pertinent to cultural production and reproduction. Althusser asks, "What do children learn in school?" He then goes on to answer, "they learn 'know-how' [...] children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour. [...] ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (132). Althusser, referencing the performances and transformations that interpellation offers regarding language, adds that children in school learn the official, appropriate version of their culture's language—French in his case, American English in Rodriguez's case. Interpellation, then, functions on a social level in a manner similar to that of the trope of penetration because the result is the calling into being of new subjectivities. Rodriguez shows how his identity, and the identity of others, is initiated through forced and external intrusions that support and promote the ideals of the dominant group. For both Rodriguez and Althusser, if one is to become a legitimate and functioning part of a culture, ideological state apparatuses, such as the educational system, are employed to ensure a sense of sociolinguistic unity.

The private–public divide is exemplified in both Rodriguez’s and Althusser’s formulations of the dominant role of education in the public culture. Althusser mentions that the ideological state apparatus has a private domain feel to it (138-144), and Rodriguez’s admission in *Hunger of Memory*, of the nuns’ entrance into the home, exemplifies this construction. In the penetration event, modern American culture is formed always on at least two levels: the private and the public. The suggestion that the educational system interpellates a public identity in the private, domestic sphere clearly shows the ambiguous, pervasive function of ideological penetration. Althusser notes, “*All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (173). Rodriguez’s admissions of his assimilation are multivalent as they link his processes of identification, nationalization, and subjectification to the concept of penetration. Rodriguez’s autobiographies suggest that it is impossible to defend all spheres from external influence and coercion. Neither the private nor the public realms are off limits or impervious to invasions. Rodriguez and Althusser’s works are united in that both see transformations of the nation-state in cultural formation as crucial.

VIII. Conclusion: Toward a Reevaluation of Rodriguez and His Texts

In this introductory chapter I identified Rodriguez’s autobiographies as major contributions to rethinking, extending, and queering narratives of postcolonial discourse and the boundaries of Latino Studies in the United States. Building on Paz’s “penetration paradigm” and expanding the implicitly queer reading of *la chingada* and *el rajado* metaphors defined in his *Laberinto de la soledad*, as well as Bhabha’s notions of

ambivalence, colonial discourse, and colonial stereotypes, I have articulated how the concept of ambiguity and the trope of penetration enable Rodriguez's negotiation of his historical conditions in American culture as a postcolonial subject. Because history is narrated from the dominant perspective, marginalized versions of history like Rodriguez's are troublesome because they unmask the historical biases that are often times widely accepted as fact. Rodriguez's autobiographies highlight the struggles of a colonized subject's identity that is ambiguously positioned as at once part of a typical American immigrant experience of otherness and displacement. However his struggles also show how this same colonized subject is also always outside the definition of what it means to be "authentically American." It is precisely because of the ambivalence this relationship produces that I argue for a critical return to and reconsideration of Rodriguez's texts.

In chapter one, "Assimilation and Language: Rodriguez as an Inappropriate Subject," I look at Rodriguez's complicated relationship to assimilation and language. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* is the first autobiography that Rodriguez wrote. It has come to define his career and mark him in ways that I believe do not reflect his overall literary contributions. The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways Rodriguez's open admission of his penetrated/colonized American subjectivity is threatening because he appears not only to welcome ideological penetrations from the mainstream but also to seek them out. This desire is then queer because he yearns to be penetrated. The threat comes from his desire to assimilate as well as from his public admission of this want. Rodriguez narrates his loss of the private Mexican language, and

consequently his Mexican identity, as necessary to approximate a position of authenticity as an American.

As Rodriguez's assimilation suggests a subordinate positioning in culture, then chapter two, "Agency and Empowerment through Culturally Passive Posturings," examines how Rodriguez's agency and ambivalence queer the notion of effeminacy, passivity and subjugation. In *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, Rodriguez finds himself in Mexico on an assignment for the BBC to introduce the United Kingdom to Mexico. Acculturation and assimilation again are important for Rodriguez; what is new in his second autobiography, however, is how he positions his colonized subjectivity as integral to opening up alternative spaces for oppressed subjects to demonstrate agency—reactionary or otherwise. Absorption, consumption, and rejection become strategies that Rodriguez employs as he negotiates his ambiguous location in culture—as Mexican-American, as colonized and colonizer, as penetrated and penetrating.

If Rodriguez still remains conflicted about the public admission of his sexuality in *Days of Obligation*, chapter three "(Im)Pure Identities: Browning as an American Project," examines how *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* returns him to the themes of race, ethnicity, and sexuality from a nuanced queer perspective. He offers brown as a term littered with impurities and contradictions that reflect the makeup of American culture. Therefore to be brown is to be already penetrated because it reflects ideological and physical conflicts that have occurred throughout American history. Rodriguez believes that what motivates American culture is a pretense of purity in which denying all

the brown (queer or colored) parts of one's historical condition is crucial. Penetration functions through the trope of browning, which Rodriguez delineates in his final autobiography. Because brown is an amalgamation of various and oftentimes contradictory pieces that create American society, I, like Rodriguez, read it as representing an ambiguously penetrated yet penetrating location in culture. Instead of privileging one side of history, to be brown(ed) is about accepting the intermingling of the disparate histories, geographies, and cultures that have created America.

The final chapter of this project, "Rodriguez's Autobiographies Create Alternative Spaces," does something different from the previous chapters. On a structural level, it places side by side all three of Rodriguez's autobiographies. I examine them as a whole to identify the performative and postcolonial impulses that unite his work. Language, acculturation, authenticity, and Americanization all form part of Rodriguez's project throughout his texts. In this chapter, I am interested in how his penetrated, postcolonial subjectivity performs and negotiates its identity in the aftermath of the colonial encounter. I suggest that, for Rodriguez, language is a penetrating, yet also penetrated, cultural system and this is a motif of much of his work. The performative impulses that create colonial and postcolonial discourses are unmasked when one views Rodriguez's three autobiographies together.

I anticipate that readers may ask, "Why Richard Rodriguez again?" Every time I have presented this work, some variation of this question arises. Many are of the opinion that Rodriguez and his autobiographies have been discussed enough, perhaps too much; I, obviously, do not hold to such a notion. I would ask, instead, "Why not approach Richard

Rodriguez in nuanced ways?” After the debates about his position as a poster-boy for the right wing at a time when academic disciplines like Ethnic Studies or Cultural Studies were being institutionalized, his ambiguous admissions with regard to his sexual and culture identities caused him to fall—or rather be pushed—off the academic radar. Much of the published scholarship on Rodriguez as author-protagonist sustains stereotypical colonial discourses that try to fix him in place. However, he has been writing over the span of almost three decades, and it is clear that disregarding all his works post-*Hunger of Memory* and statically positioning him as always a sexual/national/racial traitor is a highly problematic and incomplete portrayal of Rodriguez as a character and as an author. Because his work in *Hunger of Memory* has stimulated such a strong reaction from students and readers, it also seems necessary to rethink and reapproach his less acclaimed works to uncover what they offer.

A search for scholarship pertaining to Rodriguez’s literary texts reveals a significant number of articles about *Hunger of Memory* and its political implications. Some articles take Rodriguez’s Mexicanness (or lack thereof) to task; others deem him a frightened, closeted homosexual; still others compare him to La Malinche because of his treacherous ways. His gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality—not his literary works—are all called into question in those articles. Though the role of the author accounts for a productive debate—as demonstrated in Foucault’s “What is an Author,” Barthes’s “Death of an Author,” and, more recently, in Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif”—to attack Rodriguez the author without discussing his literary texts specifically does not make sense. The how and why for this omission is quite intriguing. Rodriguez is a figure

that has come to represent neo-conservatism to others. Rodriguez has clearly expressed his desire to be part of the hegemony—whether literary or racial.

This desire, which is the major social and racial formation that has guided him and his works, leaves many critics with negative opinions of Rodriguez because he lacks an expected sense of pride regarding his ethnicity, historical nationality, and sexuality, especially in *Hunger of Memory*. It seems as if the in-group members—the queers and the Latinos—are most infuriated with him precisely because of his alleged rejection of them. I cannot understand their vehement rejection of Rodriguez except to correlate it with their view of him as a traitor to his race/ethnicity/sexuality. Many critics stopped reading him after *Hunger of Memory*. He is aware of his critics and, almost as if responding directly to them, he writes in *Brown*, his final autobiography, “By telling you these things, I do not betray ‘my people.’ I think of the nation entire—all Americans—as my people. Though I call myself Hispanic, I see myself within the history of African Americans and Irish Catholics and American Jews and the Chinese of California” (128). Over the years, Rodriguez has developed a sense of himself as protagonist, author, and intellectual representing America. Though he has blood ties with one group, and sexual affiliations with another, he identifies himself with the immigrant’s struggle to become an authentic part of American culture as a means to succeed and thrive.

I offer a re-evaluation of Rodriguez’s autobiographies and also of Rodriguez. My goal is to discover the subtleties in his texts, such as my reading of an epistemology of penetration as a subtext that influences him, that will disrupt the simple disregard of Rodriguez’s autobiographies as only tangentially related to current academic debates in

Latino and queer studies. Returning to Rodriguez is necessary at this historical juncture because scholars are still trying to unpack the controversy's internal coherence and contradiction. I investigate all three of his published autobiographies with the certainty that this mission of discovery will uncover crucial elements of American culture that are shared experiences of many immigrant identities that are positioned as Other.

Chapter 1

Assimilation and Language: Rodriguez as an Inappropriate Subject

Is that why they teach us English in school, so we can speak like them? [...] Well, I'm not going to learn English so I don't become American.

—Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*

I. Rodriguez as a Threatening Ambiguous Public English Speaker

The opening lines of *Hunger for Memory* immediately position Rodriguez as embarking on a journey filled with his memories of a life transformed by language and education. The subtitle alone, “The Education of Richard Rodriguez,” already suggests that learning will play an essential role in the character development Rodriguez elaborates.⁸ He writes, “I remember to start with that day in Sacramento [...] when I first entered a classroom, able to understand some fifty stray English words” (9). As Rodriguez is exposed to more of the dominant culture his language abilities evolve. It is his education that forces this change. The mission of indoctrination is implied in Rodriguez’s focus on his entrance into the public school system. It is there in the classroom with English language contact that Rodriguez’s public identity is inaugurated. Because he does not speak their language, he is different. He remembers feeling helpless when young. I argue the reason that Rodriguez remembers this moment so vividly is because the experience of otherness and difference that he felt troubled him deeply. Though now clearly in command of the

⁸ This subtitle also alludes to the very famous autobiographical work “The Mis-Education of the Negro” by Carter G. Woodson. However where they differ is that Woodson critiques the educational system for mis-educating people of color while Rodriguez sees his education as a viable means to his success in public American life.

English language, Rodriguez narrates his Americanization in all three autobiographies as a complicated process that transformed him from a non-speaker to a controversial author.

In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez uses his ambiguous subject positions to counteract the notion of the passive, colonized national subject as powerless and weak. He admits that, having had American English forced on him and having practiced it for so long he inevitably began to ‘own’ it. As I suggested in the introductory chapter, many critics judge Rodriguez’s desire to assimilate as a weakness or a betrayal. By embracing the colonizers’ push for domination, Rodriguez places himself in a symbolically passive role. He becomes the recipient of the dominant culture through his Americanization. Randy A. Rodriguez points out with dissatisfaction that for many critics Rodriguez “is a *joto* or *puto*, a passive homosexual—a non-man in Mexican/Chicano/a—defined [in] cultural terms” (408). Not only is Richard viewed as a non-man, much like La Malinche,⁹ he is also seen as a traitor because of the ease with which he welcomes internal colonization in America. Randy A. Rodriguez continues, pointing out how critics emasculate Rodriguez by comparing him with an iconic female figure of betrayal: “Like La Malinche, the traitor of the Mexican people [...] Rodriguez is *el chingado* (the fucked or violated one) because he consorts with the Anglo-American colonizer” (409). The subtext I find provocative in that piece lies in the way La Malinche and Richard Rodriguez are seen to have been penetrated ideologically by the colonizers because of their willingness and readiness to assimilate. Most interesting to me is that this eagerness

⁹ For Paz and others, La Malinche is the iconic female national traitor of Mexico. Rodriguez’s association with her is not only a reference to his queer sexuality but also a reference to the ways his assimilation is marked as a cultural betrayal. For more information on La Malinche as a national traitor see works by Jacques Lafaye, Sandra Cypess, Margo Glantz, and Norma Alarcón .

to comply with the demands of the dominant culture marks both Richard and La Malinche as the receptive, disempowered objects of conquest. Neither is positioned as actively negotiating with the harsh realities of the colonial/cultural pressures. (Recall that La Malinche was a slave told what to do at first and Rodriguez was a young boy following the orders of his Catholic school teachers.) Unmasking the processes that allow for such a connection between Richard to the feminine treacherous figure of La Malinche is at the root of this investigation. Although Richard Rodriguez himself does not make that connection directly critics identify him with her because of their shared public conceptualization as culturally deviant and treacherous.

Noteworthy also is that La Malinche's inherent femininity is attributed to her gender and Rodriguez's alleged femininity is accounted for by the role he plays in the event of colonial penetration. Richard's acknowledgment of foreign influence (and perhaps his sexuality also) allows critics to conflate his image with that of La Malinche; both are seen as inappropriate representatives and traitors to their nation because of their deviance. Though she is not necessarily forgiven her major cultural offenses, La Malinche's gender becomes the justification for her failures. Paz asserts, "Women are inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals" (30). Rodriguez's submission, the open acknowledgment of his vulnerabilities, is not easily justified because it is supposed that his superiority and dominance should also reside in his gender. Thus the written words, which express his anxieties and fears, reveal the penetrability that Paz asserts as being dangerous to the performance of authentic

Mexican masculinity. It is not surprising, then, that many critics would connect Rodriguez with a symbolically feminine Mexican image. Randy A. Rodriguez adds that Rodriguez's literary submissions are culturally read as womanlike and feminine as a result of Richard Rodriguez's being labeled a sissy or queer because his actions go against normative cultural expectations. I want to extend this argument to show how it is through the prescribed cultural understanding of authentic manhood set forth by Paz that Richard Rodriguez fails to conform to the image of the impervious national figure. It is his deviance as a form of agency that enabled him to be a speaker; reevaluating Rodriguez's *oeuvre* under the assumption that submission is necessary for admission into dominant culture when you are the Other, opens up various queer and feminist close readings of Americanization.

If one focuses on Rodriguez's interpretations of his life rather than on what critics expect of him, it becomes apparent that for him English and America are his cultural roots also. He was born and lives in the United States and attended a school where English was the official language. In the home, however Spanish was originally the language of family intimacy. Thus the public English and the private Spanish combine dialectically to create Richard the author-protagonist's lived experiences. Critics see him as abandoning his authentic roots and exchanging them for a middle-class, English-speaking, American lifestyle. This is undeniably one interpretation of his acculturation. However, it is one-dimensional and entirely reductive to understand his desire to become part of the larger public culture as a disavowal of his Chicano and Mexican past. To deny speaking English would equally be a negation of the other parts of his identity as an

American. Being American is both legally and culturally defined through the ability to speak English. Following this logic then Rodriguez would be either totally ignored (because he would be speaking/writing in Spanish) or criticized for being antinationalist. (Recall the adage at the end of the introduction of *Hunger of Memory*: You're in America, speak English now.) Regardless of how Rodriguez's autobiographies are discussed, a more optimistic view of his insights and contributions to Latino and queer literature can be found when one applies an epistemology of penetration to them. Problems arise from Rodriguez's ambiguous subject position as a hyphenated Mexican-American. He is forced to confront expectations from these two communities regarding his authenticity and winds up defying both as he narrates his inappropriate subject position in America.

II. Rodriguez's Uses of Language, Culture, and Manhood

What Rodriguez accomplishes by openly expressing his fears and dreams can be seen if the "impervious man" is not assumed to be the only representation of authentic manhood. He shows a part of masculine socialization that requires men, depending on the context, to be passive and symbolically penetrated if the larger goal provides national subjects benefits. Rodriguez is part of American history because he discusses the plight of the postcolonial brown/queer/male subject. His strategy of resistance, the result of a foreign-language system's being imposed on his identity, is to fight back and write from the position of a penetrated subject, using the language of the Master as his own. In an interview conducted by Hector Torres (2003), which was published at about the same time that Rodriguez's autobiography *Brown* (2002) was being widely released, Rodriguez notes, "You learn the language of public life. You learn your oppressor's language, you

learn to spit it back at him” (170). It is important to note in this instance that Rodriguez is reflecting on his life and works until that point. The title of Torres’s article, “I do not think I exist,” is a direct quote from Rodriguez during the interview. Rodriguez questions his existence not only existentially but also in an academic sense. How people are and why people are not still reading Rodriguez is the quandary that motivates this project; I agree that in many ways Rodriguez has fallen off the academic radar. The number of articles, books, and chapters dedicated to *Hunger of Memory* is overwhelmingly high compared to the minimal amount of work published relating to *Days of Obligation*—and even far more miniscule for *Brown*.¹⁰ Thus, his not existing speaks to the fact that his texts, after the mixed reception of *Hunger of Memory*, have been largely forgotten, overlooked, and negated. In the above quote from the interview, Rodriguez is positioning himself as an oppressed subject nevertheless imbued with agency. For Rodriguez assimilation and acculturation are means to an end, an aim that this quote crystallizes by showing how his submission to English language/dominance was fueled by his desire not just to reposition himself but to retaliate.

We are thus able to return to the opening lines of *Hunger of Memory*: “I have taken Caliban’s advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle” (1). On self-reflection Rodriguez realizes that, in fact, he may not exist—any more. With the mixed, yet widespread reception of *Hunger of Memory*, it was clear then and now that Richard as a character and as an author did have some “run of the isle.” All these years later, however, it appears that for Rodriguez it is still uncertain if stealing their books and

¹⁰ At the time of this research I was only predominantly able to find book reviews.

language was as effective as expected. In the interview with Torres, Rodriguez claims that in all his works, language has been central to his project. That language is the link in all his autobiographies means that the central theme that consistently reappears is the profound role languages (both English and Spanish) have had on his life and works. Language for Rodriguez is the vehicle through which his public identity is formed. The act of writing his autobiography in English, with few words also in Spanish, substantiates his connections with both languages. However it is clear that English is the dominant language in his life because it is the main language he uses in all his texts and because it is the main language used in the United States.

In the opening of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez positions his protagonist alongside the infamous Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Such an alignment demonstrates the deviance inherent in seeking admission to a foreign/mystical realm and also suggests that the infiltration of power and public culture is strategically accessible through the language of authority. Following Rodriguez's logic, the act of stealing their books makes sense only if he is able to read, speak, and manipulate a language he describes as foreign to himself. The ability to produce and reproduce "their" language resonates with Rodriguez's defiant act of "spitting" the language of the colonizers right back at them (Torres 170). The symbolism of such an act of writing/speaking/spitting back at the dominant group is of particular interest here because it reinforces the idea that making submissions does not leave subjects forever disempowered. It also suggests the ambiguous positions postcolonial subjects assume as they are manipulated by and as they manipulate the colonizers' tongue.

The act of spitting is a forceful one and it places Rodriguez in an empowered position from which he now is able to retaliate consciously by manipulating the dominant culture's language. He is able to fight back against the attacks of others in a language that was originally not his, a language and culture to which he sought admission through submission. Spitting can be seen not only as a way of contaminating the receiving subject,¹¹ but also as an offensive action against an individual or a group. Rodriguez uses this metaphorical act of spitting while reflecting on *Hunger of Memory*, *Days of Obligation*, and what leads up to the writing of *Brown*. He is able to symbolically make that dominant group submit to his tongue now. This is only possible, on the assumption that he and his works "still exist." Again the title of Torres's interview with Rodriguez clarifies part of my argument because if no one is reading Rodriguez, then it is a metaphorical and literary death for him. Yet if people are reading his work he can continue to assume the role of an English speaker and writer who can alter, contaminate, and offend instead of being a passive, weak, acted-upon object. This self-fashioning as an empowered agent who is ambivalently positioned as passive and active is at root in my interpretation of his autobiographies as offering a subtext like the epistemology of penetration. The act of writing in the dominant language is labeled an act of spitting by Rodriguez himself and thus should be understood as a penetrative, psychosexual act of agency. I believe it is necessary to revisit *Hunger of Memory* from this critical perspective. That is the critical lens through which I frame the work of this project.

¹¹ The chapter on *Brown* discusses much more directly the concept of purity and contamination.

The two opposing views of Rodriguez's subjectivity—as empowered and disempowered through submission—substantiate the usefulness of multivalence in the analysis of the colonial trope of penetration. I argue through an epistemology of penetration that Rodriguez's intention is to learn the language of the oppressors and then to manipulate that language in order to disrupt and undermine what it means to be a member of the English-speaking elite in the United States. I believe that Rodriguez's autobiographies are an admission as submission because of the ways the anxieties surrounding his texts address overarching fears that plague the masculine socio-symbolic realm dealing with penetration. The visceral and ideological fears stemming from the assumption of an open, passive positioning in human interactions are ambiguously presented throughout his works. Rodriguez, though influenced by Paz and Anzaldúa, deviates from their suggestions about crossing lines. For Rodriguez, entering public culture, coupled with letting it enter him, prove to be the catalysts that transform and empower his postcolonial subjectivity. Instead of being disempowered, Rodriguez can now criticize the semiotic and symbolic language system that was originally external and forced upon him. Nidesh Lawtoo points out that “Rodriguez cannot be read as a passive victim only, insofar as he attempts, through writing, to open up an alternative space in-between the two dichotomic alternatives he initially posits” (237). Rodriguez establishes the public, English dominant realm and the private realms as the two spheres that contribute to his national subjectification. His assimilation and colonization allows some to read him as passive, yet as Lawtoo suggests, this is a limited view of Rodriguez and his text. He tells of a subject that, through submission, is enabled to assume multiple,

contradictory roles throughout his life. This ambiguity creates a discursive in-between space that highlights how colonized subjects negotiate and reconcile with their public and private identities. Rodriguez, by submitting to the language of the dominant culture, enables himself to assume a (re)positioning of authority where he spits back his memories publically in his autobiographies.

The image of Rodriguez as submissive is extended when one considers what critic Randy A. Rodriguez has to say about how Richard Rodriguez as an author—and, I add, character—has been received. The notion of impenetrability inherited through a paternal figure like Paz is, I believe, at the root of Randy A. Rodriguez's analysis of Richard Rodriguez. Randy A. Rodriguez notes that for Chicano critics, "Implicitly, metaphorically, [Richard] Rodriguez becomes the sissy—soft and penetrable—pathological in his mental colonization and self-deception, ripe for continued penetration by the Anglo colonizer, and subsequently, the selfish agent publicly performing (his) lies and deception" (396). The role of the sissy is inextricably linked to penetration because it is this figure that is assumed to be passive and unmanly. Randy A. Rodriguez makes a provocative point here in highlighting how Richard Rodriguez's identity is discursively constructed through scholarship. The character and writer behind Richard is seen as representing a flawed manhood because of the submissions his texts admit. There is a distancing process going on in which Chicano critics see Richard Rodriguez's admission as lies that he creates about his—not their—processes of postcolonial subjectification and nationalization. That the rhetoric used to engage Richard Rodriguez centers on his submissions to dominant culture—that is to say, as soft and penetrable—persists because

of his compliance with assimilation into American public life. His desire to assimilate, his acceptance of the English language as the dominant language in his life, is what marks him as a candidate for constant, continued penetration by the Anglo colonizer.

Instead of rejecting and blocking their advances, as Paz's work on Mexican manhood stresses, Rodriguez openly admits to embracing his colonized position. This is a defiant act for Paz and his followers because it undermines the prescribed national masculine expectations and mimics what La Malinche did regarding national betrayal. The admissions as submission that Rodriguez makes originated in *Hunger of Memory* and persist in all his autobiographies, with the result that he is positioned as a self-reflexive subject who has folded into the mainstream culture. He writes on the first page of *Hunger of Memory*, "Once upon a time, I was a 'socially disadvantaged' child. An enchantedly happy child. Mine was a childhood of intense family closeness. And extreme public alienation. Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated" (1).

What Rodriguez does not yet tell his readers is that the intimacy of his home and his alienation from the public culture drastically changed after that Saturday-morning visit by the nuns. He does, however, acknowledge that *Hunger of Memory* is a reflection on the memories and experiences in American culture that have brought him to this point in his life. The threat surrounding Rodriguez's admissions as submissions becomes apparent if we are to accept what he implies about ambiguity and postcolonial subjectification with regard to other males' potential penetrability. Positioning Rodriguez as a soft, penetrable queer and as in relation to La Malinche, facilitates his discursive

rejection while also marking him as an inappropriate and deviant voice of postcolonial identities. The iterations, the transmission of his feelings in the form of written and spoken words, are threatening to the socio-symbolic realm of masculinity; they are read as the means through which one can identify Rodriguez's betrayal of authentic manhood.

III. Home as a Conflicted Space of Public and Private Identities

The acts of opening and being opened resonate as significant experiences in the epistemology of penetration. The fears around an individual's public displays of emotions also apply to aversions to openness in the private realm. Rodriguez (1982) narrates an important scene in his childhood that disrupted his private home life and public identity. He discusses the penetration of his private home as a submission to the national thrust toward English -language acculturation. He highlights the fears that he and his family had regarding the opening and closing of the house's door because of the uncertainty and threats that might lie just outside (15). I suggest that Paz's (1961) constant anxieties around openings are not limited to people; they apply to symbols, like the home, that are associated with normative national subjectification. Assigning the home as the point of origin for both national and masculine processes of subjectification highlights the ambiguous public yet private position that the home itself holds. The home is the default site of subjectification and objectification for the nation precisely because that is where the hegemonic heteronormative family structures that dominate broader culture commingle. Hence, to speak about the home or the homeland where the masculine national figure resides is to engage simultaneously the socio-symbolic realms of nationality and masculinity.

Attempts to guard, preserve, or protect the integrity and honor of the home and the homeland echo the master narrative of impenetrability that ideologically plagues appropriate forms of masculinity. One can ask if the household led by a Mexican-American man also needs to be protected and guarded to the same extent as his body, the home being a microcosm of the nation in many instances. Also, if the home is penetrated, what does that say about the house, the male leadership, and the overall penetrability of the family? Viewing the home as an ambiguous symbolic space for masculine, feminine, and national preparation/penetration further explicates major components in the epistemology of penetration because the home is where the public and the private meet, coexist, converge, and play out.

At this point I want to turn to postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's discussion of the location of culture, and where exactly his conceptualization of culture fits into the epistemology of penetration that I delineate through Rodriguez's autobiographies. Bhabha suggests that societal rules produce ambiguities for subjects depending on the positions they hold in the culture. Cultural regulations then become something that at once provides a stable location for its members and that also has the ability to locate individuals (natives or foreigners) as prisoners/exiles inside or outside its borders. Culture is, then, much like the symbolic realm of masculinity, in that they both share ambiguity as a major factor in their social formation and maintenance of boundaries. National subjects perform and negotiate conflicted roles, at some points empowered and at other points disempowered, because of the various cultural contexts in which they intermingle. For Rodriguez, the classroom became a space where he confronted the dominant culture

directly through the institution of education, while his home remained a safe place for private cultural expression. However, much as Rodriguez's knowledge of only fifty English words changed, so too did the private intimacies of the Spanish home.

The home—a Victorian structure, a hut, a Madison Avenue condo—is implicated as a specific site of tribal/cultural ritualization in both Bhabha and Rodriguez's texts. Thus a subsequent similarity between symbolic masculinity and the culture's symbolic ambiguity is that the home is a specific site where cultural codes of conduct coalesce. Discussing the significance of colonial discourse in *The Location of Culture* Bhabha refers "to a form of governmentality that in marking out a 'subject nation,' appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity" (70). The home is one of the foundational spheres of cultural activity. It is in the home that normative cultural behaviors are expected and reinforced. The home acts as a microcosm of larger national processes of subjectification. The "subject nation" and "subject peoples" that Bhabha discusses both produce various forms of knowledge in various locations. The home is an exemplary location to investigate because it generally produces knowledge that "subject peoples" garner to acclimate into the larger "subject nation." Issues of privacy and public life ultimately reside in the home because of the fluidity of its structure. It protects subjects from external forces through locks and doors, while simultaneously allowing individuals to enter and exit vis-à-vis doors, televisions, internet access, windows, and so forth. This ambiguity of the home—at once a private space and yet a potentially public sphere—is something that fascinates Rodriguez as he remembers how the public English language entered and forever transformed the privacy of his home when he was a boy.

The private Spanish-language home Rodriguez recalls undergoes a transformation because of the entrance of public English. English was used outside the home when Richard was interacting with people who were not part of his immediate family unit. When he returned home from public interactions, its Spanish-only atmosphere became a partial safe haven for Rodriguez as a boy. “Just opening or closing the screen door behind me was an important experience,” he writes (*Hunger of Memory* 15). The opening of the door disrupted the serenity of his home because of the potential threat from outside. On the other side of the door is where the language and culture of *los gringos*, which the Rodriguez family had to navigate in public, resides. The door also suggests a back-and-forth relationship of admission and departure between the public and the private spaces—between home and school, for example. Late in *Hunger of Memory*, discussing Richard Hoggart’s understanding of the scholarship boy in *The Uses of Literacy*, Rodriguez notes:

What he grasps very well is that the scholarship boy must move between environments, his home and the classroom, which are at cultural extremes, opposed [private versus public]. With his family, the boy has the intense pleasure of intimacy, the family’s consolation in feeling public alienation. Lavish emotions texture home life. *Then*, at school, the instruction bids him to trust lonely reason primarily. [...] *Then*, at school, there is mental calm. Teachers emphasize the value of a reflectiveness that opens a space between thinking and immediate action (48-49).

The intimacy of the private home is ruptured and replaced by a stronger interest in public life. In Hoggart's description, the scholarship boy must navigate between various spaces, public and private. The only difference that seems to appear between Rodriguez's and Hoggart's conceptualizations of the scholarship boy is that, for Hoggart, the educated child feels an intense intimacy with his family in their shared alienation. Rodriguez may have at one time felt the same way. After the nuns enter the domestic sphere, however, that feeling changed; Rodriguez thereafter felt alienated from the intimacy of his home and its original Spanish language.

Prior to this "move between environments," the private home functioned as a sanctuary of Spanish sounds and words that the Rodriguez family shared. In *Hunger for Memory* he recalls the calming effect of just hearing the Spanish sounds from inside his house had on him after he had been anxiously navigating the public English culture (16). Now, however, the threat of invasion, symbolized through the entrance of the home, private and public space and family intimacy are drastically altered. Recall that Rodriguez refers to the scene in which the nuns visit the Rodriguez home. It is the door that is the ambiguous barrier that keeps external threats out but can also welcome them in. A door's function is either to prohibit or to permitting entrances and exits. A screen door is structurally ambiguous with regards to penetration. While it keeps people out, it can still allow for semi-entrances. Eye gazes, breezes, and sounds, for example, can easily pass through screen doors or open windows. Rodriguez recalls that during the summer he could hear the comforting Spanish sounds from inside the house while he was

on the porch because the screen door was open. It then becomes iconic of the house itself as public and private life converges through the screen door.

Considering the epistemology of penetration as something that passes through an opening, and that trespassing has the ability to form and transform, I argue that Rodriguez finds the act of opening the door of the home significant because, through it, movement between public and private life takes place. This opening and closing of the door provokes an emotional response from Rodriguez because of the fears and desires involved in such an act of opening—a vulnerable, disempowering act, according to Paz. Literally leaving the door open makes the home vulnerable to penetration by outside sounds, languages, ideas, and customs. Rodriguez does not, at first, want his house penetrated by such things and stresses the importance of locking the door behind him. As long as the home remains free of any external forces, it is a safe space. Closing the door would block out the sounds and any potential intrusion. “Once more inside the house,” Rodriguez writes in *Hunger of Memory*, “I would resume (assume) my place in the family. The sounds would dim, grow harder to hear” (16). Though threats that could disrupt the sanctity of the home still exist, the door symbolically functions in such a way as to safeguard Rodriguez and his family from what lies beyond the private realm. For Rodriguez, the safety and intimacy of his household is also always something that can be ruptured, but the door itself is depicted as the family and the house’s major line of defense against such intrusions.

Although Rodriguez felt to some degree safe inside the house with the door closed, the vulnerability and potential openness of the house is ever-present. On a

symbolic level, the penetrability of the house symbolizes the threat that external, dominant forces can enter any space it wants. Paz points out that, consequent to colonial history, there is always an amorphous threat that requires a closed-off, guarded position (30). The screen door acts as the threshold through which threats “afloat in the air” can potentially pass and disrupt family harmony. Discussing the tenuous barrier the door itself represents against the outside world, Rodriguez recounts that inside the house the noise from the outside world faded yet he “required no more than the blurt of the doorbell to alert [him] to listen to sounds all over again” (*Hunger of Memory* 16). The ringing of the doorbell, the mere suggestion that something foreign can and inevitably will enter the home, foreshadows the transformation of the Rodriguez home by church officials. As the private home also begins to represent pieces of the public culture, the door produces feelings of both anxiety and security. It is the door that ambiguously acts as a tangible border between the private and public domain.

The penetration of the private realm by external forces, sounds, and persons has a paralyzing effect on the family members. Something as trivial as visitors ringing the doorbell can easily trigger feelings of threat from the outside world among those inside the house. Rodriguez suggests that not only he but also all other family members (and even the house itself) “would instantly turn still” as his mother proceeded to the door (*Hunger of Memory* 16). Rodriguez and his family clearly are frightened of and preoccupied by the passing through the front door by an outside, unwanted force. Rodriguez continues, “I’d wait to hear her voice return to soft-sounding Spanish, which assured me, as surely as did the clicking tongue of the lock on the door, the stranger was

gone” (16). This time, his family and the house remained safe because the sound intruder left the house unscathed.

Rodriguez depicts the door as a mouth, and the tongue’s “clicking” sound substantiates this connection. Such a figuration is additional evidence of the penetrability of the house vis-à-vis the screen door and enables a process of personification of the house. Rodriguez emphasizes the role of the tongue in spitting back at the dominant culture. Again, the image of the mouth as an ambiguous, penetrating, yet penetrable orifice arises. This time, however, it is through the representation of the clicking tongue of the screen door that resistance and a defense can be waged. The house, here specifically referencing the door, plays an ambiguous role in the formation of private and public American identities for Rodriguez and his family.

Though the house and family are positioned as colonial objects through the nuns’ domestic intervention, Bhabha comments that, to displace the stereotypical images of the colonizing and colonized subjects, one must engage with its “*effectivity*; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs colonial identification subjects (both colonizer and colonized)” (67). Bhabha suggests that colonized subjects strategically negotiate their ambiguous positions in culture. Rodriguez’s focus on how his public identity is inaugurated through the educational system exemplifies his own negotiations with the ambiguous repertoire of subject positions available to him. For both Bhabha and Rodriguez the dominant view of colonized subjects as statically disempowered needs to be reevaluated. The focus should not be on these individuals as passive, colonized subjects but rather on how, in the

aftermath of such violations, they can traverse facile classifications. Rodriguez's public admissions highlight Bhabha's suggestion that colonized persons assume contradictory roles as they navigate their way through a larger culture.

Because the screen door links both the public and the private spheres, it is necessary to see how the concept of interpenetration further articulates Rodriguez's national and masculine processes of subjectification. His fears, coupled with his intrigue of what lies beyond the door, have profound effects on Rodriguez as a character and author. Lawtoo writes,

For Rodriguez, the process of opening the door, which puts the private and public spheres in contact, is simultaneous with the realization that these two worlds are incompatible (implicit in the door is neither simple 'disjunction' nor simple 'conjunction,' neither simple 'bridge' or 'barrier' [or membrane]). Moreover, the moving subject soon discovers that these two worlds are structured upon a severe asymmetry of power which makes the screen door a zone of uneasy and conflictual contact (226).

It is through the symbolism of the door that Rodriguez realizes that to enter either space requires a partial loss of the other. It is by interacting with the dominant culture and its demands for assimilation that Rodriguez draws the conclusion that to be successful publicly is to relinquish the private, individual identities that the home (and its Spanish intimacy) has come to represent. As we know, Rodriguez was a young boy and the decision to assimilate was not entirely his. The nuns, his parents' compliance with their

wishes, and his own desire to succeed publicly all frame his behavior in both the public and the private spheres.

IV. Rodriguez's Notion of Superimposition

The invasion of the home by the English language is the foundation on which the rest of Rodriguez's experiences evolve. At the time *Hunger of Memory* is written Rodriguez is against affirmative action and bilingual education. He believes strongly that, "[b]ilingual education was never simply a matter of pedagogy [...]" but rather was inundated with memories of historical cultural significance (*Bilingual Education* 457). During America's colonial times just as currently, a uniform language system was enforced as an appropriate means to unite the subjects under one nation, frequently by official representatives of the church or the emerging states. The scene with the nuns is a synthesis of both church and state enforcement. It is clear that evangelization was part of the colonial mission in the New World. For this reason I believe it is important to note Rodriguez's memory of the first English speaking dinner guest in his home—a priest from a local church community that at the time was not his family's church. Although this scene from *Hunger of Memory* appears some sixty pages after the nuns' visit, in the historical time line of his life, this is an older memory.

Rodriguez recalls that he was approximately four years old when this English-speaking dinner guest entered his home. He remembers all the efforts and energy spent on the part of his mother, making the clothes for her and the children and preparing for this visit. He does acknowledge that because he was so young he only retains pieces of this memory of language and cultural collision. I believe it is through the juxtaposition of

these two iconic scenes —the nuns’ and the clergyman’s visit—that an extrapolation of an epistemology of penetration burgeons from his autobiography. Rodriguez starts discussing his relationship with his faith:

I was *un católico* before I was a Catholic. That is, I acquired my earliest sense of the Church—and my membership in it—through my parent’s Mexican Catholicism. It was in Spanish that I first learned to pray. I recited family prayers—not from any book. And in those years when we felt alienated from *los gringos*, my family went across town every week to the wooden church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which was decorated with yellow Christmas tree lights all year long. [...] Very early, however, the *gringo* church in our neighborhood began to superimpose itself on our family life. The first English-speaking dinner guest at our house was a priest from Sacred Heart Church. I was about four years old (*Hunger of Memory* 86).

Rodriguez’s exact words regarding the *gringo* church’s relationship with his family are that it “superimposed itself” on the family and thus by extension affected the privacy of the family home. The home again becomes the site where public English culture and its hegemonic ideals collide with the private Spanish intimacy of the Rodriguez family. What is crucial in this scene is Rodriguez’s positioning his home and the family in passive submission to the foreign church. It is not even his family’s church but rather the neighborhood church taking an interest in or keeping a watchful eye on them as

community members. By superimposing this English-speaking church on the family, he himself implies that this is a memory of yet another forceful and invasive act.

Language is again central in the analysis of this scene not only because Rodriguez himself shifts between the use of English and Spanish in his exposition, but also because he is presenting his faith as based in the Mexican, not the American, religious tradition. His admittance to the church was through the Spanish language and sounds. Prayer, a formative act of devotion for Catholics, was conducted in Spanish because it was Rodriguez's language when communicating his faith and acquiring his church membership. Because of the language barrier, his family felt alienated from the local *gringo* church and its members. The Rodriguez family made the conscious decision to attend a church that, though some distance from his home, reflected their family's tradition. Rodriguez symbolizes this resonance not by saying he went to a Spanish-language church, but by describing it as decorated with yellow Christmas lights and containing Guadalupe in its name. The local *gringo* church, because of the language it employs, has become another symbolic colonizing force in his memories of assimilation.

Like many other colonized subjects in the past, Rodriguez remembers as formative to his public subjectification a once-foreign language and the customs and traditions connected to it. The scene with the priest is the second one in which language is brought into the home from the outside by a cultural figure of authority. Rodriguez's impetus for assimilation unquestionably is related to the message that the nuns and this priest sent to his family: success comes through assimilation, from speaking the dominant English language. Rodriguez states that the priest's "visit was too important an event for

[him] to forget” (*Hunger of Memory* 86). It is his earliest memory of the contentious relationship between public English and private Spanish. If he is to become part of the dominant culture, Rodriguez must submit to its demands by acquiring its language. This is clearly the cultural message that all the visitors to the Rodriguez home want to reinforce.

Nonetheless, because of the dominant role of the English language in the larger culture (and now in the privacy of his family’s home), Rodriguez finds himself growing more and more comfortable with speaking this once-foreign language. This ease, however, also produces anxieties and unrest in him because he is also aware that the intimacy his family once shared is rapidly disappearing and is unlikely ever to return. He becomes seduced by English and the privileges associated with the hegemony of the dominant culture; he inadvertently also is devaluing the Spanish community and language, which are marked as inferior components of American culture. He has taken sides—and the very traditional version of the American dream is the victor.

V. Rodriguez’s Racialized Expectations as a Superimposition

Placing those memorable scenes of the church officials’ entrance into the Rodriguez home side by side, helps illuminate their influence on other scenes in *Hunger of Memory* in which Rodriguez deals with adjusting to other expectations of his American public identity. Language symbolizes the first step for him to transition into mainstream society. One might think that, having acquired a command of the language, he would have accomplished the goal set out by authority figures like the priest and nuns. This assumption, however, does not take into account the issues of visibility and homogeneity.

For Rodriguez, it is not just a matter of speaking and sounding like the hegemony in America, but, inevitably, that looking like an authentic member of that society on a superficial level will facilitate his transition into “their” culture. Though language does play a pivotal role in Rodriguez’s life, all the fluidity of his speech cannot not erase the racial characteristics that mark him as submissive to dominant subjects.

An important scene that occurs outside of the house, while still closely related to concerns present inside the home is found in the chapter titled “Complexion.” This chapter opens with Richard justifying his complexion to the watchful eyes of those who try to understand and classify him according to his brown color. He writes,

Visiting the East Coast or the gray capitals of Europe during the long months of winter, I often meet people at deluxe hotels who comment on my complexion. [...] Have I been skiing? In the Swiss Alps? Have I just returned from a Caribbean vacation? No. I say no softly but in a firm voice that intends to explain: My complexion is dark. (My skin is brown. I do not redden in sunlight. Instead, my skin becomes progressively dark; the sun sings the flesh (*Hunger of Memory* 121).

Rodriguez’s staying at luxury hotels implies class superiority. The other guests are the people with whom Rodriguez seeks group unity and integration. It is not at a local bar or in another space that he worries about how his color is interpreted. Rodriguez suggests that, for the elite, his color is first and foremost a sign of leisure—others assume that he has been vacationing and thus been out in the sun relaxing. Though this immediate

interpretation seems to please Rodriguez because it creates a connection among himself, his body and this privileged group, his response is a factual one that highlights the differences between them: he is dark, he is brown.

Responding to racially biased questions, Rodriguez identifies his tone as soft yet firm, which implies a sense of shame. I, however, read his soft yet firm tone as a matter-of-fact response that confirms to these people that it is not actually leisure, although he might wish it were, but rather a mixture of genetics and colonial history that have colored his complexion. The shame in his tone is apparent also in the paragraph immediately following the one just presented, which outlines his mother's fears about his looking like a "*negrito*" after he was out in the summer sun too long—inevitably looking like "*los pobres* who work in the fields, *los braceros*" (21). The juxtaposition of the elite people thinking he was on vacation with his mother's understanding (more reflective of lower class cultural fears) of his color as a sign of his inferior position in the culture highlights how his ambiguities produce ambivalent feelings in him regarding his location in culture.

In the aforementioned quote, the sun's role in darkening Rodriguez's flesh is mentioned. Now, subsequently, with the reference to the *pobres/braceros* it is clear that his mother may have influenced his interpretation of his dark color as shameful. One must also consider the role of the sun in both quotes. Discussing his skin color, Rodriguez informs the readers that his complexion has complicated his life. He is frequently read or misread solely on the basis of his complexion. Yet for him, his racial ambiguities caused much more than just slurs. His complexion became a form of self-exploration and a way

to acknowledge his body not according to the gaze of others but to himself. Rodriguez writes:

Complexion. My first conscious experience of sexual excitement concerns my complexion. One summer weekend, when I was around seven years old, I was at a public swimming pool with the whole family [...] My mother, I noticed, was watching my father as he stood on a diving board. [...] I saw her radiant, bashful, astonishing smile. In that second I sensed that my mother and father had a relationship I knew nothing about (122-123).

However, the bashful and erotic gaze that his mother gives to his father is not reproduced when she sees Richard heading to join his father in the pool. The fact that his mother looks coquettishly at his father yet angrily surveys his body's exposure to the sun confirms for Rodriguez that his body, as a material and sexual body, is intimately related to the perception of its color as troublesome and deviant.

From the opening of the chapter, Rodriguez's mother advises him to not let the sun's rays penetrate his already too dark skin. She vehemently warns against the sensation, stimulation, and pleasure experienced by his body's exposure to the sun. As he gets ready to accompany his father in the pool, Rodriguez notes, "I caught my mother's eye. I heard her shout over to me. In Spanish she called through the crowd: 'Put a towel on over your shoulders.' In public she, she didn't want to say why. I knew" (133). He understands the significance behind her gesture. This is all he says. He knows the reason for covering up his body was related to his mother's awareness of racism and color

consciousness in both the United States and Mexico; he knew that there is shame in having a dark complexion. The first, remarkable part of this quote is Richard's privileging English to such an extent that even in the act of quoting his mother he uses English. He tells us through the text that she called out to him in Spanish, yet he quotes her in English. This act of translation highlights the dominant role English has come to assume in his life. It also suggests assumptions he has made of his audience—who most probably are not proficient or comfortable in the Spanish language, he thus suggests. This is an approach significantly different from that of his Chicana contemporary, Gloria Anzaldúa. To use Spanish would be to connect him with a group and a language he has come to undervalue. To privilege English, the language of the dominant culture, demonstrates how completely he has given himself over to its language and culture.

Rodriguez sees his mother's gaze as he prepares to join his father in the pool. The language she uses, Spanish, already implies something hidden and secretive for Richard because English has come to dominate their lives. She strategically uses Spanish to provide a sense of privacy while in public—she assumes that Spanish would not be understood in this public context by anyone other than him. Though her private or public conversations with Richard, she never explicitly mentions his darkening, he knows the reference has to do with her fears of his position in the culture because of his complexion.

Rodriguez relates how his mother would get angry and call him "negrito" when he had been in the summer sun so long that the surface of his skin darkened more (*Hunger of Memory* 119). She blames "los gringos" and reminds Richard how important looks and color are in America. She is not talking about the beauty of her child, but is

saying that his color makes him look different and therefore makes him be perceived negatively. His mother knows that, in America and many other places around the world, to be and to look different has pejorative connotations. To demand that Rodriguez cover up his skin is her way of protecting her son not just from the sun's rays but from lower class and racial associations that could hinder his progress towards authentic Americanization.

Rodriguez admits to knowing the implicit message his mother is sending because the use of Spanish in public already signifies something particular. They have rejected Spanish for so long in their interactions that to employ it is undeniably a strategy. She empowers her public-speaking position by imbuing it with secrecy. The intention here is to not open the conversation to others; she codes her speech with Richard in a way that limits the majority of people at the pool from playing a role in the scenario. The act of language coding stands out as significant for Rodriguez as it shows his mother's preoccupation with not only her son's complexion but also with an understanding of other peoples' perception of it. Richard also knows that his mother is worried about his darkening complexion because of her past concern and her private angry reprimand for allowing his body to be further darkened by the sun. Finally, he is always uncomfortably aware of his racial difference and otherness in American life. At points he comes to justify his dark complexion by connecting it to white, middle-class concepts of leisure (tanning) and travel—recall his admission of being asked if he has recently been recently skiing in the Swiss Alps or is just back from a Caribbean vacation (*Hunger of Memory* 119). However he or others account for his complexion, Rodriguez knows that his always

already brown skin signifies his otherness in American culture. Always being marked as Other is exactly what plagues Rodriguez while he is writing this autobiography. His skin marks him in ways that his education, intellect, and speaking abilities still cannot erase.

Much as the ability to speak English is deemed by the church officials and his parents necessary for future success, lighter skin coloring also has the potential to afford Rodriguez a more prosperous future. The socio-historical message that his mother conveys is that the more exposure to the sun a person of Mexican descent receives, the more exposed to cultural hardships that person faces. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's work supports the idea that this reading of racialized bodies is not a new phenomenon. Historically, whiteness for Mexicans (as for many other groups) has represented leisure, social status, and privilege. Therefore, skin color became a concrete feature on which to base assumptions of class and social status. Lightness equals affiliation with the dominant culture and darkness with subjugation, subordination, and impoverishment. Becoming an authentic American subject occurs through ambiguous circumstances that are not always under the control of the specific subject's acculturation; becoming an authentic American subject also produces ambivalence in individuals, as Rodriguez's autobiographies highlight. The English language is supposed to grant Richard access to public life, but his autobiographies reveal that being able to speak the language of the dominant culture is not the only way to gain access—looking like them also holds immense cultural significance and involves a process of uncoloring his complexion that is, of course, impossible.¹²

¹² It is interesting to note Sammy Sosa's recent public admissions and endorsement of skin bleaching. Though outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that brown subjects, like Rodriguez, are still plagued by their complexions.

Complexion plagues not just Richard's mother but him as well. As *Hunger of Memory* continues, there is a futile attempt to erase the superficial racial markings of colonial history as a means of acquiescing to the demands of the dominant culture. Rodriguez is aware of the negative stereotypes associated with dark complexions in the United States and in Mexico. In *Hunger of Memory* he tells of a childhood memory in which he is in the kitchen listening to women in his family advising a pregnant woman on various potentially dangerous lactification techniques¹³—lemon juice, castor oil, and the like:

As a boy, I'd stay in the kitchen ... listening while my aunts spoke of their pleasure at having light children. (The men, some of whom were dark-skinned from years of working outdoors, would be in another part of the house.) It was the woman's spoken concern: the fear of having a dark-skinned son or daughter. Remedies were exchanged. One aunt prescribed to her sisters the elixir of large doses of castor oil during the last weeks of pregnancy. (The remedy risked an abortion). Children born dark grew up to have their faces treated regularly with a mixture of egg white and lemon juice concentrate (124).

Rodriguez presents this scene as an extension of his mother's discourse on rejection of his body's complexion. The dark body is conceptualized by Rodriguez's mother and his

¹³ The aim of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is to "try to discover the various attitudes that the Negro adopts in contact with white civilization" (12). Though he is speaking of African Americans specifically, other bodies of color, like Rodriguez's brown body, similarly adopt complicated attitudes to fit in with the hegemonic white culture—this scene in Rodriguez's autobiography suggests a variation of what Fanon delineates in his earlier work.

aunts as a cultural problem because it signifies poverty, lack of education, and consequently suggests an inferior social positioning in dominant culture. This anxiety that these women project is manifested as a rejection of dark skin, even though they themselves know that dark a complexion is part of their cultural heritage. They take a certain pleasure in fantasizing about the lightness of their children that I believe derives from these women imagining their children as not marked, submissive or inferior to the hegemonic, light-skinned culture. The women reflect Mexican cultural mores and American expectations regarding racial hierarchies. Though the “remedies” offered are potentially dangerous, it seems that the risk is worth it for one can assume that being dark itself is dangerous. The danger is to be rejected or marked as Other because of this physical difference within the dominant culture.

Shortly after remembering and retelling the scene with the women in the kitchen, Rodriguez recounts an even more disturbing scene from his childhood in which the recognition of his dark complexion plagues him. This scene of recognition is disturbing for Richard because he is already aware of what his dark complexion signifies for others around him. Now he must confront this image and its meaning to himself. As he sees his dark complexion reflected in the mirror, feelings of frustration and disdain arise in him. With a razorblade in his hand, Rodriguez retells how the character of Richard, filled with innocence and pain, not just thought about trying to be colorless, but rather actually went ahead with the act through placing this sharp metal object against his skin—presumably with the goal of cutting the darkness off or out of his skin. Rodriguez writes,

Slowly, with steady deliberateness, I put the blade against my flesh, pressed it as close as I could without cutting, and moved it up and down across my skin to see if I could get out, somehow lessen, the dark. All I succeeded in doing, however, was in shaving my arms bare of their hair. For as I noted with disappointment, the dark would not come out. It remained. Trapped. Deep in the cells of my skin (*Hunger of Memory* 134).

Richard directly confronts his complexion in that emotional scene; at once readers can feel his pain. This is a young boy who is constantly told that he is either too dark or too different from everyone else. First his difference was one of language, a flaw that should have been fixed by embracing English. He was enabled to be part of dominant culture because he could speak like them. But race does not work as language does—Rodriguez cannot perform whiteness visually.

Negotiating a relationship to the color of a body is another place where Rodriguez and Fanon's works converge. Fanon writes, "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (110). Understanding the complicated construction of a person of color in a world that deems it Other is a complicated task, which Rodriguez narrates with conflicted emotions and tries to negate the colonial past that is reflected on the surface of his body. Although Rodriguez may speak English with great facility, he still is not given access to the same privilege as his white, English-speaking fellow Americans. The ideological racial stereotype lumping Richard in with other dark bodies

cannot be erased simply because he talks like the dominant majority. His difference is no longer linguistic but material—it is embedded in his flesh. The act of putting the razor to his flesh to excise the brownness elicits an image of negation and erasure, even self-mutilation. Fanon's suggestion that consciousness of the body is a "negating activity" resonates with Rodriguez's self-inflicted violence. He is unable to think of a way out of his racial positioning in American culture because of how deeply entrenched the color is on both a physical and an ideological level. An internal conflict arises in Richard as he attempts to uncolor himself. He presses the blade to his brown skin, as if shaving, to see if there is, in fact, a way to cut out or reduce the color. He notes that he does not in fact draw blood; he avoids the physical act of self-mutilation but does not avoid the socio-historical one. The trope of colonial penetration highlights his awareness of both a color and a history locked deep inside his skin. For Richard, erasing as a form of negating the proof of his colonial past seems to be the only logical way of accomplishing and proving his authenticity as an assimilated American subject in public life.

Much as Rodriguez's autobiographies come to represent assimilation not only for Mexicans but also for other immigrant cultures, his discomfort with his body also invites any misfit or person out of place into his narrative. His choice to narrate a scene with the razorblade from his youth is, as I see it, is a literary strategy to provoke compassion. Innocence is implied in his self-fashioning in the text as a much younger man, and readers can relate to Rodriguez because of the universality of body-image issues. Many people struggle to meet the norms of mainstream culture. They employ unhealthy dieting techniques, bleach their hair and skin, undergo cosmetic surgery, use hair relaxers, and so

forth. All are motivated by the desire to mimic the privilege of the white hegemonic majority in some real material sense. Richard's engagement with his body in the razorblade scene is played out for various queer bodies around the world. The act of removing pieces of oneself or one's past to conform to the demands of the dominant culture suggests a process of racial negation that motivates assimilation for Rodriguez in his first autobiography.

VI. Richard's Conflicted Relationship to Penetration

Rodriguez's autobiographies offer many contradictory images of penetration and rejection. To become an authentic American subject has meant for Rodriguez assuming different roles throughout his life depending on the specific context. Speaking English supported his acculturation, but his racialization immediately challenged it on a separate level. The avoidance and opposing desires produced through internal colonialism highlights Rodriguez's ambivalent feelings about becoming an authentic American. As the chapter "Complexion" continues, Rodriguez admits to feeling divorced from his body and notes that he would consciously choose to walk in the shade: "[M]y mother didn't need any more to tell me to watch out for the sun. I denied myself a sensational life" (135). Note the two implications of the word sensational. The first deals with the feelings and vibrations the body experiences through the senses; the second implication has to do with "sensation," in the sense of calling attention to oneself. Though he avidly attempts to assimilate and fit in, he is also aware that, to be viewed as authentic, he cannot missteps. His racialized body is already a struggle Rodriguez faces. He produces a subtext of desires and sensations that contradict his overt glorification of becoming an

American. It is at this point that I want to return to Fanon's work to highlight another intersection between what he analyzes regarding the colored body in culture and how Rodriguez as a character and author develops a relationship with his own brown body. Fanon writes, "As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions" (218). Rodriguez desires the dominant culture to recognize him as part of it. (I address this desire in the third chapter.) Though acculturation is his most passionate desire, one that forces him to give up all other desires, I read Rodriguez's ambivalent relationship to his penetrated/colored body as one where desires control the outcome of his identity. His relationship to his own body is built around negating desires, yet his desiring is in a conflicted role as simultaneously a subject and an object.

Denying sensations means that Rodriguez finally does, on some level, adhere to Paz's notions of impenetrability, as Richard remains primarily focused on achieving his authentic American subject position. In his autobiography, his national subject position is privileged over his sexual subject position. However, we should remember Rodriguez's position where he identifies a loss as implying a gain, an idea that I discussed earlier in this chapter when considering language. In denying his sensations, he avoids the act of openly expressing them. What he gains is an ability to conform to the standards of mainstream America, a highly important objective for Rodriguez. Although he does not openly admit to his sexual desires, Richard still defies Paz's prescription of

impenetrability because his autobiographies address his experiences in an emotional and very public way. Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith state that “*Hunger* can be read not only as a narrative of assimilation but as a coded personal gay manifesto of Rodriguez’s coming out narrative in ‘America’” (33). The chapter “Complexion” illustrates this racial and queer reading of Rodriguez’s processes of subjectification and objectification that occur concurrently through his body and its desires. Let us consider the following quote:

Without any pleasure I studied my skin. [...] I denied myself a sensational life. The normal, extraordinary, animal excitement of feeling my body alive—the sensations that first had excited in me a sense of my maleness, I denied. I was too ashamed of my body. I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body [...] I continued to see the *braceros*, those men I resembled in one way and, in another way, didn’t resemble at all. On the watery horizon of a Valley afternoon, I’d see them. And though I feared looking like them, it was with silent envy [that] I envied them their physical lives, their freedom to violate the taboo of the sun. Closer to home I would notice the shirtless construction workers, the roofers, the sweating men tarring the streets [...] I was unwilling to admit the attraction [...] I tried to deny it by looking away. But what was denied became strongly desired (133-134).

Richard reflects on his complexion with anxiety. This conflicted relationship to his complexion has created a space where he has grown divorced from his body by denying it any pleasures or sensations that would imply opening up himself to his corporeal desires. All the separation he feels from his body grows out of the shame he feels because of it. He is, on the one hand, ashamed of his complexion and, on the other, ashamed of his desires. Interestingly, the desires in question here are not limited to sexual ones.

When Richard watches the sweaty *braceros* from a distance, he first becomes aware of their similarities to him and then of their differences from him. He knows that on a purely superficial level they have a complexion similar to his; however when he speaks to them, in their language (now lost to him), he learns just how different they are. On a physical level they look like him; the *braceros* and Richard are brown. The similarities simultaneously evoke interest, fears, and desires in Rodriguez—a variation of Fanon's concept of a world of reciprocal recognition. In this instance, however, there is recognition and denial at the same time, which for Rodriguez inevitably lead to a disavowal. There is no way to deny the physical similarities between him and the *braceros*, and though he recognizes these, they also create anxieties in him. He resents looking like them because of the socio-cultural stigmas that are attached to these working-class, non-English-speaking, brown bodies. He has been seduced through education to the privileges available to those with hegemonic identities. Not being comparable to the dark-skinned workers is an impossibility for which Rodriguez yearns as he assimilates into mainstream American culture. However, as he continues to watch these men, it is not just their homogeneity that he recognizes. Richard also sees how

different these men are from him. The differences are not so much about the lack of education or their working-class lifestyle. The major difference is the way they freely violate what he calls the “taboo of the sun.” He states that it is with silent envy he watches these men and wants the one thing they obviously possessed that he did not—the ability not to be held prisoner to fears and complexes because of their complexions.

The *braceros* are obviously not concerned about being darkened by the sun. If they were, they would not be working shirtless. For them, baring their skin to the sun, not relying on a shirt or towel to cover up, is wrapped up, I believe, in masculine attitudes toward work and the sun—that is to say, they aggressively exhibit their bodies. It is a warm day. They are working and take their shirts off so as to be physically comfortable. Ironically for Rodriguez, and this, again, is a major difference between their respective brown bodies, it is when his body is covered up and avoiding the sun that he appears to be most comfortable. Richard does not envy their color; he has the same color. What he envies is that they do not have to make apologies for their bodies and sensations as he believes he must. The quote ends with Rodriguez being unable to deny the attraction he has to the *braceros* as he watches their sweaty bodies in action—he both wants them and wants to be them. Though he actively tries to look away, he admits that the more he attempts to deny the desire to watch them and their bodies, the more he cannot help but desire watching these men. Though he never explicitly confirms his homosexuality at the time of writing *Hunger of Memory*, the desire for the bodies of the *braceros* provides a narrative of the racialized and sexualized body all at once.

Richard's immediate response is simply to deny any ambivalent feelings he has regarding the *braceros* and the sun—all at once fearing it but also wanting to feel its warmth. However this disavowal does not go unnoticed. He nostalgically looks back to those days and almost wishes he had, in fact, violated the taboo against running shirtless in the sun, open and receptive to its rays. His divorce from his brown (racialized and sexualized) body continues as he perpetually denies his body sensation and pleasure. For Rodriguez's body to experience sensation and pleasure is to admit a physical openness that he is not yet able to admit publically. His denial of any pleasure is a way for him to remain impenetrable to his sexual desires. Moreover, this denial of sensations reveals an ambivalence that he has regarding his relationship to various acts of penetration. He openly embraces assimilation as a significant penetration event that transforms his national subject position. Yet, by disavowing sensation and pleasure, he outwardly denies explicitly connecting his body with homosexual desires. In these instances Richard's body is, then, not implicated in any sexual acts of penetration that do not involve colonial history. In the end, he disavows race and represses sexuality.

Continuing his voyeurism on his way home, Rodriguez recalls another group of sweaty men he watched with fear, adoration, and anxiety. I present his words in conjunction with the aforementioned *braceros* quote because of the ambivalences that arise from his visual desires, his desires to violate the taboo of the sun, and the racial and sexual complexes these penetrative desires produce. Rodriguez writes:

It would have been important for me to have joined them. Or for me to have taken off my shirt, to have let the sun burn dark on my skin,

and to have run barefoot on the warm wet grass. It would have been very important. Too important. It would have been too telling a gesture—to admit the desire for sensation, the body, my body (*Hunger of Memory* 135-136).

Again Rodriguez is confronted with a group of sweaty males. In this instance, he is referring to his classmates, who seem to be interchangeable with the *braceros* because of the homosociality of the situation. However, these particular bodies are not brown but white. Note the ambivalence in how Richard thinks that this time it would have been crucial for him to have joined them. He then does not contemplate working with the *braceros*, but he does think about aligning himself with his white classmates in the sun as he suggests in the above quote. Rodriguez openly discusses cultural acts of penetration that may help him to become an authentic American subject. He rejects anything that could limit his successful acculturation. In this case, once brownness is displaced, queer sexuality becomes the new limit that can keep him from the mainstream, colorless, American world. Those contexts that can further limit his acculturation, in this instance because of his queer sexuality, Rodriguez publicly denies. Acts of penetration themselves produce ambivalent feelings for Richard. It is through this conflicted relationship to penetration that Rodriguez narrates his attempts at becoming an authentic American.

VII. Concluding Remarks

Rodriguez and his works are an excellent starting point for understanding an epistemology of penetration not only because the written words lend themselves to such an analysis but because he, a Chicano, Mexican, American, homosexual, brown, queer,

postcolonial author, provides a more complete picture of the epistemological ramifications of subjects who act inappropriately. Perhaps if Rodriguez had not clearly demonstrated how “authentic” members of symbolic masculinity must all have been ambiguously both penetrated and penetrator, the critics would not have had to focus on his sexuality in order to discredit his legitimacy and the admissions he makes. Randy A. Rodriguez notes, “Continued demonization and exclusion are necessary for the (re)construction of Chicana/o and other ‘imagined’ communities that cannot tolerate threats of excess, contamination, interaction and penetration symbolized by Rodriguez and his work [...] He represents a dark side of our various cultural experiences that must be repressed lest his seductive, emasculating, and effeminate powers divert our attention” (402). Rodriguez is depicted as a threat because his open admissions attest to the potential submissions of other postcolonial male subjects.

Rodriguez’s inappropriate act, or what he does “wrong,” is that he admits to the various submissive positions that his male subjectivity experiences while becoming a citizen. His admissions do not merely reflect his singular life, but rather implicate other colonized/racialized male subjectivities in such acts of submission. Other male subjects are threatened by such assertions, and their overwhelming response is to deny the legitimacy of what Rodriguez depicts. By excluding him from the larger, more appropriate discussions by Chicano authors, critics of Rodriguez can ignore the fact that his openness proves problematic to their own personal and professional subject positions. The “dark side” that Richard Rodriguez describes is not about mixed heritage or strong indigenous roots. Rodriguez’s openness as a postcolonial or colonized male subject

therefore labeled inappropriate. Although he once denounced bilingual education, there is still value in his works for American, Latino, Chicano, and Ethnic studies. That value lays in Rodriguez as a character and author being subjected to implicit rules of appropriate and inappropriate behavior determining symbolic and authentic acculturation. Because of the overlap of his public and private lives, his works provide a panoramic view of the deep rootedness of such a cultural narration of penetration in both United States and Mexican societies.

Many who read Rodriguez's work do not necessarily interpret it as foundational to the fields of Latino and Ethnic studies in the United States. For me, Rodriguez is an iconic, ambiguous subject who does not justify his complexities but rather admits to them—especially regarding his sexual subject position. His admissions are then submissions because he defies Paz's notions of masculine imperviousness and opens himself, his life, and his memories to consideration by the broader public. He is also positioned submissively because others need to account for his erratic and inappropriate behaviors. To read Rodriguez as a penetrative subject is perhaps difficult for some because of the way he embraces his own penetration through the assimilation model. He absorbs and reproduces the English language and culture to such an extent that he is seen as a traitor of his fellow Chicanos/Latinos. He allows these images to influence his character, yet he manipulates them and is able to incorporate these assimilatory characteristics, as well as many others, to write in opposition to the dominant culture. His assimilatory qualities make it difficult for some to view him as a Latino or Chicano thinker. Others, like critic Juan E. de Castro, codify Rodriguez's work in *Hunger of Memory* as "a masculine

version of intercultural contact where assimilation is paradoxically an act of aggression” (113). Assimilation affords Rodriguez the ability to assume a public identity and write about his experiences of adapting to a culture that is geographically his own but that was once foreign to him. To suggest that Rodriguez’s assimilation is an aggressive act, again, is to focus on the concepts of dominance and submission that ground an epistemology of penetration. To label assimilation aggressive is a way for critics to defend interpretations of Rodriguez as emasculated or effeminate.

The act of writing these autobiographies is a way for Rodriguez both as a character and as an author to explore the roles assimilation and language play in his pursuit of an authentic location in American culture. Through the writing of his texts he pursues the position of a legitimized speaking subject who can spit, write, and retort in the aftermath of colonial impact. Though some may not want to hear what he has to say, Rodriguez is capable of expressing his sentiments for a broad audience. Instead of simply judging him as a traitor, it is fruitful to consider how his works cause conflict for both the dominant majority and the disgruntled minority. I believe Rodriguez and his autobiographies illustrate issues that are important not just central to Ethnic or American Studies but also to social and legal policy issues that influence the makeup of the United States. His works can be read by scholars and students alike who are struggling with their identities as they grow or by individuals who, for whatever reason, feel they do not necessarily “belong.” Whether they are the offspring of immigrant parents or the parents of a queer youth, Rodriguez’s work in *Hunger of Memory* has caused positive and negative reactions in people. Clearly, his texts are productive sites to engage when one is attempting to understand a process

like Americanization and its effects on subjects who are culturally positioned submissively.

Chapter 2

Agency and Empowerment through Culturally Passive Posturings

Mexican-Americans constructed political subjectivity as colonized people, in part, as an aspect of resistance to colonialism.

—Linda Gordon, “Internalized Colonialism and Gender”

I. Rodriguez as a Consuming, Colonized Subject

The act of penetration is itself ambiguous because it requires contradictions for successful completion. Penetration accomplishes its function only when some border or boundary is traversed. Thus, an underlying yet integral component of penetration involves the acceptance by the recipient of the intended act. Of course, acceptance does not preclude force. In the consideration of the trope of penetration in relation to colonization, absorption and consumption exemplify the varied forms of acceptance that subjects manipulate and negotiate. The conquest relies on force on a basic level. Whether or not subjects want to be invaded by foreign influences is not necessarily important once the act of colonizing begins. The outcome is that colonized subjects are left to negotiate their identities through such strategies as consuming and absorbing the external force or attempting to reject it.

In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez describes his process of assimilation through language as a way of accepting the dominant culture, and even attempting to tamper with it. Although he originally rejected using English, he inevitably consumed and absorbed pieces of American society. Consequently, he became a literal and figurative postcolonial speaker, writer, and character. A decade after publishing his first autobiography,

Rodriguez writes *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992) in the aftermath of the mixed reception of *Hunger for Memory*. Identifying *Days of Obligation* as a second example of how an epistemology of penetration can be read through Rodriguez's work is undeniable when considering how he repositions the notion of passivity; oppressed subjects are not seen as eternally disempowered because of their postcolonial states of being. Rather they are also positioned as agents, who, having accepted their submissive role in colonial history, act on and transform the dominant culture also. Absorption, consumption, and rejection are strategies employed in the various processes of becoming a citizen subject that colonized individuals and groups manipulate in the aftermath of conquest. The ambivalence produced during and after physical and ideological invasion is negotiated by subjects as they begin to develop an identity as other than the object of conquest. Bhabha points out, "In the objectification of the scopic¹⁴ there is always the threatened return of the look [...] the recognition and disavowal of 'difference' is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction" (81). In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha empowers the objects of colonial surveillance by discussing their returned gaze as threatening. It is through this scopic act of penetration that the colonizers gaze on the colonized. Bhabha's focus on the fears apparent in the returned gaze can be applied to Rodriguez's work in *Days of Obligation* (1992). For Rodriguez, colonized subjects are ambiguously positioned as objects of cultural assimilation that have the agency to write beyond, look back, and transcend their subordinate positions.

¹⁴ "Scopic" is an adjective meaning all-embracing. However in the colonial context Bhabha is using it as a noun to imply the interplay between the gazes of dominant and inferior individuals.

Another reason why *Days of Obligation* is so useful in the understanding of the colonial trope of penetration is related to its subtitle, “An Argument with My Mexican Father.” Rodriguez positions his work in relation to various father figures. The immediate assumption one makes regarding this subtitle is that Rodriguez is talking about his biological father. The opening scene where he is in Mexico en route to find a village (at the request of the British Broadcasting Corporation) that resembles the one in which his father must have grown up solidifies this interpretation. Rodriguez finds his role as narrator and guide of the BBC documentary on Mexico awkward because, in his own words, he is “a man who spent so many years with his back turned to Mexico. Now [he] is to introduce Mexico to a European audience” (xvi). Rodriguez is quite literally the symbolic representation of the history between the cultures and languages of Mexican and the United States.

If *Days of Obligation* is an argument with his Mexican father then I suggest *Hunger of Memory* can be read as an argument with his American father. Rodriguez is physically in Mexico in the opening of his second autobiography. It is almost as if Rodriguez is responding directly to critics who ask about his roots and his relationship to the *patria*. Therefore a subsequent reading of “Mexican father” is of the *patria* or homeland itself. Mexico itself as a symbolic father figure then also suggests another interesting father-son relationship. I am thinking of Paz and his work as the authority figure on the historic struggles of Mexican manhood. Gustavo Pérez Firmat finds a direct connection between Rodriguez’s first book, *Hunger of Memory* and Paz’s infamous chapter “*Máscaras mexicanas*” in *Laberinto de la soledad*: “*Hunger* may well

be an elegant impersonation, an example of mimicry or *simulación*, one more *máscara mexicana*, to allude to one of the best-known chapters in *El laberinto*” (262). I extend this relationship between the work of Paz and Rodriguez to *Days of Obligation* and later *Brown*. Because in *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez is now impersonating the figure of “the Mexican,” I extend Pérez Firmat’s argument to also include his second autobiography. Not only is it another interpretation of the *máscaras mexicanas* that colonized subjects wear, I argue that *Days of Obligation* is a rereading of Paz’s *Laberinto de la soledad*. One of the criticisms of Rodriguez has to do with his representation of Mexico and *lo mexicano* as eternally impregnable and guarded. As opposed to remaining closed off, Rodriguez focuses on how colonized subjects absorb, consume, or reject pieces of the colonizing culture. Essentially, Rodriguez’s argument with Paz is that consuming and absorbing is a way of talking back, looking back, and striking back. These defiant acts threaten the power of the colonizers because they highlight the ambiguity of penetration itself.

Rodriguez’s contentious relationship with Mexico is presented in the opening scene of *Days of Obligation*, in which he is leaning over the toilet of his hotel room suffering from a variation of Montezuma’s Revenge (xv). This scene is discussed in detail in a subsequent section of this chapter. However, I must point out Rodriguez’s ambiguous relationship to Mexico. In the opening scene of this book, he represents himself as identified and identifiable as Mexican but also as completely foreign to Mexico and its foods, peoples, and cultures. In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez is constructing himself as Bhabha’s subject, “neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] *but something else*

besides” (41). Rodriguez writes, “Yesterday, the nausea began. Driving through Michoacán with a television crew, I was looking for a village I had never seen” (xv).¹⁵ The assumption and stereotype is that visitors to Mexico must be careful of the water they drink, use to clean food, and obtain from the faucet. In referencing both his vomiting (literally abjection), and the nausea that plagues him, Rodriguez is positioning himself as an outsider, a foreigner in Mexico. To the audience that will see the BBC documentary, however, Rodriguez presents himself as an insider of Mexican culture. This ambiguity of self-presentation and public representation is a unifying thread in all three of his autobiographies. His identification, subjectification, and nationalization produce conflicts for him and others because of racial and national assumptions about Rodriguez. *Days of Obligation* is an explicit attempt by Rodriguez to reconcile some of the internal and external conflicts that his sameness (he is just like the Mexicans) and otherness (yet he is nothing like them) engenders throughout his past, present, and inevitably his future.

Throughout this chapter I address some of the ways in which Rodriguez engages Paz’s work, specifically that pertaining to the “penetration paradigm” elaborated in *Laberinto de la soledad*. Paz’s chapter from this book, “*Máscaras mexicanas*,” directly discusses the notion of impervious Mexicanism. He writes, “El mexicano se me aparece como un ser que encierra y se preserva: máscara el rostro y máscara la sonrisa. [...] Entre la realidad y su persona establece una muralla, no por invisible menos

¹⁵ Paz notes in “Conquista y colonia,” “Cualquier contacto con el pueblo mexicano, así se fugaz, muestra que bajo las formas occidentales laten todavía las antiugas creencias y costumbres. Esos despojos, vivos aun, son testimonio de la vitalidad de la culturas precortesianas” (81). [Whatever contact with the Mexican village, even if fleeting, shows that under the Western form ancient beliefs and customs exist. These remains, still thriving, are testimony of the vitality of cultures before Cortés arrived.] The supposed village of Rodriguez’s father’s funeral procession highlights the role ancient customs play in the lives of postcolonial Mexican subjects.

infranqueable.” Pérez Firmat translates this passage as follows: “The Mexican seems to me to be a person who shuts himself as a way to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile [...] He builds a wall of indifference and remoteness, a wall that is not less *impenetrable* for being invisible” (26, emphasis added). Paz implies ideological and physical hierarchies in his presentation of Mexican national subjects as consciously guarded and guarding the parameters of their physical and national bodies. The word *impenetrable* implies a strict ideal of not allowing anyone or anything inside or not allowing it to go through specified, guarded boundaries. Rodriguez’s use of images of absorption and consumption highlights his arguments with Paz.

In Rodriguez’s text absorption and consumption offer a nuanced analytical perspective on the agency inside originally passive posturings. By revitalizing allegedly passive acts as potential sites of resistance that reposition colonized and colonizing subjects alike, Rodriguez is attempting to remove cultural limitations that shape the various ambiguous interactions in which participants engage. Absorption as a response to colonialism and as a way of demonstrating the agency inherent in colonized participants is crucial to understanding why it is important to reconsider Rodriguez and his autobiographies. Absorption and consumption are symbolically codified passively, because in acts of penetration these role assumptions are designated for the recipients of the actions. The metaphor of food and consumption is pervasive in Latin American literary traditions; to consume is not merely a passive act, and Rodriguez uses language and culture as sites where individuals absorb, consume, and transform the various elements that have entered them.

Ambiguity also plays a decisive role in the negotiations subjects make as they absorb, consume, and evacuate. Rodriguez's discussion of versatility, at times positioned submissively and at other times dominantly, adheres to Paz's assertion that ambiguous and contradictory stances shape Mexican national subjects. He addresses national Mexican subjects' ambivalence: "El contenido concreto de esas representaciones depende de cada espectador. Pero todos coinciden en hacerse de nosotros una imagen ambigua, cuando no contradictoria. [...] Traición y lealtad, crimen y amor, se agazapan en el fondo de nuestra mirada. Atraemos y repelemos" (Paz 59). [The details of the image formed of us often vary with the spectator, but it is always an ambiguous if not contradictory image. Treachery, loyalty, crime and love hide out in the depths of our glance. We attract and repel] (Kemp 65). Paz presents contradictions as beneficial for the national image because it suggests a negotiation with one's subject position in culture. Contradictions, such as being passive yet active agents, for example, prove productive in the establishment of the Mexican's character. It is through ambiguity that the Mexican begins to understand his or her place in culture.

An additional element Paz offers concerns the function of the eyes to glance at, evaluate and observe subjects. Depending on who is viewing a Mexican, these contradictions arise. Paz implies, through the idea of negotiating one's location in culture under the watchful eyes of others (dominant or not), that the creation of an identity rests not solely on the subject but also on the subject in relation to others—as a subject, as an object, as both and as neither, as Bhabha suggests. However it is also through the subjects' retaliatory glances that the role of ambiguity and contradiction proves crucial

for postcolonial nationalization and subjectification. It is almost commonplace, according to Paz, that one attracts, rejects and assumes the roles of the traitor and the loyalist, the lover and the fighter, the viewer/consumer and the viewed/consumed, as those subjects progress toward becoming authentic society members.

II. The Mouth and Throat as Optimal Sites for Penetration

As I have shown, the discourses surrounding absorption, consumption, and rejection directly implicate the national/physical body and its permeability. The mouth is a major site in acts of penetration regarding the national and physical body. Since the negotiation of language deals ultimately with the opening and closing of the mouth, and since culture and community revolve around shared language systems, it is not surprising that Rodriguez employs these images in various instances. In “Bilingual Education: Outdated and Unrealistic” Rodriguez writes, “Baptized to English in school, at first I felt myself drowning—the ugly sounds *forced down my throat*—until slowly, slowly (held in the tender grip of my teachers), suddenly the conviction took ” (459, emphasis added). The description of his teachers is most interesting. Rodriguez suggests the force and indoctrination of language by these school/religious officials by describing the imposition as a “tender grip.”

Here again, acquisition of a public language is reminiscent of the same forced penetration by the priest and the nuns that I spoke of in chapter one. This later event is represented as undesirable— Rodriguez describes it as ugly. By forcing the English language down Richard’s throat, the nuns and the priest transform him. At first, the words in the back of his throat are suffocating, as Rodriguez metaphorically compares the act of

language acquisition to drowning. This imagery can be elaborated to include the tongue, a muscle without which speaking is impossible. Shoving words and cultural ideals into the mouth, on the tongue, and down Richard's throat is then presented as a form of disciplining that national subjects undergo during various processes of acculturation. The dominant culture assumes the invasive role.

The mouth is the integral orifice through which cultural exchange occurs. Rodriguez delineates overlaps between the processes of subjectification and nationalization that are fundamental to the creation of an epistemology of penetration. Some scholars, discussing school systems for minority students, point to the mouth as both a national and a physical site of colonial indoctrination. For instance, Alfredo Mirandé notes, "Chicanos are oftentimes punished in school, for example, for speaking their native tongue or for expressing familial or cultural values that run counter to dominant Anglo values" (755). That is precisely the consequence the Rodriguez family encountered when the church officials entered their home. Almost as if the parents are being reprimanded by church officials, the domestic transgression from church officials imposes the use of language valued by the dominant culture. The school system is the vehicle through which the majority enforces its demands. Rodriguez and his family, like many other Chicanos/Latinos, are accosted by religious and educational representatives offering the English language as a means to achieve complete Americanization.¹⁶ The inability of Richard and his siblings to speak English is counterproductive to all settings

¹⁶ Petra Fachinger defines Americanization's relationship to class status and education as follows: "Americanization, that is, assimilation into middle-class America through the institution of education" (116).

except the privacy of the home. In order to create standardized national subjects a unified language system is needed. The language that church officials put in the minds and mouths of the Chicano children belongs to the dominant culture. At first viewed as an imposition by Rodriguez, this new language system gradually becomes desirable and practical. Rodriguez's major cultural offense is his eagerness to exchange pieces of his past, without question, for all that English in America represents.

In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez traverses geographical boundaries. His arguments in the book are a response to his ambiguous position as a Mexican and United States American in the aftermath of Paz's writings. Rodriguez then lives in Bhabha's in-between space—neither one nor the other, but a hybrid, something different. For Chicana/o theorists following Anzaldúa, the borderlands become pivotal physical and ideological sites of convergences and divergences because they speak to the cultural hybridity that arises from border thinking. Rodriguez inhabits this space not just ideologically in his works but also physically. In *Days of Obligation*, one of Rodriguez's main arguments has to do with his ambiguous legitimacy as a public speaker. Recall that the BBC hired him to narrate a documentary introducing Mexico to the world because of his facility in English and because of his Mexican roots. In this documentary, he reflects on his paradoxical situation:

I am on my knees, my mouth over the mouth of the toilet, waiting to heave. It comes up with a bark. All the badly pronounced Spanish words I have forced myself to sound during the day, bits and pieces of Mexico spew from my mouth, warm, half-understood, nostalgic

reds and greens dangle from long strands of saliva. [...] I am crying
from my mouth in Mexico City (xv).

His ambiguous relationship with Mexico, however, is now undeniable. Though he resembles an authentic Mexican outwardly, his experiences in Mexico have left him in a situation similar to what many foreigners face when visiting this country. The scene with Richard positioned over the toilet bowl vomiting exemplifies his ambiguous relationship to both cultures. No matter what the exterior of his body suggests, he is still foreign to Mexico. The cautionary rules for travelers apply to Rodriguez also; that is to say, he expels Spanish.

Rodriguez's vomiting is a literal rejection of consumed materials—he is spitting Mexico or Mexicanness. In this instance, he forces himself to speak Spanish on his journey. His characterization of Spanish as bad food that must be expelled highlights his conflicted relationship to the Mexican language. Deemed a legitimate representative of Mexico by the BBC, yet a traitor according to others, Rodriguez demonstrates the strategic function of rejection in this scene of evacuation; the act of vomiting is not just physical but also symbolic because it metaphorically becomes his body's coping mechanism to deal with all the contradictions at hand. As he tries to find a village that resembles where his parents must have lived, the character of Richard is portrayed as physically ill. This is the consequence of having spent many years with his back to Mexico. Now, while in Mexico Rodriguez experiences the same fate as any foreigner to Mexico (*Days of Obligation* xvi). Yet again, the central theme in Rodriguez's work is immediately presented to us as connected to his struggles with language.

The character Richard's literary function is to express how Rodriguez understood his relationship with Spanish after the publication of *Hunger of Memory*. Analyzing the literary device of symbolism that Rodriguez uses here, I interpret Rodriguez's decision to represent his difficult relationship to Mexico as one of Bhabha's "repertoire of strategies" postcolonial subjects employ (Bhabha 94). What consumption, absorption and rejection all offer are alternate ways of understanding how colonizing and colonized subjects alike are interpellated and respond to such a positioning. Bhabha argues, "It is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing *within* Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant subject being strategically placed within it too" (72). Similar to penetration, both subject positions, those of the colonizer and the colonized, are central in the actions involving consumption, absorption and rejection. Though society places different hierarchical values on the roles of dominator and dominated, for Bhabha both subject positions are ambiguously initiated. Culture judges the role of the penetrator to be advantageous because it is associated with masculinity, dominance, and power. The colonizing subject is already a participant in a social conversation that privileges not just its role but the acts associated with this dominance. At the same time, acts associated with submission, the penetration of any orifice of a woman or a man, are devalued. Although submission may socially connote weakness and powerlessness, Bhabha's focus on the repertoire of strategies possible for colonized subjects incorporates concepts like consumption, absorption, and rejection.

Consumption through the eyes, mouth, tongue, or throat, highlights the interactions between various subjects and objects of colonial discourse. Those

transmitting (active positioning) and the others receiving (passive positioning) information are all integral to the successful completion of these exchanges. Each participant plays a role in the creation of the other in the culture. Rejection, for example, can prove to be a strategy wherein the dominated subjects enact their own forms of agency and resistance. Although the larger social structure of superiority and inferiority is not necessarily threatened by individual acts of rejection, those acts nonetheless do cause stress yet do not necessarily break the structure. To deny or prioritize one position over the other is, again, to provide an incomplete portrayal of the repertoire of actions and agency of the colonizers as well as the colonized. Moreover, articulating the actual ambiguous experiences of penetrated subjects—regarding dominant and submissive role assumptions rather than their alleged weakness—offers a more accurate, less limited description of these individuals. One cannot conclude that colonizers are always and only dominant and that the colonized are always and only submissive. I see the “epistemology of penetration” as a springboard to advance an explication of contradictory role assumptions and experiences that includes diverse subjects in narrations of colonial history.

III. The Ambiguity of Colonial History

In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez discusses the power that dominant figures hold over colonized subjects especially in their biased versions of history. Although most histories of war are told from the perspectives of the victors, Paz’s work in the chapter, “Conquista y colonia” from *Laberinto de la soledad* reminds us that conquest and colonization are full of contradictions and ambiguous cultural exchanges:

No pretendo justificar a la sociedad colonial. En rigor, mientras subsista ésta o aquella forma de opresión, ninguna sociedad se justifica. Aspiro a comprenderla como una totalidad viva y, por eso, contradictoria (106). [I am not attempting to justify colonial society. In the strictest sense, no society can be justified while one or another form of oppression subsists in it. I want to understand it as a living and therefore contradictory whole] (Kemp 103).

Paz briefly addresses the inevitable contradictions of a vibrant postcolonial society.

Although he does not develop his notions of cultural colonial contradiction, it is clear that ambivalences and ambiguities frame a part of nationalization. Paz's reference to contradictions reinforces the importance and centrality of various conflicting positions for all its members. For Paz, as for Bhabha, recognizing the ambivalence in the ways subjects relate and react to conquest is vital to understand that ambivalence and ambiguity not only are productive of forms of agency, but also approximate the contradictory roles subjects assume at different moments in history.

Conquest and colonization are topics of direct discussion in Paz's work.

Rodriguez also engages these topics, but in a more covert way as he challenges historical narratives of colonial formation. In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez addresses the ways in which history is presented under the terms and conditions of the *conquistadores*; he joins Paz in depicting cultural colonial contradictions through an understanding of the productive ambiguities and contradictions that conquest creates. The interpellation of ambiguous subjectivity is a point where the works of Paz, Bhabha, and Rodriguez

converge. Specifically for Rodriguez, the contradictions are not only the product of the role assumptions and positions of colonial dominance or submission. These contradictions are a consequence of the pervasiveness of the biased historical narrations that support the conquest of the New World. A conflict between assigned positions arises in Rodriguez's overview of the European conquest of the New World. The colonial event in question revolves around Euro-Indian relations in Mexico during the time of conquest.¹⁷ In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez writes:

According to the European version—the stag version—of the pageant of the New World, *the Indian must play a passive role*. Europe has been accustomed to play the swaggart in history—Europe striding through the Americas, overturning temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood. [...] And wasn't the Indian the female, the passive, the waiting aspect to the theorem—lewd and promiscuous in her embrace as is indolent betimes (8)?

Through a close reading, readers can see how historically privilege and dominance belong to European *conquistadores* and the colonized bodies are marked as passive recipients in colonial acts. This characterization of the colonized subjects as passive frustrates Rodriguez to such an extent that he openly challenges this assumption throughout his second autobiography. It is undeniable that the European version of

¹⁷ Rodriguez titles this chapter “India” with an ironic tone because the conquest of the New World came about while Columbus was pursuing the spices of India. The inhabitants of the New World were thus “Indians.” Although they were not the people the *conquistadores* expected to find, Rodriguez suggests that the appellation was appropriate to the situation. Another interpretation of the reason for calling them Indians is related to the figure of La Malinche. As the representation of Mexico and its inhabitants, she is the marked a passive India that is conquered and colonized.

colonial interactions has become the authoritative one, an interpretation of the events that is the “accepted” historical account. The colonizing Europeans always have had sufficient power to narrate and replicate their version of the events, which, for many, it is the only conceivable course of history. European colonizers as authorized narrating subjects leave only a passive, silenced role for the colonized Indians. Rodriguez, however, identifies contradictory versions of colonial history, and therefore problematizes this one-dimensional, heteronormative perspective.

Rodriguez urges readers to rethink the generic European version of the conquest of the New World because he is aware of how deeply this historical, semi-fictional, narrative has influenced nationalism and patriotism for Mexican-American and other immigrant subjects. The European and American colonizers embrace this hegemonic nationalism through geographical and cultural imposition.¹⁸ Rodriguez, dissatisfied with this version, offers a different version of colonized nationalism. Matthew. G. Henry and Lawrence D. Berg state, “Situating nationalism as an ongoing discourse in the contemporary ‘Western nation’ [...] has a significant effect on the production and reproduction of its citizens’ subjectivities [...]” (630). Where Rodriguez’s autobiography and Henry and Berg’s work converge is on the production and reproduction of national subjectivities vis-à-vis the biased versions of colonial conquest. Because being an authentic American consists in being assimilated into the mainstream culture, what is produced and reproduced are citizens who are lumped together and expected to cut ties with their homelands and adopt those of the dominant culture. I believe a major theme in

¹⁸ See Walter Mignolo’s *Local Histories/Global Designs* for more information regarding nationalism and cultural formations.

Days of Obligation focuses on erasing immigrants' specific ethnic pasts and on creating a space where these assimilated bodies are imagined as pure, uncontaminated and even interchangeable with the dominant nation.

Think of examples of earlier immigrants to this country from the late 19th and early 20th centuries: the Jewish, the Irish, the Italian. Rodriguez discusses how in the United States historic battles waged between countries do not mean as much. The significance is not on the conflicts of the past but rather on how efficiently the new immigrants assimilate. Rodriguez notes,

Many came, carefully observing Old World distinctions and rivalries. German Jews distinguished themselves from Russian Jews. Venetians were adamant about not being taken for Neapolitans. But to America, what did such claims amount to? All Italians looked and sounded pretty much alike. A Jew was a Jew. And now America shrugs again. Hispanics are all the same (70).

Although these immigrants brought with them cultural traditions and distinctions reflecting their national and religious origins, once those groups landed in the United States, the ideas they had brought with became less relevant. What mattered was not that they negotiated their backgrounds but, rather, how they were positioned in American society. When the Irish, Italians, and Jews came to the New World, the Mexicans were already here. The ethnic Irish, Italians and Jews become "white" after World War II. Yet, the Mexicans have not yet done so primarily because of their differences relating to language and coloration. Their otherness is not one that can be erased, as Rodriguez consistently suggests throughout his autobiographies.

Rodriguez claims that there is hardly a distinction between a Russian Jew and a German Jew once they have transplanted to the United States. Their allegiance and focus is not to Old World rivalries but to being authentic Americans. Likewise, Rodriguez says, “Palm tree or cactus, it’s all the same. Hispanics are all the same” (70). If individual ethnic and cultural identities are subsumed in the United States, then it is safe to say that the place of origin of these Hispanic subjects is also of little importance—when they are located inside the United States, Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans are all Hispanic and thus they are interchangeable—that is to say that their individuality and cultural specificity is lost and replaced with a patriotic notion of community in America. Their particularities and cultural pride must be relinquished to ensure that, first and foremost, these new national citizens understand that what they are is American.

It is with frustration that Rodriguez presents these interchangeable American subjects. I believe that he does not support this process of homogeneity, but he also does not know how to find a way out of it. In a way, the concept of consumption is also at root here because Rodriguez describes all particular identities in the United States as being subsumed and consumed by their expected dominant national positioning. Visual and audible markers, Rodriguez argues, facilitate and influence the lumping of people together. The claim that Hispanics all look the same—even with his overt connection to his “foreign” ethnic roots—is something Rodriguez grapples with throughout his autobiographies. Rodriguez is never truly able to pass as a colorless man in the same way that Jews or Italians potentially can and did. The official/legal identity for them is as white American—not as Jewish, not as Venetian, not as Hispanic, as almost the same as

the dominant Protestant majority. If they are noticeably different, then it is their individuality that is consumed and subsumed, and they are generically labeled as Other.

Thus, in the aftermath of these complicated processes of conquest and colonization, the dominant position assumed in the Euro-American version consistently indoctrinates the minds of many individuals globally. Throughout this chapter I will use the term Indians, without quotations, when I am talking about the original inhabitants of the New World. I do this because Rodriguez titles his first chapter of *Days of Obligation* “India” and refers to the colonized, passive bodies as Indians throughout. The Indians Rodriguez speaks of are consistently interpellated and represented as performing a receptive and socially disempowered role that marks them and their cultures (read nations) as inferior. This inferiority because of its widespread dispersal and reproduction is evident on a global scale, and this is perhaps the reason why Paz rigidly guards Mexico’s penetrable ideological and geographical borders. These biased colonial histories are available for all to read. Paz’s work in *Laberinto* responds directly to the hegemonic histories, but instead of debunking them entirely (he admits to cultural-colonial contradictions) he creates hegemonic nationalism as an effective strategic response for Mexico. As opposed to Paz’s defensive posturing, Rodriguez, in *Days of Obligation*, rejects this facile recapitulation of history by empowering the colonized subjectivities with the agency to shape their lives and negotiate, on their own terms, their own identities. Through absorption, consumption, and rejection, colonized subjects are repositioned as empowered, though in an ambiguous way. Rodriguez’s counter-narrative

of colonial history opens up new spaces for the colonized subjects to be other than emasculated.

The relationship of the epistemology of penetration with Rodriguez's choice of words in his appropriation of the European/American historical narration is evident in the representation and interpellation of Indian subjectivities as passive. Though they are marked as submissive, Rodriguez suggests their gender when he presents this specific version of history as "the stag version." The word "stag" itself implies a notion of homosociality and privilege. In its adjective form, "stag" refers to a grouping of and for men only.¹⁹ In other words, it is a purely male-male gathering where the absence of women is integral to its functioning. Recall that in *Laberinto de la soledad* Paz points out that any homosocial interactions and relationships between men "are always tinged with suspicion" (30). The ascription of gender roles in the homosocial exchange can be read as a way of dispelling any homoerotic suspicions one may have in the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized.

The absence of women, as Rodriguez points out, does not preclude the presence of femininity within role assumptions in the discourse surrounding colonial acts. In mainstream accounts of conquest, the Europeans assume the active, male role in narrating colonial history while the Indians assume the passive, feminine role in the marginalization of their accounts of the same events.²⁰ The emphasis on how Indians "must play a passive role" symbolically in this colonial act is because of the

¹⁹ The online *Oxford English Dictionary* offers these definitions at <<http://www.oed.com/stag/>>.

²⁰ It is interesting to note the subtlety here regarding the active and empowered role of those able to narrate. Rodriguez positions himself as dominant in his role as an author who can unmask, penetrate, and queer biased histories.

heteronormativity surrounding the notions of penetration in its fundamental sexual sense; it can also be related to, as Paz suggests, the suspicions that arise from homosocial interactions. If, in fact, the conquest of the New World were a party with only men and if Europeans were relegated to the role of the powerful, dominant group who could narrate and write the stories of conquest in whatever way they deem appropriate, the passive role would be the only option by which to demarcate the participation of the Indians in binary thinking.

If the Europeans are the symbolically dominant, colonizing agents, then the Indians are interpellated symbolically as effeminate, colonized objects. Moreover, the Indians are the disempowered participants who are denied the ability to narrate or control the retelling of historical events in which they participated. Thus, I believe Rodriguez's aim is to uncover the silenced voices of colonized subjects. This act of uncovering is an act of recovering versions of history that are marked inferior. The Indians are players who reinforce the virility and power of the dominant European rendition of conquest. This (biased) narration privileges the subject position of the Europeans and appears to be a major contributing factor to Paz's reflections about the Mexican psyche. It is because of how Mexico as a nation and Mexicans as a people are interpellated that Paz, and later Rodriguez, concern themselves with understanding the various processes of subjectification and objectification that affect citizens locally and globally. Not only does Rodriguez's argument give voice to the negated versions of history, it also provides a fertile ground from which to understand the gendered implications of superiority and inferiority implied in a simplistic understanding of an epistemology of penetration.

IV. Consumption, Absorption, and Rejection as Transformative

In the telling and retelling of mainstream colonial histories, colonized subjects are represented as weak while the colonizers reap the benefits of becoming the only authorized speaking subjects. In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez continues interrogating the colonizers' version of history, the ideological superiority that extends as Europe marches through the Americas in its quest to maintain its status as colonizer. They plow through the Americas with the hope of altering as many peoples and places as possible. If an impasse were to present itself, Europe could rely on its dominance to overcome it as the continent continues its hold as the most powerful dominant subject position in the Euro-Indian historical drama. While penetrating the lands in a physical, geographical sense, the Europeans are simultaneously performing ideological acts of penetration. Rodriguez tells us that during these acts of penetration, Europe "over turns temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood" (8). His use of metaphor and imagery illustrates the effects of Europe's dominant subject position on the Indians being colonized.

Although the Indians are positioned as receptive by the Europeans and Rodriguez alike, Paige Schilt clarifies Rodriguez's intention by suggesting that the European interpretation of Indian passivity is incomplete: "Justifying their own endeavors through the perceived passivity of the Indians, the European explorers could not conceive of indigenous people as interested observers able to 'consume' European culture and to create the sophisticated Mexican culture that Rodriguez celebrates in *Days*" (7). Positioning the Indians as victims of European advances who passively sit by while

major cultural transformations are enacted upon them substantiates the strength of the colonizers. It is, nonetheless, an inaccurate representation of the various processes of subjectification that the Indians endure. Both Schilt and Rodriguez see the importance of empowering not just as an active role in colonization but also of addressing strategies of resistance or compliance that enable colonial subjectivity. Passivity is defined as a feminine attribute by scholars like Paz, yet Schilt and Rodriguez both rearticulate passivity as an empowered state of being.

The Indians are able to assume effectively and strategically a symbolic and cultural feminine position in order to open up more positions for their nation and themselves. This passive posturing is ambiguous in itself as it also contains a degree of activity. In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez asks, “And wasn’t the Indian the female, the passive, the waiting aspect of the theorem—lewd and promiscuous in her embrace as she is indolent betimes” (8)? Rodriguez does not see the Indians as solely inactive. Granted, they were “discovered” or “conquered” and thus positioned passively. They nevertheless had various forms of agency that allowed them to negotiate their identities during and after colonial contact. Rodriguez identifies them as passively waiting while at the same time harboring defiance and rebellion. They wait but always with the idea that they potentially can resist the colonial advances. Positioning the colonized Indians as actively consuming what the colonizers force upon them demonstrates yet again the ambivalence that is produced through colonial encounters for both colonizer and colonized; after consuming pieces of the dominant culture, colonized subjects can speak, look, and spit back.

Enabling the colonized subjects to speak, consume, and spit back is essential for reevaluating the biases of colonial discourse. The ways in which certain members are deemed to be authoritative causes the reproduction of privilege to the colonizers and subjugation for the colonized. Bhabha, in his chapter “The Other Question” in *The Location of Culture*, discusses the creation of a space for “subject peoples” based on the production of knowledge of both the colonizers and colonized, as a major strategy of colonial discourse (70). To base production and reproduction on the bodies of knowledge of both the Europeans and Indians is what Rodriguez is calling for in *Days of Obligation*:

Had the world been flat, had the European sought the unknown, then the European would have been as great a victor over history as he has portrayed himself to be. [...] If the world had been flat, then the European could have traveled outward toward innocence. [...] But the world was round. The entrance into the Indies was a reunion of peoples. The Indian awaited the long-separated European, the inevitable European, as the approaching horizon (7-8).

Although the explorers are positioned as active, it is clear to Rodriguez that the Indians were not passive victims. They expected the white man’s arrival. They planned and prepared for this reunion. Thus, although the colonizers had an audible voice to shape their own global perspectives, Rodriguez does not agree with the way they portray themselves as the only active agents in the colonial exchange.

The interpretation of voice and silence is important to reconsider when thinking of the agency and resistances colonized subjects employ. The voice of the empowered colonized subject has been absent from the colonial conversation, which focuses more so

on their disempowered roles. Bhabha identifies the objective of colonial discourse as “a form of governmentality that in marking out a ‘subject nation’, appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity” (70). Rodriguez seems aware of this objective when complicating the influential role of biased histories. By acknowledging the voice and perspective of the Indians as negated, he is highlighting how historical biases dominate global understanding of historical events. Europe is positioned as dominating various spheres of activity because they have claimed this space for themselves. I read Rodriguez’s work as an attempt to carve out a space that voices the ambiguous experiences of colonized subjects. Rodriguez therefore creates a form of counter-governmentality because he resists dominant historical narrations and offers a different version of historical events.

Rodriguez notes Europeans’ overturning temples as a direct historical commentary on how, once having entered the Americas, the Europeans enacted religious reformation through their ideological penetration. I repeat the point in *Days of Obligation* that Rodriguez points out: “Europe [was] striding through the Americas, overturning temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood” (8). This quote shows the force behind the acts the colonizers perform. However, the Indians’ strength while consuming the religion illuminates their strategic effectivity and ambiguously empowered positions. In an interview with Paul Crowley, Rodriguez discusses the religious modifications the Indians of Mexico face obliquely precisely because of consumption, absorption, and rejection. Specifically addressing the consumption of the Eucharist, Rodriguez speculates, “Perhaps cultures absorb one another. If it is true that the Franciscan *padre*

forced the Eucharist down the Indian's throat, maybe she forgot to close her mouth. Maybe she swallowed the Franciscan priest" (quoted in de Castro 112).

The colonizers are aware that religious values are fundamental to most cultures. The quote by Rodriguez, in which he spoke of overturning temples, suggests that the act of altering places of worship during the colonial invasion was a calculated one; the intention of such a calculation is to produce future subjects who would not even be conscious of the penetrated state they had been born into because of how ordinary and standardized it had become. Physical and temporal boundaries are destabilized to such an extent that the dominant subject position continually influences the culture's ideological values without any direct, tangible action needed. As Rodriguez notes, however, consumption and absorption are ambiguous forms of agency and power that colonial subjects possess. The image of a colonized subject consuming the religion, the Eucharist, and even the priest, empowers the role of the colonized subject and is perhaps also a way for Rodriguez to justify his own (dis)empowered consumption of language and culture. Rodriguez suggests cannibalistic undertones here, demonstrating that colonized subjects are not entirely passive. These subjects are ambiguously positioned as submissive, yet also as empowered agents.

V. Destabilizing Colonial Stereotypes—Atypical Colonized Subjects

Presenting the colonized Indians as actively consuming the Europeans damages their stereotypical image as passive, weak colonized subjects. Rodriguez consciously positions the colonized Indians as having the agency to affect colonial structures. It is through their alleged passivity that they can transform the colonizing culture by effectively consuming

and absorbing various pieces of it. Though passivity is stereotyped as weakness, Rodriguez debunks this claim and suggests a strength that arises during and after colonization. Bhabha speaks directly of the importance of that stereotype colonial discourse. Bhabha points out that the stereotype is

the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both the colonizer and colonized [...]

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (75).

Fixity is a central concern for Bhabha as it relates to the limitations imposed through colonial stereotypes and colonial discourse. The Other is represented as disempowered because the privilege of narrating history belongs to the *conquistadores*. This limiting representation does not reflect the actual abilities of the subject-object but, rather, the desire motivating those with hegemonic identities. I would argue, though, that eliminating static expectations and assumptions of both the colonized and colonizers opens up spaces where the Other can resist and subvert its arrested position in the culture. In the conceptualization of the Indians solely as passive subjects incapable of strategically responding to the European advances, the Indians' subjectivity is inaccurately portrayed. Rodriguez subverts this image of weak, colonized Indians by

making them cannibals. Comparable to that of La Malinche, the dangerous image of the female Indian devouring or rejecting the Franciscan priest is admitted into the repertoire of images available to the colonized subjects; the fixation on their passivity and feminization is destabilized. The stereotypical images of Indians correlate to the narrations that the colonizers deploy globally. To incorporate a markedly different representation of consuming or rejecting Indians allows for the greater repertoire of subject positions that Bhabha's effectivity demands. Further, this incorporation also destabilizes notions of fixity in marking Otherness as ineffectual and disempowered.

A return to the colonial penetration of the Americas that Rodriguez presents in *Days of Obligation* is important now: as Europe continues its conquest, the residual effects of "overturning temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood" (8) have ideological permanence. Rodriguez emphasizes this by describing, three times, in three different places, the act of spilling by the colonizers. In the first chapter I mentioned the spitting back that enabled Rodriguez to respond directly and aggressively to internal colonization and the English language. This spitting is voluntary and aggressive whereas the vomiting is generally an involuntary act. Now, the focus on metaphorical spilling conjures a more feminine image. The material spilled onto the lands or into the cultures of the Indians impregnates the surfaces and alters their foundations. Yet the destabilization of stereotypical images of passive colonized subjects also has an effect on the representation of colonization. Europe's "stag version" places itself as the dominant provider that offers the sustenance deemed appropriate for the Indians' growth. Again, the Indians inhabit a receptive subject position in the colonial event because of the language

used to narrate their histories. I believe, however, that through the epistemology of penetration it becomes clear that Rodriguez has reappropriated feminine attributes in this instance to realign them with power. Through consumption and absorption, the Indians gain the creative potential to reposition themselves and their culture.

As opposed to picturing the Indians as helpless and powerless, Rodriguez considers their postcolonial agency through the consumption of the colonizers' language (his once defined passive assimilatory urges) as an effective means of expanding their subjectivity and destabilizing stereotypical images. Europe introduces a new language system into the lives, minds, mouths, and cultures of the indigenous groups with such force that most of their original language systems (take Nahuatl, an Aztec language spoken mainly in Mexico, for example) are obsolete in mainstream public culture. These acts of consuming and absorbing the language of the colonizers conform to the advice Rodriguez himself values. Writing, "to steal the books of the dominant culture (an active and subversive act) in order to bend the language of the colonizer to his own purpose and, thus, like Caliban, [is to] rethink possibilities of subversion within the sphere of the hegemonic order" (quoted in Lawtoo 232). Rodriguez takes Caliban's recommendation and even offers it up as a useful strategy in the various processes of subjectification. Absorbing and consuming the new language of the colonizers creates a repertoire of effective ways to manipulate the once-foreign language system to such an extent that it becomes theirs. Much as the colonizers are able to use language to position themselves and their subjectivities, the colonized/feminized inhabitants of Mexico, the Eucharist scene, for example, according to Rodriguez, challenges stereotypical images of them,

creates their identities, and expands the potential subjective positions after the colonial encounter while simultaneously meeting their needs.

The infusion of their native tongue and the imposed English language system creates more hybrid identities and ambiguous postures for colonized subjects. The deployment of language is defined by Lawtoo as an “active and subversive act” precisely because, by accepting instead of rejecting the language, the colonized are able to display unforeseen agency. They are defying the colonial stereotypes of them. As opposed to being understood as inferior to the dominant culture and its language, the colonized people manipulate the colonizer’s language as a strategy to expand their own subjectivities. Whether the language is forced upon them or stolen from them, the fact remains that, after the original invasive act, the colonizer’s language is open to the manipulations and alteration that concepts like consumption and absorption exemplify. The colonized subjects then are in a position of power and authority even after having acquiesced to the dominant culture’s advances. They have been able to achieve this transformation because of their strategic negotiation of their ambiguous potential as colonized and colonizing subjects.

Positioning the English language as dominant creates a conundrum that the European colonizers may have never imagined: the once foreign language begins to belong to not just the original speakers but all those that are part of the larger colonial process. Further once it is consumed, there is no way to foresee how these new speakers will penetrate the recently acquired language and cultural system. This is precisely why consumption and absorption are essential to elaborating an epistemology of penetration.

Europe reiterates its elevated and dominant colonial subject position through its insistence on the superiority of its language system. While Europe positions itself as dominant, it also is undeniable that alterations, adaptations, and transformations occur because of a multitude of ways the language is manipulated. Although the multiple indigenous language systems are marked as inferior to those of Europe (weak, passive, female, impotent), and in many instances are lost, the colonized subjects have the agency to morph the colonizers' language after consumption. It is through their ability to negotiate parts of the new language system with traditions, tones, sounds, and words from their old ones that colonized subjects are repositioned.

Colonized subjects, whether coerced (as Richard was as a child) or freely deciding to use the colonizer's tongue, need a valid means of communication that does not physically endanger them. Even though history shows clandestine communities that retained their religions, languages, customs, and the like, using the dominant public language is simply an unavoidable necessity if one is to become an authentic part of that nation. Communication is not solely oral; it manifests itself through a desire to express both publicly and privately in writing. The voice of Europe becomes the voice with which the colonized Indians must speak, and this is a direct result of conquest. Speaking in the historical context of the United States, Rodriguez writes, "Spanish is now an Indian language" (*Days of Obligation* 24). Labeling Spanish an Indian language is, of course, inaccurate if taken literally and if the productive potential of absorption and consumption is not considered. A high majority of the indigenous people of Mexico, who no longer

live in tribal communities, and most of the greater Latin American region as well as Spain, speak a variation of Spanish.

If Indians are now speaking Spanish, it is metaphorically an Indian language because they have absorbed and consumed it. The colonized people acquire the language because the Europeans transformed not just their lands but their institutions of learning during conquest. The colonized were forced to consume the language of the dominant group and to absorb everything that came with it. The long-lasting effects of the colonial event are undeniable, consistent, and repeated involuntarily. The Indians have absorbed the language and culture of the colonizers and begin various processes of negotiations between old customs (pre-colonial) and new regime ideals (postcolonial).

Labeling Spanish as an Indian language demonstrates yet again how absorption and consumption are key elements not only in the epistemology of penetration but also in destabilizing colonial discourses and stereotypes. The concepts of absorption and consumption prove integral to an understanding of the complicated ways in which penetration is conceptualized in culture. Penetration is not merely about invasion, nor should it always be understood from the perspective of the penetrator. Penetration is an action that involves a penetrator and a penetrated participant, regardless of how ephemeral or ambiguous each role is. Thus, to think of the subject position that penetrates only as active is incomplete. The subject acted upon has the ability to accept or reject the advances of the penetrator. ²¹

²¹ See Ania Loomba's work in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* on complicity as a product of colonialism, but also as something that colonized subjects are able to navigate with different approaches in various contexts.

The opening scene in *Days of Obligation* highlights both acceptance and rejection. This is the scene where Rodriguez is vomiting over the toilet in a Mexican hotel room. The red and green pieces of Mexico that dangle from his mouth were consumed and ingested earlier. It is interesting to note the reference to the colors of Mexico's flag as Rodriguez discusses this act of rejection. He is in Mexico, and it seems that it is not the country itself that he rejects but certain versions of Mexican nationalism that limit behavior to only those which position subjects impenetrably. Absorption, consumption, and rejection are crucial not because they are generically under theorized in discussions of penetration, but because they identify foundational processes of subjectification that colonial stereotypes negate.

Further, the idea of postcolonial subjects' employing such strategies underscores how the colonized subjects are anything but stereotypically passive. Schilt points out that colonized subjects can employ absorption and consumption to expand their various processes of national subjectification. Schilt argues, "the conquistador has been absorbed, consumed by the 'Indians' of Mexico City" (8). Not only the colonizers are actively positioned; the colonized, too, actively consume to absorb the transmitted images. Instead of solely viewing the colonized subjects as passive, Schilt aligns her argument with that of Rodriguez's insistence in the strength of the Indians' role in history through the repositioning of passivity as empowered. Both authors agree that it is through absorption and consumption that the "living Indians" are enabled to manipulate the various institutions that shape their identities. It is from the penetrated state that Indians learn to maneuver inside their new cultural hybridity. Yet again, absorption and consumption are

related to ambiguity. The ambivalence produced in such an oxymoronic positioning simultaneously empowers both roles, the colonizer and colonized, because in such codependent relationships it is a mistake to value only one part of the whole process. As reactions to colonial advances, absorption, consumption, and rejection allow for versatility in role assumption for all and force the rethinking of colonized subjects as stereotypical.

VI. Self-Reflection, Self-Rejection, and Self-Dismemberment

Rodriguez, in *Days of Obligation*, describes the strategies of absorption and consumption that empower colonized subjects. I have already suggested the utility of rejection.

However, it is not until one investigates Rodriguez's sexual subjectivity that the role of rejection is unmasked. Because for many years Rodriguez critics identified Rodriguez as rejecting his own homosexuality, I believe it is important to consider his relationship to it throughout his texts. Consumption, absorption, and rejection work together for Rodriguez and I will now turn to how he consumes images of homosexuality as he rejects other pieces of it. What is interesting here is how his relationship to his body's color and his sexuality again are connected. He wants to be colorless or not marked by culture for his otherness. The rejection of his sexuality then acts similarly to his desire to be colorless and aligned with the hegemony. In his chapter, "Late Victorians," Rodriguez finally speaks directly about homosexuality. Assimilation through language is central for Rodriguez in *Hunger of Memory* and now he alludes to the decisive role that strategic rejection played in his public acculturation. The ability to maintain a specific image in culture depends on the looks and judgments of oneself and others. Describing what he

sees when he consumes his own image in the mirror at a local gym, he desexualizes himself: The gym is at once a closet of privacy and an exhibition gallery.

All four walls are mirrored.

I study my body in the mirror. Physical revelation—nakedness—is no longer possible, cannot be desired, for the body is shrouded in meat and wears itself.

The intent is some merciless press of body against a standard, perfect mold. Bodies are “cut” or “pumped” or “buffed” as on an assembly line in Turin. A body becomes so many extrovert parts.

Delts, pecs, lats, traps.

I harness myself in a Nautilus cage.

Lats become wings. For the gym is nothing if not the occasion for transcendence. From homosexual to autosexual [...]

I lift weights over my head, baring my teeth like an animal with strain.

[...] *to nonsexual*. The effect of the overdeveloped body is the miniaturization of the sexual organs—of no function beyond wit.

Behold the ape become the Blakean angel, revolving in an empyrean of mirrors (39-40, emphasis added).

Because all four walls have mirrors, Rodriguez cannot escape his reflection and, further, he is presented with reflections of his body from a variety of angles. The mirrors

enable him to see his image repeatedly and also to see other bodies working out. Nakedness has become, for him, impossible, because of the abundance of mirrors that multiplies the number of eyes and gazes that abound. As Rodriguez sees his own image, he is confronted with his otherness. He does not conform to aesthetic demands of the gay community. He realizes again his brown body is multiply Other.

The glances from others and from oneself penetrate the body and leave it vulnerable to comparison, criticism, and adoration. As Richard views his own image in the mirror, he is unable to deny the physical characteristics that make him different from standard expectations of beauty. Rodriguez's emphasis on the visibility of the body is in accordance with Paz's work in "Máscaras mexicanas" can be understood when considering this following Paz quote: "Somos nuestro cuerpo. Pero las miradas extrañas nos sobresaltan, porque el cuerpo no vela intimidad, sino la descubre" (35). [We *are* our bodies. But we are frightened by other peoples' glances, because the body reveals rather than hides our private selves] (Kemp 35)]. Both Paz and Rodriguez see the body as a legible text that people can not only read but threaten with penetrative glances and judgments. For Rodriguez self-reflection, as exemplified in the scene in the gym, creates a space where he can dissect the image of his body to reveal, rather than hide, his self-identified insufficiencies.

The closet-like room in the gym, at once dark and illuminated, is where Rodriguez studies his own body and compares it with the current body-image ideals of San Francisco's gay culture. In the mirrors Rodriguez scrutinizes his body with the same critical eye as the typical body-obsessed San Francisco queer. This inspection produces

anxieties for Rodriguez because what he recognizes in the mirrors is his body's lack of compliance with the "standard, perfect mold" troubles him. In this instance, color does not seem to plague him even though, because of his anxieties, that potential is always present. Rodriguez describes the stereotypical image of the "gym bunny," the gay man who has a tight, toned, body. He continues anxiously, discussing how, through exercise, bodies are "cut," "pumped," "buffed," and even dissected. As he gazes in the mirror, the reflection of his body has a disembodied effect on him. He no longer sees himself as a whole; instead he sees "delts, pecs, lats, traps"—pieces of his body that come to represent him in relation to this perfect standard. Because of his awareness of the normative gay body, Rodriguez suggests that he has homoerotically glanced at other bodies and knows that his body is different from them. Gazing on others and himself produces ambivalence in Rodriguez because it unmask more of his fears of not fitting into the mainstream (sub)culture.

The body and its musculature come to define Richard as he views his body in the mirror. However for Rodriguez it is through noticing his body's lack that he becomes aware of his body and sees it in separate pieces. This process of dismemberment influences his other processes of subjectification and objectification because of the anxiety around whether or not his reflected image meets that of the ideal stereotypical (colorless not colorful) image in American culture. Thus Rodriguez's desire to look like the others, characterized through the description of his workout regime, reveals that this particular stereotype of gay men is not displeasing to him even though it appears

unattainable. Assimilation of physical and cultural standards is still something Rodriguez values and is denied.

For Rodriguez, dismemberment is a means through which his subjective identity is (trans)formed. Creating space and distance from himself, literally from his body, allows him to see the fragmentation integral to his national subjectification because of his otherness. Rodriguez is thus contemplating his own disembodiment as he views his image in the mirror. This process of disembodiment continues as Rodriguez works out and “lats become wings.” By dissecting his body into separate pieces Rodriguez makes it capable of physically transcending the closet in which he is trapped—however, the price he pays is the loss of his sexuality. Acquiring muscles metaphorically provides his body with wings that can free him from the mirrored-cage in which he finds himself.

It is through the chronicling of stereotypical homosexual bodily concerns for muscular development that he, and perhaps others, can find a form of freedom. Or perhaps the musculature can act as one of Paz’s masks to help protect the culturally effeminate man from being viewed as weak and penetrable. Whether muscles provide freedom or allow for privacy, for Rodriguez freedom does not come from an imperfect body that does not meet standard expectations. Instead, his freedom exists on a fundamentally psychosexual level. The wings he obtains by working out help him to move from “homosexual to autosexual [...] to nonsexual” (*Days of Obligation* 39). Viewing the body as an object allows two different interpretations to arise. First is the homoeroticism of the male body is present. Next the anxieties he has surround the perfect mold/body is evident in Rodriguez’s visual fascination with the gay gym culture.

Yet his anxieties around homosexuality resurge as the self-reflection he desires to see is nonsexual. It is through a self-rejection that Rodriguez finds a way to escape his own glances and those of others. He needs to escape from this image of otherness to dominant culture that plagues him in all three autobiographies. However he also manages to lose part of himself and the pleasures his body offers as he escapes into asexuality. By suggesting that his body is void of all sexual connection and desires, even with itself, place Rodriguez in a solitary existence.

The scene in the gym brings to the forefront Rodriguez's conflicts with his sexual identity. If he can acquire the desired physical body, his desire for other male bodies—his homosexuality—can be eliminated because this desire can turn from the desire of another man's body to the desire for his own body (the autosexual element present). His self-disembodiment also acts as a way of avoiding the homosexual interactions that could potentially implicate this very same body in penetration events beyond glances. His own body, through masturbation, would, in fact, please itself and fulfill his desire for a male so that no interaction with another male body would be necessary. Meeting the bodily standards of overdeveloped musculature also suggests assimilatory elements at work. By becoming the "perfect mold" of a man, the homosexual male body is capable of visually surpassing the expectations of the dominant male body in culture. The male body as strong, aggressive, hard, and indestructible is reinforced if homosexuals replicate it. By mimicking the perfect manly body, homosexuals are positioning themselves and their subjectivity ambiguously because on a visual level they are in accord with symbolic

representations of authentic manhood but on a cultural level, if proof of sexual deviance is apparent, the body in question is immediately rejected from the domain of masculinity.

Rodriguez's dismemberment allows him to position his identity as fluidly moving from homosexual to autosexual. His transmutation from homosexual to autosexual implies that no other body will have access to his guarded body. The lack of another body's involvement, along with issues pertaining to sexuality, suggests Rodriguez's aversion to homosexual penetration events. Throughout "Late Victorians," he presents many instances of loss due to the AIDS pandemic. Rodriguez thus presents homosexual penetration as not only socially unacceptable by the masses but also as potentially dangerous. Discussing the graver offense in homosexual behavior, Paz argues, "Es significativo, por otra parte, que el homosexualismo masculino sea considerado con cierta indulgencia, pero lo que toca al agente active. El pasivo, al contrario, es un ser degradado y abyecto (38). [It is likewise significant that masculine homosexuality is regarded with a certain indulgence insofar as the active agent is concerned. The passive agent is an abject, degraded being]" (Kemp 39).²² The active, penetrative homosexual man is more culturally understood and accepted ("with a certain indulgence") than is the passive, receptive homosexual man. The penetrating gay man is viewed as adhering more closely to society's sexual expectations of manliness. The passive participant is viewed as a dangerous role to assume because it defies generic masculine norms and this openness, according to Paz and Rodriguez, can potentially lead to physical harm.

²² Tomás Almaguer's work suggests a similar degradation of the passive, anally receptive role for gay men: "The invective associated with all these appellations speaks to the way effeminate homosexual men are viewed as having betrayed the Mexican man's prescribed gender and sexual role" (260).

The discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS, regarding infection and exposure through male-male anal intercourse, also suggests that the passive partner is the more vulnerable of the two. If one places oneself in the position as the penetrated subject participant in a homosexual sexual event, one is open to possible infection through the very same acts. The active member is also not entirely free from the threat of infection. Autosexuality for Rodriguez seems to be the only way of avoiding danger. Desiring one's own body does not present the same physical dangers as does sex with a partner because any action that may occur is self-initiated and, one can assume, performed conscientiously enough to ensure the body's health. The body is closed to any outside force, which is necessary for authentic national masculinity, according to Paz, and its purity and integrity can thus be maintained. There are ideological dangers involved in homosexual desires because of social norms, and autosexuality becomes the transcendent category for which Rodriguez yearns.

The reality for Rodriguez, however, is that autosexuality is not the final stage in the pursuit of transcendence and corporeal freedom. The same-sex desire, even manifested latently in the desire to view the maleness of one's own body, is threatening in Rodriguez's equation homosexual-autosexual-asexual. After passing through autosexuality, the body needs to be dissected once again and all sexuality separated out to fulfill this transcendent asexual state of the abject being. Not only is this asexual body able to be viewed as disconnected chunks and pieces of muscles, now it is entirely closed off to any sexual activity—penetrating and being penetrated are both impossible because all sexual activity, even masturbation, is precluded. Rodriguez's response to Paz's

urgency to guard and block the authentic Mexican male's national body, then, indicates the absence of sexuality.

Rodriguez takes this sexuality a step further by implicating impotency, that is to say, an inability to penetrate, with muscle building. Accruing excessive musculature on the body brings with it a kind of nonsexuality as it miniaturizes the sexual organs. The primary male sex organ, the penis, is diminished to such an extent that it has, as Rodriguez states, "no function beyond wit" (39). Either the penis is too small to function actively in any penetration event (heterosexual or homosexual); or, metaphorically, the male body has been castrated to avoid threatening interactions. What is so fascinating here is how, in this particular instance, the act of castration is self-inflicted. It is self-castration as Rodriguez consciously amasses muscles that eventually shrink or eliminate the penis and its potentials. Because of the way he consumes his own image in the mirror, Rodriguez eventually concludes that asexuality is the only viable means for protection. If he is autosexual, the only threatening potential lies in his own glances and those of others.

VII. Concluding Remarks

Rodriguez's avoidance of penetration, influenced by Paz's promotion of impenetrability, is evident with respect to ideological, cultural, and national acts as well as to physical homosexual acts. In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez tells of a protagonist who consciously follows Paz's teachings by guarding his own body from threatening acts of penetration while simultaneously narrating his subject position as colonized. Clearly, consumption, absorption, and rejection are also ambiguous responses in the epistemology of

penetration. At times, absorption, consumption, and rejection are identified as passive acts whereas at other times, these same acts are repositioned and empowered. These contradictions help rupture the fixity of colonial stereotypes and colonial discourse. Paz, for example, in discussing the verbal assaults in which authentic masculine figures engage, he writes,

Cada uno de los interlocutores, a través de trampas verbales y de ingeniosas combinaciones lingüísticas, procura anonadar a su adversario; el vencido es el que no puede contester, el que se *traga* las palabras de su enemigo (38-39). [Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to *swallow* his opponent's jibes] (Kemp 39, emphasis added).

In this instance, the role of consumption and absorption is pejoratively presented. He who swallows is deemed the loser in the verbal exchange. This logic is in line with Paz's overall insistence on impenetrability at any cost. Paz positions swallowing (consuming/absorbing) as an undesirable, and emasculating part of penetrative exchanges. The participant that expels and rejects the damaging diatribes is victorious in battle; the one who swallows is not conforming to the conventions of authentic national masculinity because he has been forced open.

Days of Obligation is not simply an argument with father figures in both the United States and Mexico, but a geographical and cultural exploration of the complicated

relationship between each of those countries. The connection between the United States and Mexico can be seen immediately from the opening of the text where Rodriguez struggles with the fact that he is foreign (that is to say American) in Mexico. The connections are also ideological because Rodriguez is complicating Paz's teaching on his own hyphenated American identity. Rodriguez as a character and author has evolved since the publication of *Hunger of Memory*. It is clear that his second autobiography is in some way a response to the harsh criticism he received for "not being Mexican enough." Because of this categorization he travels between Mexico and the United States, not to find a village similar to the one that his parents must have lived in, but rather to find a space for him reflected in both worlds. Because he is at once the colonized Indian and the colonizing *conquistador*, Richard is ambiguously positioned as both an active and a passive subject. This ambiguity destabilizes Bhabha's effort to rupture the fixity of colonial discourses. In *Days of Obligation*, through the reappropriation and repositioning of colonized and feminized subjectivities, Rodriguez tries to reconcile some of the contradictions that accompany being ambiguously positioned in the interstitial space between two cultures. The argument he is having with his various Mexican forefathers is from the perspective of the oppressed subjects. Colonization places subjects into certain positions and Rodriguez's work in *Days of Obligation* is in line with Sandoval's

Methodology of the Oppressed:

All social orders hierarchically organized into relations of domination and subordination create particular subject positions within in which the subordinated can legitimately function. These

subject positions, once self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants, can become transfigured into effective sites of resistance to an oppressive ordering of power relations (55).

In *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez has prefigured some of what Sandoval argues throughout *Methodology of the Oppressed*. He encourages the acceptance of colonized, oppressed subjects in mainstream culture only later to reposition these same marginal subjects as empowered agents of social change. The strength and resistance that penetrated subjects demonstrate as they consume, absorb, and reject pieces of the dominant culture helps Rodriguez to continue exploring his location in both cultures yet in neither at the same time. All the while stasis is not only limiting of disempowered subjects but also not very realistic because those subjects are constantly in flux between roles and allegiances. Although oppressed, Rodriguez does not negate agency and therefore refashions the notion of passivity that surrounds the objects of conquest.

Chapter 3

(Im)Pure Identities: Browning as an American Project

If thou be one whose heart the holy forms of young imagination
have kept pure, Stranger! Be henceforth warned [...]

—William Wordsworth, “Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree”

I. Brown as an impure Political Subjectivity

Of Rodriguez’s three autobiographies, *Hunger of Memory* has received the most critical attention. *Days of Obligation* and *Brown* both seem to have passed relatively unnoticed by critical commentators in comparison to *Hunger of Memory*. Nonetheless, all three texts must be considered as pieces of a larger whole that represents the life and evolution of Rodriguez as both a character and an author. Although these three works are interrelated thematically, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* makes a theoretical intervention that is not quite as explicit in his other works. Michael Depp notes, “For Rodriguez, who has spent his career playing havoc with the politics of identity, *Brown* is both a departure from his earlier work and the culmination of its most potent arguments” (10). Although all three texts are hybrids of narrative essays and autobiography, *Brown* is a much more theoretically dense presentation because Rodriguez is proposing brown as a new approach to understanding community, sexuality, history, and identity in the United States. *Brown* ends Rodriguez’s three-decade plus journey with a retrospective look at all that has enabled him to theorize from his current position as a postcolonial, queer, brown, and American subject. In this text, however, Rodriguez is proposing different conceptual tools for rethinking universally accepted truths about race,

class, ethnicity, borders and boundaries, and sexuality in America. Critically introducing brown subjectivity as a strategic discursive space for various participants, the colonizers and the colonized, begins conversations that allow for alternative perspectives on the various ambiguous roles individuals have played in the narrations of America's discovery.

In *Brown*, Rodriguez begins by discussing history's role in establishing normative narrations of subjects' location in mainstream culture. An important element for Rodriguez is, I believe, a reconsideration of how certain identities are labeled as powerful while other identities are marked as inferior. Rodriguez juxtaposes the "Negress" and the "Indian" with Alexis de Tocqueville ("the most famous European traveler to the New World," according to Rodriguez) so he can highlight how "[h]istory is a coat cut only to the European" (*Brown* 2). The history in which Rodriguez is interested throughout this autobiography is that of the impure, brown, stained figure of the American cultural imagination. Issues of democracy and politics filter throughout his narrative as he describes brown as impure, contaminated, Hispanic; he personifies brown as "the Third Man," the Indian, the Queer. Through American cultural exploration, Rodriguez posits the acceptance of our brown past as something that unites everyone in the United States. To be brown, then, is to be most authentically American, because brownness embodies the struggles that once created the proverbial melting pot that has come to symbolize the United States. It is because of *Brown* that I even began to conceptualize an epistemology of penetration. I identify a subtext in *Brown* suggesting the following: to be brown is about being fundamentally impure but it is also about existing in an always, already penetrated state of being. Rodriguez makes brown a political identity as he responds to

the historical conditions in the United States that have created these colonized subjectivities.

Rodriguez negotiates brown as a site where feelings of ambivalence create American identities. Brown is an impure and complex category that reflects the ambiguous processes of nationalization and subjectification that all immigrants must face when they assimilate to meet the demands of the dominant culture. Again, the role of open, public admission and a level of acceptance prove to be crucial strategies as Rodriguez provokes debates concerning his identity and the identity of other national subjects post-“discovery.” Declaring the role brown holds in his perception of Americanism, Rodriguez writes, “In an American conversation, where there is no admission of brown, the full meaning of the phrase ‘New World’ lies always out of sight” (*Brown* 132). It is immediately clear that, for Rodriguez, brown is a key analytical and conceptual tool for reevaluating narrations of conquests and their residual effects. Acknowledging and engaging the role of brown in American cultural history is of the utmost importance because, according to his logic, it fills in gaps and unmasks blind spots that have gone unquestioned for far too long.

What makes a concept like brown so provocative is that it imbues various relationships with ambivalence and ambiguity. Although racial implications are a large part of the deployment of the term brown, I read Rodriguez as calling for a reconceptualization of how difference is viewed in the United States so that he can make brown be more understood as a state of being reflecting its sordid colonial past. In colonial discourses, brown parts of the culture are often deemed insignificant or

unimportant. Margo Jefferson suggests, “‘Brown,’ for Rodriguez, stands for everything in American life that resists fixed categories” (27). To view pejoratively the ambiguous mixtures that create the brownness of America is to elevate the pretense of purity that dominates American ideological formations. Recall Bhabha’s suggestion in *The Location of Culture* that “an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (66). Rodriguez yearns for a reformulation of difference in America not as something bad that separates us from the group but as something that unifies us as a community. To see the brown in us all is to destabilize the hierarchies that privilege purity over mixtures in the creation of authentic American subjects. Rodriguez offers the browning of America as the reason why a focus on fixity and classification does not work when one investigates the various cultures that shape the United States.

To extend Jefferson’s ideas, I argue that brown does not just stand for resisting fixed categories. It also represents a (re)productive relationship with ambiguity that can undermine colonial discourses. Brown, then, inaugurates new cultural positions for subjects who, because of their impure histories, have not found sites of representation in public life. Rodriguez asks his readers to rethink the facile classifications that divide subjects into subgroups and instead see brown as a reflection of subjects’ states of being and also of the various processes that enable those states of being. His aim is to hail brown subjecthood into existence not just by virtue of skin color but on the basis of the socio-historical pasts that overlap and intersect. As Richard Alleva states, “*Brown* is a meditation [...] that portrays the United States as a country where barriers, categories,

and—eventually—ethnicities are constantly infiltrated, undermined, obliterated” (25). The breaking down and infiltration of barriers, coupled with the interpellation of these impure bodies, provides a discourse that connects brown with the epistemology of penetration because it accurately reflects that ambiguities that frame the nation and its subjects. The subject positions that are created open up spaces inside the culture for people whose histories have marked them as invisible, and thus, cultural outsiders.

Brown itself resists fixity because of its multiple functions in language. Brown is at once an adjective, a noun, and, as Rodriguez offers, a verb (105). As a descriptor, brown represents the color of skin that is not defined culturally as either as white or black. It also describes states of being that are the results of mixing and hybridization. As a noun, brown is an identity category, much like Hispanic, for example, created to apply to people ideologically or physically and emphasizing admixtures and complicated histories. Through the verb form, to brown, or the gerund browning, we are introduced to the process by which individuals, groups, languages, cultures, and so forth, interact and mingle (think of the metaphor of browning in cooking, where flavors intermingle, for example) and influence one another. It is the resulting overlaps, admixtures, and unifying elements that create impure subjects. Anzaldúa credits José Vasconcelos with envisioning a mixture of races that creates “hybrid progeny” and a genetically stronger species. It is from “this racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollination” that Anzaldúa narrates a *mestiza* consciousness in *Borderland/La Frontera* (99). Throughout American history, the *mestiza/o* has been conceptualized as an impure mixture of bodies in action. I position Rodriguez’s work in *Brown* as being in conversation with Vasconcelos, another

father figure of Mexican philosophy/letters and the Chicana mother figure that Anzaldúa represents.

When an amassment is created, it is by definition a combined product of what created it; it is not clearly one thing or another. Instead, the result of such a mixing reflects a combination of the original items. Though it may be similar in some ways to certain elements that combined to produce it, it is also markedly different from them.

Anzaldúa writes,

Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creation of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. [...] In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures (103).

I believe that in *Brown* Rodriguez is engaged in an ideological and psychical mission similar to that which Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa begin in presenting *mestizaje* to America. Where Rodriguez diverges, I think, is in regard to the politics of brown in colonial discourse. Because of its varied grammatical usage, brown becomes an impure characteristic that can undermine and even obliterate negative colonial stereotypes. Brown, therefore, resists the fixity that colonial discourse imputes to it by blurring the image of stasis; it represents something that is at once action and actor, subject and object. For Rodriguez, brown is the direct result of contradictory interactions between empowered and disempowered bodies during and after the conquest of America. What

Rodriguez attempts to unmask is how uncovering the brown stains in the historical American cultural imagination is the final necessary discovery for the New World.

II. The Pretense of Purity

In *Brown*, Rodriguez undergoes a process of defining exactly what brown is and what it is not. Taken as a whole, the book suggests several ways of applying brown to a new critical analysis of the historical and ongoing collusion of cultures in the United States. His first definition of brown comes in the preface and appears in all capital letters: “BROWN AS IMPURITY” (xi). For Rodriguez, the concepts of impurity and contamination, much like passivity, are neither simple nor one-dimensional. As he did in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez again repositions culturally understood images (such as impurity) in order to expand their meaning. Rather than adhering to the fixed representation of impurity as negative and pejorative, Rodriguez suggests that our “dirtiness” unifies all Americans. The negative connotations of impurity do not necessarily limit brown’s ability to empower its subjects. Later in *Brown*, Rodriguez reiterates the importance of the link between brown and impurity; he calls it “the most important theme of [his] writing now” (35). The passages in this book are not about criticizing impurity but, rather, acknowledging the transformative potential of impurities in the processes of browning; a brown state of being is liberating because it disrupts notions of fixity that colonial discourses create. Rodriguez sees impurity as central to reconstituting the American community precisely because the impure mixtures that create its diversity are commonly shared characteristics. Abjecting or negating impure subjects is contrary to Rodriguez’s

project. *Brown* is about inclusion and integration, but also about the public admission of browned, impure subjectivities into national consciousness. In *Brown* he argues:

What most matters is the soliloquy. The soliloquy is an occasion for explanation. For putting one's case before oneself in private (privacy is represented by direct address to the audience). Theatrical soliloquy achieves what private deliberation attempts, what prayer attempts, yearns for, but can never seem to accomplish in life (61-62).

Rodriguez positions purity as a theatrical production. The text itself is ambiguous because the narrative becomes an intervening, semiprivate yet fully public soliloquy directed to his readers. What he hopes to accomplish in real life, through his autobiographical writings on brown, is the acceptance and admission of the queer/brown parts that have historically unified everyone's condition in the United States. He wants readers to rethink the standardized, constraining elements that connect brown, or impurity, with negative stereotypes. His efforts to reevaluate the reality that most, if not all, identities and subjects have some relationship with brownness is central to this analysis. Purity is depicted as the best way to represent a culture and therefore the category brown—however tangential or repressed it may be—is troublesome because it disrupts dominant sociopolitical expectations.

The mistaken notion that a penetrating subject remains uncontaminated must be reevaluated. The interactions among subjects are not so clean, neat, and one-directional as the concept of purity suggests. The importance of identifying this inaccurate

representation of purity for Rodriguez lies in how the altered, colonized subjects speak and manifest positions and identities after penetration events, as well as how they are enabled to taint or penetrate the original repressive structures that deem them marginal. A brown state of being is not a fixed category. It is a dynamic and ambiguous identity that represents the proof of penetration, yet is also able to disrupt fixed expectations of colonized subjectivities. Notions of activity, passivity, empowerment, and disempowerment no longer make much sense when brown is considered to be a space in which they constantly intersect.

Rodriguez's suggestion that America is brown, and thus the result of conflicting colonial events, is unsettling to some who understand brown solely through its racial or moral connotations. In *Days of Obligation*, concepts of Indian culture, language, religion, and body are all in browned, penetrated states such that daily activities that have roots in imperial influences go unnoticed. In *Brown*, an epistemology of penetration reveals that not only the Indians of America but also the bodies and mindsets of other Americans are also browned. Rodriguez claims, "There is brown at work in all the works of man" (36). The suggestion is that the colonizers and colonized subjects produce and reproduce impurities as they interact with one another. Discussing Rodriguez's play on brown, Alleva notes, "Any cultural mutant can be 'brown'" (25). Underlying that assertion is Rodriguez's desire to demonstrate that purity and segregated bodies of knowledge do not exist, nor have they ever existed despite what the culture portrays. Alleva accepts Rodriguez's suggestion that any non-normative subjects in a culture can be considered brown—even if the color of their skin is not. Alleva adds that brownness is more a state

of being than a physical description. If any non-normative cultural subject can be brown, brown is clearly not just a reference to race and color. Alleva points out that brown as a marker of identity has always been an integral state of being: “In our culture brown is here to stay. But is anybody alive who remembers when it was absent?” (26). Though Alleva’s question can be interpreted as a critique of the nuance the book purports to proffer, it nonetheless substantiates how integral an idea like brown and the process of browning is when considering the mixed and complicated history of American subjects. It also supports the notion that brownness reflects more an ideological stance and interpretation of one’s ambiguous past than a reference to skin color.

From *Hunger of Memory* to *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez makes a shift toward empowering the culturally defined feminine aspects of colonization and its effects on subjects. *Brown* extends this shift to a broad reconceptualization of the difference in the ambiguous roles subjects play throughout history. Further, an anxiety surrounding the side effects of the browning process that is colonization reappears. Rodriguez offers readers some solace by suggesting how Americans, like many other groups, have all at some point have been or will be contaminated on some level. Purity itself is an imaginary state of being that in no way reflects the real historical conditions of colonial subjects. I see Rodriguez’s gesture for unification as an attempt to alleviate some of the frustrations that penetration events causes for participants. If we are all altered and are impure because of our complicated pasts, Rodriguez suggests that the fear surrounding impurity is a byproduct of colonial discourses. To fear contamination makes sense only if the dominant class claims purity as an integral component in establishing and maintaining its

position on top. Processes of national and individual subjectification are brown because they require ambiguities and impurities.

III. The Browning of Language

Language acquisition and its relationship to assimilation principles are major themes for Rodriguez and his critics (see, i.e., the works of Randy A. Rodriguez, de Castro, Lawtoo, and Fachinger). Education is the vehicle through which language and culture are disseminated. J.A. Marzan writes, “For Rodriguez, ‘education’ also referred to schooling but as a euphemism, in his words, mimicking, being submissive to, or emulating Anglo culture” (45). Although the connection between education and submission is consistently reinforced by critics, specifically in his book *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez reconfigures the notion of submission as feminine and empowers this socially devalued classification. He sees acquiescing to the public realm as a necessary component of successful Americanization. Clearly, for Rodriguez, assimilation (much like passivity and impurity) does not simply have negative connotations. Ilan Stavans notes, “*Brown* is again about assimilation, but from a perspective that asserts America is a country shaped by so many interbred layers of ethnicity that nothing is pure anymore” (32). Alleva would, I believe, respond by asking if the country is ever pure to begin with. What is important here is that this third, and allegedly final, autobiography provokes scholarly debate in a way that *Days of Obligation* did not. Rodriguez’s focus on a controversial term like brown appears to make sense to a larger audience grappling with identity politics.

Nothing is pure anymore in America precisely because of its colonial past (and present) is still visible through interactions between minority and dominant subjects and

institutions like internal colonialism. Discussing how African slaves engaged with the English language to make it their own, Rodriguez writes:

Despite laws prohibiting black literacy in the nineteenth century, the African in America took the paper-white English and remade it (as the Irish and the Welsh also took their English), wadded it up, rigmarolled it, rewound it into a llareggub rap, making English theirs, making it idiosyncratically glamorous (*Come on now, you try it*), making it impossible for any American to use English henceforward without remembering them; making English so cool, so jet, so festival, that children want it only that way (*Brown 18*).

Although national and state legislation was enacted by the dominant (white) group to limit the agency of the minority (slave) group, it made no sense to think that the minority group would indefinitely remain subsumed by and be positioned submissively to the dominant culture. Through the use of language, one can witness the interplay between various groups in America. The English language, once foreign to the Africans in America, became their own because of exposure, location, and the interaction of speakers in society. Much as Rodriguez claims in *Days of Obligation* that Spanish became an Indian language in America, and similar to how he narrates his interactions with the English language as a child, the example of the English language as being influenced by the African and other presences extends the idea that language is constantly being infiltrated and contaminated by internal and external forces. Referring to English as “paper-white” implies purity and chastity, along with the connotation of a *tabula rasa*, on

which the English language is presented as a blank sheet of paper without outside influence. Finally, the concept of English as a sheet of white paper implies the intention to contaminate; that is to say, the purpose of white paper is to be inscribed, to be contaminated with words, images, and so forth.

Even though by the nineteenth century English had been influenced by other languages (it is a Germanic language with strong Latin influences), the image it holds as a clean slate upon which to be inscribed suggests its ambiguity both before and after its reworking by minority subjects. Eventually these marginal figures grew accustomed to speaking the language, even if some were not capable of writing or reading it. The ability to penetrate and transform the language of the dominant culture was still possible even though the African slaves did not have as much direct access and control over it as non-slaves did.

White as a color does not merit much explication, simply because at this point in intellectual thought, white is routinely conceived of as pure. Juxtaposed with brown, however, white offers another layer to this analysis. Rodriguez would argue that English is and always has been brown at its core; emphasizing the alleged purity of English only furthers its ambiguous position as both an active force that transforms and shapes others and as a language system that is also transformed, altered, and contaminated by various historical influences.

The English language is itself ambiguous because it is an amalgam of various other languages and cultures. It is a colonized and colonizing language incorporating such varied examples as zoot suit/pachucos (a men's clothing style popularized by

Mexican Americans), and so forth.²³ Minority subjects have been known to penetrate the English language to such an extent that their presence and various roles in its evolution are undeniable. What once would have been considered inappropriate, inferior English is now standard.²⁴ Acknowledging the influence that brown subjects have had historically on the English language is central to Rodriguez's autobiographies; now such penetrations as those made by the African Americans and other browned subjects have become the expected and desired components that future generations seek out as the sole viable way of expressing themselves. Because of the ambiguity affecting the regulation and evolution of English, the white (dominant) and brown (inferior) presences are consistently reproduced.

Rodriguez credits non-white subjects as being among the first to introduce the browning of the English language. He sees their role in infiltrating the language system as a catalyst that caused change and is still an ongoing process affecting English. Thankful for their efforts, Rodriguez writes, "I cannot imagine myself writing these words, without the example of African slaves stealing the English language, learning to read against the law, then transforming the English language into the American tongue, transforming me, rescuing me, with a coruscating nonchalance" (*Brown* 31). Much as in *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez envied and yet respected the *braceros* defiance of the taboo of the sun's rays by working outdoors without shirts; here he sees the actions of these brown and other brown subjects as defiant yet necessary for many reasons. By

²³ Think also of words from other immigrant groups such as Yiddish (chutzpah-audacity), French (la mode), German (sauerbraten) to mention only three.

²⁴ Ebonics is a material example of how language itself can be brown and browning at once.

influencing the shape of the English language and transforming it, minority American subjects have carved out a space for themselves in a culture that once regarded them as inferior and insignificant. This scene in which language deviates from a standard highlights the themes in the second chapter of this project regarding consumption, absorption, and rejection. As brown subjects consume and absorb the dominant language, they also reject various parts of it and replace these parts with new words that did not already exist in that language. Rodriguez sees his work as an extension and a continuation of post-Civil War efforts and as a way of rescuing other subjectivities that are not necessarily represented through the English language. If it were not for the pioneering and inventiveness of the African slaves and their descendants to infuse the dominant English language system with parts of their own culture, Rodriguez confesses that he would not have been able to express himself or theorize brownness as he does.

IV. Religious Purification as a Response to American Browning

Religion is another pervasive theme throughout all Rodriguez's autobiographies. Christianity's notions of purity, sanctity, and virginity hold a particular fascination for Rodriguez. In *Brown* he questions how, and if, religion as a social construct interacts with brownness. That impurities must be absolved through various rituals suggests a strong desire for reclamation of some virginal or purified state that leaves participants absolved from sins and external influences. Rodriguez does not adhere to these policies; yet, in discussing the confessional and penitence, he notes that brownness is, at least on a superficial level, antithetical to the root philosophy of purity in Catholicism and other forms of Christianity. In *Brown* Rodriguez writes, "*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned*

[...] Pure thoughts are few and far between. Impurities are motives, weights, considerations, temptations that digress from God” (202). Rodriguez grapples with the idea of the confessional as a space to acknowledge his sins because of his uncertainty about which thoughts do or do not constitute offenses. The religious effort is that its adherents maintain a pure lifestyle and think only pure thoughts. The reality, though, is that, pure thoughts do not populate Rodriguez’s mind. It is the impure, brown debates that intrigue and provoke him to think critically. Impure thoughts, according to Rodriguez, occur with some regularity. He labels these thoughts as temptations that move him away from God. Rodriguez seems to me to be articulating that impurity is a fundamental part of being human, and thus brown is a human trait too. Although brownness is at odds with religious ideology, I believe Rodriguez wants readers to question the social rigidity concerning impure bodies and actions.

Rodriguez argues that there is brownness inside religion. He suggests that various major religious doctrines, like that of Protestantism and Catholicism (among others), are already implicated in brown discourses. Because religion has traditionally emphasized purity and chastity, it is logical to see why Rodriguez finds religious ideology to be a fertile source for exploration. For example, “*That thou shouldst descend to mortal clay*” or “to be Adam summoned from dust” implicates brown in the actual beginning and end of human life (201). Moreover, Rodriguez notes,

A young woman from San José who writes to me, tells me, by way of introduction, that she is the daughter of a ‘New York Jew’ and an ‘Iranian Muslim.’

That is what I want to know. That is what I want to hear about—children who are unnatural to any parish because they belong to no precedent. Brown children are as old as America—oh, much older—to be the daughter of a father is already to be brown. To be the rib-wife of Adam was already to be brown; to be Adam summoned from dust as the magpies watched and nudged one another. But public admissions of racial impurity are fresh and wonderful to me (202).

That is again Rodriguez's attempt to disrupt the rigid colonial ideologies that dominate American culture. For Rodriguez, browning is a process that in many ways is based on a misreading of the notion of purity that exists in many religious doctrines. He makes a direct reference to colonization when speaking of miscegenation. He then implies that religion itself is not pure. Rodriguez racializes religion in order to address the humanity in different races and religions. To view religion as having brown components reinforces the role of brown as a category of unification in American subjectification and nationalization. It concurrently highlights the importance of purity in the American imagination.

Though Rodriguez attempts to empower brown as a quasi-spiritual state of being, he is also aware of subjects' intense yearning for an uncontaminated identity—however impossible that may be to attain. For many, there is a desire to reverse the results of the contamination and reclaim or restore the lost virginal state. Confession exemplifies the desire to cleanse the speaker/confessor. That “confession involves the search for forgiveness or absolution for one's misdeeds” only furthers the enforcement of confession

as symbolically integral in the various processes of purification as a means of unbrowning the repenting subject (Murray-Swank 276).

Loss of purity plagues many to such an extent that they firmly believe that there could be a procedure to un-dirty, un-penetrate, and un-brown themselves from past sins that defile them. Discussing the cleaning of Michelangelo's art on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rodriguez states that the idea of purifying the brown of time's passage is not only blasphemous but also an impossible reversal (*Brown* 36). "The blasphemy was to believe that time should be reversed" (43). Reversing the effects of moral impurities and of time are strong impulses that govern some religious acts; this is frequent because of the importance the concept of purity holds in religion. Disrupting the fixed religious notion of purity with his use of brown, Rodriguez uncovers ways that subjects can productively negotiate their ambiguous and mixed positions in culture. Accepting browning as part of Americanization becomes an impulse that motivates Rodriguez's text.

It is clear that such reversals are not actually possible, yet many religious figures historically have urged purification rituals. For example, Catholics believe that baptism will erase original sin. The original brown element they all share needs to be purified as the first process of becoming an official religious subject. "The human imagination has recently sustained a reversal. We have cleaned the ceiling [...] It has been cleaned, has been restored; unhallowed; changed and called 'original,' though no one has any idea what that might mean" (43). Of interest here is not the desire to reverse time but the desire to regain what is lost. The desire to cleanse and erase the residual effects of time and life moves from an amorphous idea of a private confessional to a physical cleansing

ritual. You can try to reclaim the pristine look of a white dress through bleaching, or you can make Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* and *The Last Judgment* new once again by systematic cleaning. But the passage of time is not erased; its remnants are merely covered up and altered in a way that unintentionally supports the notion of purity as a hoax. The alterations may make the picture appear cleaner superficially, but they do not reverse the browning of time's passage. The chemicals clean build up and refine the surface; it can be altered inasmuch as it is no longer soiled with dust and sediments. Yet it is by no means identical to the original. The cleansed version is still brown fundamentally, even though people view it now as identical to the original. Rodriguez's notion that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel has been cleaned and restored is, of course, an observation of fact as well as a rhetorical ploy. Yet, despite having been chemically washed in the attempt to restore it to its original form, it is nonetheless merely an imitation of the lost original. He asks, "What was the light of day in 1540?" Even if the painting looks exactly as one imagines the original, there are far too many factors that prevent its ever being exactly as it was originally (43).

The cleaning of the ceiling has not so much "restored" it as it has altered it. Even the attempts to cleanse it do nothing more than implicate it in another form of browning. The chemicals wash away particles and in many people's perception, this process renews the object to some mythical original state. In reality, the painting is masquerading as an original when it is nothing more than a cleaner version than it was prior to cleaning. Rodriguez underscores how believing the cleaner version is the same as the original has negative effects on viewers because it deludes them into thinking that some mythical

reclamation and renewal process can restore the image. This picture is much more than a famous work of art. It has a value to the Catholic faith itself. Cleansing and purifying the ceiling was an attempt to “restore the Vatican’s luster” (*Brown* 43) to that which the church enjoyed prior to the many issues of abuse and corruption that it has confronted in recent years. The mere passage of time browns us on several levels according to Rodriguez. Religious ideology has a problematic relationship to purity because living an unsoiled, pure life is clearly a difficult task for many; rules and regulations are created to promote ways to cleanse oneself of the inevitable and pervasive contaminants that abound.

Even though Rodriguez notes that the admission of the brown parts of religion is not offered frequently in public (202), he does not give up his pursuit to substantiate a deep connection between the two. Although some religious fanatics may find his discussion of God as brown to be unnerving, it is not so much a conversation on race as it is about a profound relationship among brownness, God’s expression, and mankind. Rodriguez writes, “God so loved the world that the Word became incarnate, condescended to mortal clay. God became brown. True God and true man” (207). Here, Jesus Christ, the son of God, is implied. According to Christian ideology, God offered his son to humanity as a way of humbling himself and to show the world his love; the idea behind this action is that nothing is too great a sacrifice for devout followers. To convey religious messages better, God’s son became flesh. According to Rodriguez’s logic, the flesh would be brown not necessarily because of the color but because, as Alleva highlights, Jesus would be considered a cultural mutant. If one accepts that flesh as a

category is already browned, this action browns part of the figure of God; this browning of the image of God is not just because of the reference to clay but because, on entering the earth, He is no longer completely pure inasmuch as the world itself is beset with impurities.

The brownness of mankind is further explicated in Rodriguez's discussion of St. Augustine's concept of original sin,²⁵ according to which, all religious subjects are born impure because life itself is a browning process. Baptism, for Christians, is the purification process that absolves them of their inherent brownness; confession is an extension of the concept of purification because of the range of impure temptations we all face. Thus, in religious thinking, God humbling himself and suffering along with his followers builds a connection between brownness, divinity, and humanity. Because to be human is to experience impurities, this connection between God and brown is an important gesture Rodriguez makes.

V. The Browning of the Flesh

The purifying of bodies, mouths, and cultures is not foreign to Rodriguez. In *Brown* he revisits the scene from his childhood in *Hunger of Memory* in which he takes a blade to his skin in an attempt to remove the brown coloring of his flesh. At that time, Rodriguez believed that there was a way to erase the colonial markings his brown skin symbolized. He had fallen victim to the illusion that perhaps one can reclaim a sense of purity by excising the proof of colonialism (his brown skin). However, in *Brown* Rodriguez presents this failed attempt at removal of his "colored" flesh as the desires of a young,

²⁵Rodriguez's admission of racial/cultural impurities in his autobiographies can be read as structurally similar to St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Rodriguez makes multiple references to St. Augustine throughout his texts.

naïve boy unable to think critically about the ambiguous and productive processes of browning:

Many years later, long after I leave Stanford, I will be pursued in print by some puritan professor there for exhibitions of ethnic self-hatred in my writing. Yes, as a child, I dragged a razor blade against my forearm to see if I could get the brown out. I couldn't. A clandestine experiment. Just checking. Did I hate my brown skin? No. Would I rather have been white? I would rather have been Jeff Chandler. Jeff Chandler would rather have been Lauren Bacall, according to Esther Williams' autobiography.

And yet I remain as much a puritan as any American (66).

Rodriguez moves from his youth to middle age and because of this growth, he is able to reflect from some distance on his earlier actions. He admits to having been enchanted then by the universal allure of and urge for purification. Now however, the removal of the brown is not just a singular act of altering his skin color, as it was when he was younger. It instead represents the attempt at removing a colonial history that privileges purity over impurity. He accepts that he did, in fact, try to cleanse his skin of its sordid past, but now does not hate his skin and prefers not to be white or pure (66). Although it is impossible to know exactly what he thought as a child with the blade to his then undesirable flesh, Rodriguez as an adult suggests that his desire to rid his flesh of its impurity was unsuccessful regardless of the reasoning.

Rodriguez tackles the issue of sodomy when he recalls that excising the impurities of his flesh transferred from the physical to the psychological realm. In *Brown* he is more

open about his sexuality. Since *Hunger for Memory*, the role religion has had on Rodriguez's English-speaking public identity is undeniable. I believe that another motivational thrust in this third autobiography is his acceptance of the various potentials of his brown, queer flesh. The transition that Rodriguez makes from religion being brown, bowel movements being brown, and sodomy being brown is not entirely smooth, yet making this connection allows him to discuss homosexual male sexual interactions from a religious perspective. Dan Seligman points out, "[W]e are also reminded that excrement is brown, which eventually leads to the thought that sodomy, too, is brown" (76). What Seligman does not reiterate here is that the conversation was tripartite; he leaves religion out of the equation. All these factors, combined with the concept of purity and impurity, begin Rodriguez's discussion of religion and homosexual male anal intercourse.

Rodriguez negotiates cultural concepts of homosexuality from various and conflicting standpoints. He believes that male-male (homo)sexual references are the brownest of all spaces in the cultural imaginary. I note, though, that Rodriguez is conflicted because his own identity is also inevitably intersected with sodomy, the most impure, brown of all social/moral acts: Rodriguez offers:

The way we are constructed constructs love? Limits love? (We die.)

The making of love? No. That is heresy. God so loved the world that

the Word became incarnate, condescended to mortal clay. God

became brown. True God and true man.

Where there's a will there's a way. Sodomy is among the brownest of thoughts. Even practitioners find it a disagreeable subject (*Brown* 207).

Rodriguez identifies God as brown and impure because of becoming flesh, yet that does not negate the inappropriateness of sodomy in mainstream culture. Rodriguez makes a simple yet bold connection: God, by becoming flesh, became impure like humanity. If humanity is impure by nature but receives divine forgiveness, then how does sodomy come to symbolize the ultimate brown stain in normative culture? Obviously Rodriguez's classification and evaluation of the topic of sodomy is not necessarily based on fact, but it is interesting to consider the implications of such a comment in relation to our earlier discussions of homosexuality coupled with religious references. Rodriguez's anxiety around homosexual acts resurfaces here, but perhaps this time with a small level of admission—he says that even practitioners find it a disagreeable topic of conversation. Rodriguez undoubtedly finds homosexual anal penetration difficult to discuss openly. (Recall how I identify the scene in *Days of Obligation* where Richard is in the church seated on a cold, hard pew and contemplating the middle-aged gay couples' knowledge of each other's body as a way for Rodriguez to engage his homosexuality.) Now in *Brown* he is yet again calling into question religion's role in shaping culture.

Although Rodriguez is unwilling to address sodomy in any direct way that implicates his own flesh and his body's permeability, he clearly holds some contempt for the way religious doctrine has influenced his previous classification of sodomy as one of the brownest of all acts. It is, I believe, because of the negative ways sodomy is written

and spoken of from a religious standpoint that Rodriguez grapples with homosexuality and its physical expression. Religious ideology dominates issues of propriety and morality in mainstream American society—for better or worse. Therefore Rodriguez’s conflicted relationship to sodomy is inevitably also influenced by normative expectations and understandings. “Theological condemnation of sodomy,” Rodriguez points out, “has scrolled into a pillar of negation rising from a small, hometown passage in Genesis wherein some redneck rowdies of Sodom—heterosexuals all, I’d be willing to bet—make obscene remarks about a couple of hunky angels they see passing through town” (*Brown* 207). That Biblical scene, involving angels and the inhabitants of Sodom, deals with violence and rape, yet it is best known as a doctrinal warning against the sin of inappropriate bodily penetration (particularly homosexual and anal). Rodriguez’s condescending tone reflects his attitude toward the misinterpretation and magnification of this passage and suggests latent homoeroticism on the part of the local town members viewing these “hunky” angels.

Rodriguez is almost blaming the inhabitants of Sodom for the way a specific event regarding the “hunky angels” is narrated. This narration has become emblematic of God’s wrath for the brownness inherent in the sin of sodomy. Rodriguez is angry and represents the Sodom townies as uneducated, provincial locals. The inhabitants of Sodom and their provincial interpretation of certain events has led to the utter condemnation of sodomy—a condemnation that has influenced social consciousness and legal discourse. Thus sodomy is disagreeable not only for practitioners but for a majority of individuals because of religious discourses that connects sodomy with impurity,

homosexuality, and sin. Reconceptualizing brownness according to Rodriguez's logic disrupts this fixed notion of sodomy in colonial discourse and opens up alternative spaces to rethink such an act.

VI. One Drop of Brownness Affects the Landscape of the United States

Miscegenation and sexual interaction between colonized and colonizers continue to be important themes in Rodriguez's work because of his focus on impurity and contamination in culture. In *Brown*, Rodriguez aligns with Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space of enunciation" when he speaks of the representation of brownness and impurities in relation to race. For Bhabha, the "Third Space of enunciation" makes "the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process" (54). This process is labeled contradictory because it challenges widely accepted, socio-historical norms as a "homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (54). This contradictory past, present, and future is kept alive, I believe, through the enunciation and creation of this "Third Space" of representation through discourse. Bhabha explains the role of the "Third Space" as being essential:

When we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent [third] space of enunciation [...] we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity (55).

For both Rodriguez and Bhabha, the historical purity of culture is an impossible goal, even when those narrating history have the power to shape its course. The “Third Space” ensures that there is no single specific meaning or significance for symbols in the culture and, most important for Rodriguez’s work, “that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 55). Rodriguez’s conceptualizing a racial and cultural category like brown is harnessed to the reappropriation of impurity and contamination in the broader cultural milieu. The strength of *Brown* lies in the way it articulates an alternative interpretation of symbols, like race.

North of the border, in the United States, racial contamination has been identified as a scary browning process because it highlighted fears of cultural impurities. Miscegenation is a concern about the bodies of individual subjects and national bodies as well. Bhabha discusses the border conflicts between the United States and Mexico: “The discourses of American cultural colonialism and Mexican dependency the fear/desire of miscegenation, the American border as cultural signifier of a pioneering, male ‘American’ spirit [is] always under threat from races and cultures beyond the border or frontier” (69). Miscegenation is threatening to the color and culture of America because it is a concrete example of the varied, ambiguous histories within the United States. The geography and history of America substantiate that, though feared, cultural hybrids have always played a role in its national formation. The threat is from subjects both inside and outside of the perimeters of the United States. Rodriguez emphasizes that a concept such as purity is not even historically plausible in a discussion of the racial and social history of America.

In *Brown* Rodriguez highlights the “one-drop theory” as among the most controversial and racist discursive developments produced in response to the interracial mixtures occurring in the United States. The basic idea underlying this racial theory is that once mixed (read browned) with the blood of a black body, the offspring, and many if not all future offspring, are socially classifiable as black (141). The actual color of the skin then becomes less relevant—what matters is that they represent impure admixtures. Of course, the issue is still one of visibility, yet now issues of subjectification and objectification extend the debate to incorporate cultural understandings that surpass the shade of one’s skin. Referencing Du Bois, Herb Boyd writes, “Historically, white America has viewed the color question through a prism of the ‘one-drop theory.’ Any American with one drop of black blood was considered a ‘negro,’ even if she or he had a lily white complexion” (4). Brown, as not solely a racial category, extends these implications to show how ideologically one is contaminated in America if they represent its ambiguous past.

Rodriguez’s focus on brown as already and always a contaminated subject position can now also include black because of the one-drop theory. He continues, “But the issue of such white-black eroticism was not recognized as being brown, or both. Mulattos, quadroons, octoroons, tracing distance from the contaminant, were ultimately an irrelevance under the dictum of the American racial theory called the ‘one-drop’ theory” (*Brown* 134). Though Rodriguez sees the brownness in this historical racial debate, this is not the way the dominant culture approaches it. Also, socially interracial offspring are not afforded the option of categories as black and white. Black becomes the

subject's identity regardless how long ago such mixing (read contaminations) occurred. What matters is that the subjectification of mixed race individuals is limited by the culture because of how the larger society views their racially impure and culturally browned states of being.²⁶ For Rodriguez the aim is not to necessarily open up the label "white" to these individuals, thus declaring them black or white. Rather the theoretical applications of brown resolve cultural concerns because to accept browning is to accept that many subjects have historically or are currently negotiating their conflicted hybrid identities. Similar to how I offer *Days of Obligation* as a rereading of Paz, I believe that in *Brown*, brown and browning is also a rereading and reappropriation—the "Third Space" of which Bhabha speaks— of the significance of otherness in culture.

VII. Richard's American Project

The cultural significance not just of black but also of white is implicated in a conjecture such as the "one-drop" theory. White as flesh color and as a social classification tries to maintain its purity and innocence with regard to its involvement in brown history (*Brown* 139). By remaining innocent and pure of actual historical occurrences, white removes itself from an admission of its real culpability in the browning of history—its own and others'. Such an admission is threatening precisely because it suggests the browning of whiteness. In *Brown* Rodriguez identifies a paradox in the New World that allows a white woman to birth a black baby but never the reverse (135). The complexity of white as social consciousness and a racial category is a theme that plagues Rodriguez throughout

²⁶ In the light of Barack Obama's election, it is pertinent to note that, for the first time, expressions like, "He's half-white too" resound. Nonetheless, racism is still rampant, and his inauthenticity, as neither one hundred percent black nor white, is controversial. Though outside the scope of this project, he is a politically brown figure, and it will be interesting to see if and how ideologies involving racial mixing change in the coming years.

all three autobiographies. Bhabha addresses Rodriguez's anxieties about racial and cultural purities and impurities when he writes, "The myth of historical origination—racial purity, cultural priority—produced in relation to the colonial stereotype functions to 'normalize' the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequent of its process of disavowal" (74). The myth is that an original and pure history is accorded to (and afforded by) the dominant white characters who have narrated the course of history. Colonized subjects are left with few options, and negating their otherness, their brownness in relation to the cultural power whiteness offers, becomes a strategy for national subjectification.

Previously, in *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez has used imagery and specific scenes (recall the razor blade on his skin as he tried to see if he could excise its color) to suggest a discontent with his dark complexion. Now, however, Rodriguez openly admits, "I grew up wanting to be white. That is, to the extent of wanting to be colorless and to feel complete freedom of movement" (*Brown* 140). White is signified not just by Rodriguez, but by American culture, as being colorless. Rodriguez desires to be associated with the white hegemony in American culture. The white, or colorless, bodies in the United States are able to move about freely without racial demarcation—that is to say, they assume the position of non-racialized bodies in the cultural imagination. This colorlessness is what Rodriguez yearned for. But his focus has changed to admitting the brown parts of us all as a valid means of American subjectification and nationalization.

Whether because of self-reflection and maturation throughout the years or in response to critics' labeling Rodriguez as a traitor (see Alleva, Almaguer, Márez,

Fachinger, among others), Rodriguez now directly takes up a topic that shapes yet plagues his life and his critics. The desire to be white, according to Rodriguez, is not necessarily about betraying his ancestry. It has much more to do with the ability to not be marked immediately as Bhabha's Other, on the sole basis of his complexion (or other physical characteristics). White then becomes an issue of visibility or, rather, invisibility. To be white is to be part of the myth of origin and purity that Bhabha explicates. As Rodriguez admits, to be white is to be free, without a color, to blend in with other people and groups in a way that being "of color" never affords. Labeling whiteness as a total freedom of movement suggests Rodriguez understands the symbolic meaning colorlessness holds in culture. Directly talking about whiteness, Rodriguez writes, "White, which began as an idea of no color [...] white in America ended up as freedom from color—an idea of no boundary" (*Brown* 141). To be white, for Rodriguez, is to be able to pass through life unnoticed except for your successes or failures. White, then, is antithetical to brown because it exemplifies purity concretely. However I believe that for Rodriguez, to be brown is to represent a form of authentic Americanism, perhaps the only pure American identity. To be brown is to be mixed, and this mixing is the common denominator throughout history. Rodriguez yearns to be white in a society that neither wants nor knows how to deal with the brownness of its history.

A white body has symbolically been conceptualized as a pure body insofar as it was not immediately classified as visually other. Generally the white bodies were dominant and impervious whereas brown bodies always were reminded of their potential openness. Rodriguez, though, articulates how the presence of brown bodies had effects on

whites, blacks, and browns alike: “Brown made Americans mindful of tunnels within their bodies, about which they did not speak; about their ties to natures, about which they did not speak; about their ties to one another, about which they did not speak” (133). The acceptance of a shared brownness establishes a sense of community for Rodriguez. It can be viewed as an alternative cultural American project because it reminds people of their historical ties to each other. In the United States there is a culture of racial mixture that intersects with the history of segregated migrants and, as well, is offered as another definition of what America(n) is.²⁷

Rodriguez’s work on the brownness of postcolonial subjects complements Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence and the “Third Space,” because bodies that are white/black/brown can all have at least an ideological relationship with brownness. Using white flesh as a specific example of a nexus between Bhabha and Rodriguez’s work, one can see how a colonizing white subject can be, and most probably is, ideologically browned in some way because of the consistent interactions with other bodies that represent cultural impurities. Through their exchanges all participants switch roles, influence each other, and create new relationships because of the inherent and undeniable ambivalence and ambiguity of which Bhabha and Rodriguez speak. Rodriguez sees the admission of the brown parts of everyone as necessary for colonized and dominant subjects because it affords the ability to reconcile with and to accept their interrelated pasts.

The politics of cultural propriety label certain sexual interactions—recall the notions of sodomy previously noted in this chapter—brown. The penetrability of national

²⁷ For more information on alternative readings of racial mixtures and definitions of America, see *Faces of America* by Pablo Dilerio.

subjects' bodies can be forbidden for a variety of religious, legal, and cultural reasons. The implication that these brown admissions taint both the subject and the nation resonates with Rodriguez's theoretical work in *Brown*. Rodriguez yet again assumes the role of the narrating subject who admits to things that are generally not spoken of because of their damaging effects on the various processes of nationalization and subjectification. Just as Paz admits to the penetrability of the masculine subject's body ideologically, geographically, and socially, Rodriguez uses brown strategically to represent a visceral admission to some historical submission. Similar to the arguments I elaborate earlier in this project, for Rodriguez this admission-as-submission does not necessarily have deleterious effects on the subject's position in the culture. The problem arises from the evaluation of contamination and impurity as representing weakness as opposed to a potential strength or a strategy. Rodriguez wants to reposition brownness as a potent identity category that motivates nuanced cultural formations for colonized and colonizing subjects in the United States.

VIII. Brown Knowledge from Body to Epistemology

The final chapter of *Brown*, "Peter's Avocado," deals with issues related to food contamination and purity and the effects on the body. Rodriguez shares the topic of his current writing project with a friend. Here is the conversation that ensues:

Franz, Peter's father, with whom I am having lunch at yet another Chinese restaurant (this one called the Mayflower), tells me a story. I have just told Franz my book is about brown—not skin but brown as impurity—and Franz says, 'I have been thinking about purity.'

A few months before, before Peter left for India, before I write this, Franz was leaving his house to keep some appointment when Peter called out to him: ‘Dad, I need you to pick up an avocado on your way home.’ (Peter, as you may imagine, cooks for himself when he visits home.) The door reopens: ‘Dad, it has to be an *organic* avocado.’

On his way home, Franz stops at Safeway. He notices the small display of chemical avocados, much cheaper. He is tempted. At Safeway, of all places, Franz has come upon the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; he has stumbled upon his first theological debate: Will Peter know the difference? Which leads inevitably to the second theological debate: Can what Peter doesn’t know defile him (194)?

Religion again plays a central role in Rodriguez’s writings as he constructs purity in relation to the divinity of the body and the self. Rodriguez sees Peter’s father, Franz, in a sort of theological crisis concerning the sanctity of his son’s body. He thus identifies a trend between his thinking on brown and the narrative that Franz offers. Brown is positioned as at the intersection of religious, cultural, and even economical values. Therefore brownness is central to various social formations in American society. Through this autobiography, Rodriguez has built a connection among brown, God, and religion. In this final chapter of *Brown* he confirms these connections and extends them to issues around consumer culture and ethics.

The epigraph at the onset of “Peter’s Avocado” reads as follows: *Can’t you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes into the sewer?*” (193). This passage comes from the Bible, Mark 7:14. Through the Biblical epigraph, Rodriguez invokes religion as crucial to better understand the profound and profane implications of brown’s relationship to (im)purity. This invocation of religion as fundamental in critically approaching purity further confirms the role of religious values in the construction of an impure, third space. The epigraph comes directly from the Bible and suggests what goes in must also inevitably come out. On a superficial level, it has to do with food consumption and the body. It is also about the sanctity and purity of the body and how external agents affect the body. Throughout the book, whether speaking of the body’s sewer system or a waste management process, Rodriguez discusses excrement as a brown topic in the cultural imaginary. Consumption, absorption and rejection reappear in Rodriguez’s formulation of a penetrated and colonized brown subjectivity.

Rodriguez does not use rejection in the conventional sense as a refusal to admit entrance. Instead, it is an anatomical form of rejection/absorption by the body. The body has its own natural system of rejecting consumed materials. French theorist Dominique Laporte, in *The History of Shit*, reinforces the notion that discussing the history of human feces is always already implicated in a discussion of the body, its subjectivity, and the Cartesian “I” (viii, 31):

It is apparent that socialization is regularly subverted by the politics of waste. To touch, even lightly, on the relationship of a subject to his shit, is to modify not

only that subject's relationship to the totality of his body, but his very relationship to the world and to the representations that he constructs of his situation in society (29).

Laporte's analysis works in conjunction with Rodriguez's suggestions in *Brown* because the contamination in question for Peter centers on the purity of his body and its byproducts. Peter and his father are concerned that the browning of his body is a continuation of a history of waste management, the institutionalization of impurity in culture. Laporte's proposal that the history of impurities and waste are related to subjectivity is provocative. Both Rodriguez and Laporte suggest that one's relationship to one's corporeal impurities does, in fact, say something about the individual and about society. There is a systematic way in which society deals with waste as an impurity. Laporte's engagement of the way material impurities are managed informs my reading of Rodriguez, who is also addressing the systematic ways cultural impurities are handled. Rodriguez addresses the pervasive cultural concern for purity as he presents the debate between Peter and Frantz regarding the browning of the body and its waste.

The interesting part about what Rodriguez writes in the Biblical epigraph is the relationship among a subject, excrement, and religion's focus on purity. Mark suggests that fearing contamination is futile because "*nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes in the sewer*" (193). There are two messages here. The first is that, although the body may be browned, the heart can never truly be tainted because it is the body, not the soul or heart, which receives the actions. The second message concerns the body's ability

to negotiate its penetrated, browned state of being. Though food may be consumed through the mouth and stomach, the body is equipped to rid itself of excess and waste. Referred to here as the “sewer,” the digestive tract and the anal opening perform various processes of rejection that cleanse the body of unnecessary items.

Though that which is ingested will exit, its effects on the body, mouth, and mind are plain to see. Thus the religious passage, rather than assuaging Peter’s reluctance to eat contaminated foods, seems to be a fantasy about some impenetrable state that has to do with the separation of soul and body. Because the body is equipped for both excretion and ingestion, browning is necessarily ambiguous; it is part of the natural functioning of the body and consequently unavoidable. Rodriguez advises that we accept the ambiguity of penetration and embrace our browning, which, for him, is itself ambiguous because of the conflicting knowledge and emotions it produces in subjects.

This chapter, “Peter’s Avocado,” entails a discussion of vegetarianism and bodily purity. As the chapter unfolds, readers learn that the crisis Peter’s father faces is whether or not Peter would know if he bought the organic avocado (as per Peter’s request) or the cheaper, larger store brand avocado. Vegetarians, who typically eat only eggs, milk, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes and avoid consuming “harmful” foods, such as meat, fish, and poultry, seem to hold to an ideal of the body’s sanctity. To add a focus on consuming only organic foods suggests that natural products do not contaminate the body as pesticide-grown, genetically altered, antibiotic- or hormone-treated products do.

Peter’s self-identified veganism is a step further on the continuum of purity, as any item that has come from an animal is considered harmful to the well-being of his

body. Rodriguez explicates Peter's veganism when he writes that it "has to do with the sacredness of his own body; with purity of his lungs and his bowels and his liver and his breath" (*Brown* 194). The body's internal cleanliness is crucial here. Peter wants to attain purity inside his body even though he knows it is impossible to do so; even if he were to go to great lengths to maintain the sanctity of his body through the food choices he actively makes, impurities abound in the air and water. In a way, Peter's efforts are reminiscent of Rodriguez's avid search for American assimilation in *Hunger of Memory*. In that instance, the quest is an admission of and acceptance of the impure historical condition of all American subjects (regardless of location north and south of the Río Bravo) that drives Rodriguez as a character and an author.

Peter may want to keep his body unsoiled, but the fact remains that he must eat. Food needs to be consumed for survival reasons, and at times he will be unable to manage the food he ingests. One can assume that the choice of veganism is not just about eliminating animal products from a diet but rather also about the health benefits that come along from eating mostly raw and unprocessed foods. Vegans like Peter can try to control the purity of what they consume, but, as Rodriguez's conversation with Peter's father about the probability of Peter's awareness of whether or not the avocado is organic indicates, extreme safeguarding is not always realistic. Laporte reminds us that "civilization does not distance itself unequivocally from waste but betrays its fundamental ambivalence in act after act" (32). Though waste is inevitably impure because of internal anatomical mechanisms, recognition of this brown and impure act is troublesome for many. Waste, thus, acts as a reminder of the events surrounding

consumption, absorption, rejection, and penetration. Again, Laporte informs my reading of Rodriguez because of the ambivalence that arises in the management of impurities. Distance from, and even the negation of subjects' ambiguous relationships with contaminants, is exemplified in Peter's urge for ingesting food that is as pure and natural as possible—even though he knows that it will eventually leave his body impurely. Perhaps not all vegans, but specifically Peter and those who share his beliefs, are preoccupied with the purity of their bodies.

The notion of the purity of bowels is oxymoronic. Imagining bodily waste as pure is difficult precisely because of what it is by definition. If, however, one understands the concerns with organic food and self-assigned veganism ideologically, the purity of the waste that the body produces might be higher than that of a vegetarian. Peter's adamant (even "maniacal" as Rodriguez suggests) attitude about not being tainted by any meat byproduct asking "*Do you place meat and vegetables on the same grill*" (Brown 194)? Peter's concerns and fears are of food that can taint the purity of his body. That meat and vegetables might be cooked on the same grill suggests the danger of proximity and that the undesired meat can defile the vegetables (similar to how Jewish kosher or Muslim halal can be contaminated). If ingested, the contaminated vegetables can also defile the sanctity of his body. Perhaps, if the food itself is not defiled then, on entering the body, it will not soil the host. Laporte, Rodriguez, and even Mark all suggest an intricate relationship between a subject and contamination/impurity. The subject may not feel

comfortable discussing food consumption and its subsequent excretion, but the reality of such activities is clear and does play a role in subjectification and nationalization.²⁸

Franz, Peter's father, wonders not only if Peter would be able to tell the difference between an organic and a nonorganic avocado, but he also worries about any effects that omitting this fact could have on his son's well-being. Rodriguez calls it a theological debate when he reiterates Franz's question, "Can what Peter doesn't know defile him?" (*Brown* 194). According to what we know about Peter's concerns with bodily integrity, the answer might very well be yes; *not knowing* that the avocado is contaminated will have deleterious effects on his son's body. For Peter it would contaminate him regardless of his awareness because of how strictly he maintains the purity of his body; it would also contaminate him because for Peter the threat not only revolves around physical impurities but extends to the larger meaning behind attempting to live a pure lifestyle. Nonetheless, Franz opines that it would do no immediate harm to his son, and that consuming a chemically altered avocado would not harm Peter in any real physical sense. He does not consider, however, that for Peter this is not only a bodily concern; it is also an ideological, even theological, belief about cleanliness and purity. Peter would be defiled because something that entered his body was excessively and unnaturally soiled. Thus, he, in turn, would be browned and soiled unnecessarily.

Peter's desire for purity of body is founded on the belief that, although contamination is inevitable, one can still hold a dominant subject position where one can actively regulate the entrance of materials into one's body. Peter's father's temptation, as

²⁸ Such authors as Mary Douglas, Thelma Barer-Strein, Carole M. Counihan, and Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz all suggest undeniable links among consumption, subjectivity, identity, and nation.

well as other people who have to answer his questions regarding how his food is prepared by responding, “No. (When in doubt)” (193), is to appease Peter. This generic response Peter receives suggests the impossibility of knowing everything about the purity or impurity of what he consumes. Even if Peter were to prepare his own food, he could not avoid all impurities; even if he grew the vegetables himself, he could not know everything about, say, airborne or water-based organisms. Franz realizes that there is no way of ever knowing about every item ingested, but he does not acknowledge that ingesting a browned product can cause ideological and psychical damage to Peter. Though he does in the end purchase the organic avocado (*Brown* 228), he still does not grasp the depth with which Peter’s preoccupation is theologically and ideologically centered on the maintenance and purity of his body

Although Peter’s concerns about organic foods suggest a desire for the purity of his body, Rodriguez is perplexed by Peter’s ambiguous position with regard to other forms of bodily contamination. Peter has a tattoo and thus has defiled his body (216). Rodriguez points to this paradox of self-defiling yet constant avoidance of any ingested impurity: “All paradox is brown and divine paradox is browner” (225). As much as Peter avoids the various browning processes, being exposed to impurities is inevitable owing to his life experiences and surroundings. The message conveyed is that whether one is aware of it or not, various acts contaminate the body. The body itself is ambiguously and paradoxically positioned through these acts because it is a space where purities and impurities reside.

IX. Brown as a Major Contradiction in Rodriguez’s Life

Brown as a paradoxical appears throughout *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*.

Rodriguez is intrigued by audience members who identify themselves as the material examples of old world battles: the Jewish-Muslim, the white girl demanding that her black friend tell her whom she was speaking with (her white grandma!), the queer Catholic, or the “Blaxican” make brown not only paradoxical but also ambiguous.

Rodriguez is intrigued precisely because of the difficult historical battles that were waged between such odd couples. Just as Rodriguez identifies sodomy as among the brownest of all acts, these conflicted bodies are among the brownest of all beings because they defy socio-historical logic. However, after reading fan mail and giving public lectures, Rodriguez consistently encounters an “only in America” sentiment. He is bombarded with questions from ambiguously brown bodies scattered throughout the United States trying to figure out exactly where they racially/culturally fit. In *Brown* Rodriguez’s goal is to show how our impurities unite, rather than separate, us.

I want to speak of such unpursued scenes and lives as constituting brown history. Brown, not in the sense of pigment, necessarily, but brown because mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the fluids of generation are mixed and emotions are unclear, and the tally of human progress and failure in every generation is mixed, and unaccounted for, missing in plain sight (197).

Rodriguez works toward a reevaluation of the term brown. He acknowledges that, because of its associations with impurities and darkness it is easy to understand how

brown has acquired a pejorative connotation. But he is searching for a nuanced approach to what is meant by tainted or soiled. Instead of viewing the browning process as having deleterious or disempowering effects, Rodriguez suggests that browning—if accepted as something that all American subjects undergo regardless of social position—is clarifying/purifying (195). For Rodriguez, differences among groups and individuals actually offer intense moments of unity. As opposed to seeing the dirty parts as needing to be negated and abjected, the acceptance of brown may just be the location from which to rethink the trope of penetration’s negative connotations in colonization.

X. One Nation Under Brown

Nationhood is represented by Rodriguez throughout *Brown* as a contamination that subjects experience because of their differences as well as their similarities. He suggests that much attention in the United States is given to the browning processes that shape interactions between subjects: “Race is America’s theme—not freedom, not democracy (as we say in company)” (*Brown* 136). Discussions centering primarily on the color of one’s skin, a black and white issue, pervade legal and social institutions. The concern here in both this chapter and in Rodriguez’s text is, again, one of purity versus impurity. Heterogeneity is the impulse that attempts to keep separate the groups that the nation tries to control and police. Laporte argues that “the State has the supreme power to whiten and restore us to innocence” (65). However, for Rodriguez, brown is an alternative approach to the dichotomous logic that governs the acknowledgment of various Americanization processes. It is a browning, not a whitening, process that is credited with the power not to restore lost innocence but to negotiate historical and current experiences that influence

national subjects. He nods toward heterogeneity as a viable means of understanding subjects' positions in the nation. Brown is the element that unites subjects through shared colonial histories that cause overlaps and interplay between individuals and groups in America.

Whether we are speaking of black, white, or brown, the focus remains on the conceptualization and evaluation of racial classifications in the United States. Rodriguez sees freedom, a major theme in American conversations, as a false statement that attempts to cover up the major concern, whether scientific, religious, or cultural, that the history of the United States has for its own contamination. The response to such a threat is to approximate whiteness and purity as a means of self-representation. "The price of entering white America," Rodriguez notes, "is an acid bath, a bleaching bath—a transfiguration—that burns away memory" (*Brown* 140). This loss of memory is part of the price one pays for alleged purity; Franz's concern with the more expensive cost of the avocado is but one ramification of the various costs of pursuing cleanliness single-mindedly. I read assimilation, for example, as a process of purification because of its attempt to rid the nation of its impure parts. The price of entering white America is an acid bath because, though it may purify the subjects, it does so painfully—and the cost is to give up parts of oneself and one's past that the nation defines as contaminated, undesirable elements.

There are also legal and social ramifications inherent in the nation's promotion of purity and tidiness. To be defined as what is considered colorless, then, is not only to be free and innocent of history but is also the act of denying one's past. "The Modern State

is constituted by the *public/private* split that lies at the heart of bourgeois law[...] The State is at once private, because of the purity of its power, and public, because of the purifying powers of its power” (Laporte 42). Ironically this act of bleaching becomes a process ignited by a desire for a national subject to represent himself or herself as unaffected, untainted. There is a national insistence on purifying its subjects. The nation holds the power to demand that subjects be pure and to enforce their purification if necessary. The bleaching process is transformative because it enacts a process of purification that enables the nation to avoid the complicated histories of their citizens.

The importance of racial purity in the various processes of nationalization involves an admission of ambivalence if it is to be articulated accurately. A theme that resonates throughout all three of Rodriguez’s autobiographies centers on how subjects assume contradictory roles in culture. In *Brown*, he suggests how paradox and impurity are requirements in the development of a nation: “The progress of a nation,” Rodriguez argues, “as of a life, is a litany of conflict, score, segment” (196). For various participants, a term such as conflict offers multiple layers toward better understanding the processes of nationalization. On one hand there are conflicts that arise between individuals and groups within and outside the nation’s borders. However, conflicts, like contradictions, also inevitably form part of the various Americanization processes. Rodriguez compares the process of a nation to that of a life where the subject is ambiguously positioned depending on the context and circumstances surrounding particular events. The evaluation of such conflicts as right or wrong is not significant

here; what matters is the way subjects and the nation intersect through a debate about purity versus impurity.

For Rodriguez, time and space affect how subjects understand their roles in the nation. He presents the idea that “one embodies contradiction through time” (223), combined with the suggestion that “brown marks the passage of time” (139); this definition of brown is vital to a better understanding of American subjectivities. Contradictions embody the actual experiences that subjects and communities face as they negotiate their identities and form part of the larger nation. To negate the frequency and utility of contradictions in subject formation is to inaccurately represent oneself and one’s nation. Viewing the ambiguity of power as limiting to subjects and nations alike is a trend I identify in Rodriguez as something he wants to unmask. For him, the admission of such real experiences only further elaborates the complicated processes of subjection and nationalization. To excise all the impure and dirty parts is a form of cultural genocide. Rodriguez suggests that strategically identifying the brown in all the nation’s subjects will provide a more accurate historical, current, and future picture of the ambiguities Americanization requires.

XI. Concluding Remarks

The negation of the brown and ambiguous parts of subjects and nations limits and alienates groups and individuals. Denying pieces of a person’s or a nation’s history simply because they do not fit in with the preferred representation of purity enforces segregation and divisiveness. The United States should be motivated by unification and community—hence the term “united” in the official name of the nation. Disavowing

uncomfortable, brown pieces simply because they do not easily fit into black–white binaries limits the nation and its inhabitants. Rodriguez offers brown as the conceptual tool to help the nation heal and unify its people.

After decades of experiencing his own otherness in a very material sense in the United States, Rodriguez finally writes directly about what he defines as at its core: brownness. Rodriguez unmaskes the agency and cultural potential of a term like brown not only by making it the ultimate protagonist of his final autobiography, but also through his suggestions that brown is more than skin color. Brown is about being an impure mixture that does not fit neatly into boxes that define everything through the binary logic of black or white, gay or straight, and so forth. Rodriguez is aware that it intrigues not just him but many other people. He finds “people who tell [him] they grew up alone. Because they didn’t belong. Because they belong to too many” (*Brown* 221). Rodriguez himself struggled to find his proper location in both public and private American culture. What he has gleaned through the years is that the negation of the browning of the United States and its national subjects creates a false sense in its citizenry of what it means to be an authentic American. If one does not fit nicely into strict, tidy categories, serious ideological and cultural consequences ensue that ostracize some and encourage the inclusion of others. This is not the direction Rodriguez believes America should continue to follow. So far this path has led to the creation of unfair laws and the punishment and murder of entire groups of people, as well as continued internal colonization, simply because the public admission and acceptance of their brownness implicates the brownness in us all.

Rodriguez wants to free brown from its pejorative cultural connotations because in doing so he is providing a way of admitting and accepting the reality that subjects and nations face. Instead of browning processes being seen as dishonorable and effacing, and instead of seeing brown as solely about miscegenation, Rodriguez wants to find ways to help people and nations heal together. He writes, "I was looking for a brown history of America, I was looking for the precedent that made me possible" (209). Though speaking about his own subject and national position, Rodriguez knows that the desire for the individual "I" is something shared in America (200). Elaborating a shared history of browning as a major American process is his response to the plethora of hyphenated subjects that live inside the physical borders, yet may remain outside the ideological border, of the United States. Fredrick Luis Aldama emphasizes a convergence in the works of Bhabha and Rodriguez relating to the way they both call for a third, alternative space for colonized subjectivities. Aldama points out how the emergence of alternative, brown positions are possible for speaking subjects whose subjectivity lies in-between or outside simple binary (598-599). According to Aldama, both Rodriguez and Bhabha open up new discursive spaces in the culture for national subjects to occupy.

Rodriguez's works span three decades that saw major changes in the conceptualization of race, class, sexuality, and nation in the United States, partly owing to programs like Ethnic/Cultural/Latina/o studies. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* is an exploration of his reconciliation of these issues. It also offers other individuals who do not feel they fit neatly into the dominant culture an opportunity to find themselves and their lives inside its pages. The expression of his singular life, then, may be more about a shared

national subjectivity than one may think at first glance. I believe this final autobiography demonstrates how Rodriguez's ideas are in direct dialogue with those of Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa, Paz, and Bhabha. He is attempting to find an alternative, noncolonial space where historical wounds and conflicts can be reconciled. "The future is brown, is my thesis; is as brown as the tarnished past," writes Rodriguez (*Brown* 35). The notion of an undeniable brown past and an inevitably browner future is one that we all share simply by being national subjects living in a postcolonial culture. My project, then, critically represents Rodriguez to the academy and the literary world with the hope of opening up new genealogies that are unafraid by someone as ambitious as Rodriguez. Rodriguez's admissions of the complicated brown history all Americans share frustrates many people. Viewing him as a traitor or as someone too scared to admit openly who he really is minimizes and trivializes the theoretical and cultural relevance of his work. It is through the application and articulation of the epistemology of penetration that the sophistication of his works comes to fruition.

Chapter 4

Rodriguez's Autobiographies Create Alternative Spaces

Autobiographically inspired fiction accomplishes many things: a referentiality to the self, a simultaneous grounding in experiential reality and social/communal/national history, and a space for the free flight of imagination and for creative expression.

— Lawrence La Fountain-Stoke, *Queer Ricans*

I. Putting Together Rodriguez's Three Autobiographies

Placing all three of Rodriguez's autobiographies *Hunger for Memory*, *Days of Obligation*, and *Brown*, side by side reveals, I believe, a subtext in his writing that centers on language, theatrics, and cultural performances in general. After almost three decades of writing and inhabiting a contentious and ambiguous location in American culture and letters, Richard the author-protagonist and his texts have opened up an alternative space for postcolonial subjectivities in mainstream culture. It is through this alternative space, Rodriguez argues, that colonized subjects navigate and negotiate their ambiguous identities in public American culture in the pursuit of legitimate membership. Language, sexuality, race, ethnicity, legal status, contamination, and migration all influence how subjects act and engage with the broader culture. Rodriguez's autobiographies offer an alternative model of how a non-normative, and oftentimes problematic, American subject can come to terms with performing otherness and sameness concurrently.

Rodriguez argues that the starting point for understanding minority subject positions in culture is found in the past. The way histories are organized through official

narratives already suggests a positioning of subjects inside or outside the culture.

Scholars like Michael Horswell, Emma Pérez, Anibal Quijano, Serge Gruzinski, and Richard Rodriguez agree that colonial histories need to be understood not just from the perspective of the colonizers but also from that of the colonized. Gruzinski notes “The academic world has discovered that [popular] culture includes not just the fate of the ruling classes and the elite but also the body of beliefs and practices interiorized and experienced [...] by the ‘lower’ or ‘subordinate’ classes in society” (3). The narration of history according to the privileges and experiences of the elite members is an incomplete version of what actually occurred during and after colonialism; it also supports the logic of an institution like internal colonialism. Less biased versions of the past must represent the beliefs and practices of the colonized subjects. Anibal Quijano also challenges subjects’ privileged relationship to narrating history: “In this sense, the Eurocentric pretension to be the exclusive producers and protagonist of modernity—because of which all modernization of non-European populations, is, therefore, a Europeanization—is an ethnocentric pretension and, in the long run, provincial” (544). To imagine any story as having only one side is part of Quijano’s critique of this impulse as provincial. Other influences and stories told from other vantage points are necessary. These scholars are not negating the role that the colonizers played in the conquest, but they are pointing to the necessity of the focus to include multiple voices, from multiple perspectives to present a more complete version of history.

The unifying thread among these three autobiographies is that they agree that historical renditions of colonization and conquest limit the roles of participants in the

culture. Thus, not only the past but also the present and future conditions of national subjects need to be repositioned in Rodriguez's alternative space. Rodriguez in an interview with Hector Torres, notes, "I think to the victor goes the masquerade. I think the winner always gets to decide what the game is, in some way, and those of us who are the losers in history have to be content with our role" (195-196). Rodriguez suggests the narration of colonial history from the perspective of the "winners" as a performative speech act. Language accomplishes the inferiorization of colonized subjectivities and experiences. Comparing their retelling of history to a masquerade, Rodriguez is discontent with the role he is expected to assume in the culture because of his relationship to its colonial past. I read Rodriguez as frustrated by the colonial legacies that pigeonhole him because of his race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In response to provincial expectations of his colonized American subject position, Rodriguez narrates his own life as a series of negotiations of ambiguous events that coalesce to create an alternative speaking/writing subjectivity.

For Rodriguez, then, the creation of an alternative third space is in accord with Chicana historian Emma Pérez's work on the decolonial imaginary. The discourse of colonialism does not sufficiently encompass what Rodriguez does with words in his autobiographies. Defining the difference between the colonial and the decolonial²⁹ imaginary, Pérez writes, "The difference between the colonial and decolonial imaginaries is that the colonial remains the inhibiting trace, accepting power relations as they are,

²⁹ I quote Sandoval's footnote explaining her use and understanding of decolonial as a process: "Helen Tiffin describes decolonization as a 'process, not arrival.' De-coloniality involves a dialectical relationship, she writes, 'between European ontology and epistemology, and the impulse to create or re-create' local reality. My use of the term *de-coloniality* follows her definition. See "Post-Colonial Literature and Counter-Discourse," *Kunapipi* (1987): 17-34" (186).

perhaps confronting them, but not reconfiguring them” (110). Though Rodriguez’s earlier autobiographies were not vocal about reconfiguring colonial discourse, it is important to view his works as a progression and evolution. Rodriguez, in *Brown*, attempts to remake the space of racial otherness as an inclusive cultural location that acknowledges shared impure pasts. Pérez continues, “[T]o remain within the colonial imaginary is to remain the colonial object who cannot be subject until decolonized. The decolonial imaginary challenges power relations to decolonize notions of otherness to move into a liberatory terrain” (110). I see a direct connection between the works of Rodriguez and Pérez in the remaking of “brown” as an alternative third space that is neither black nor white but living at the interstices of a postcolonial society.

Pérez, following Bhabha, underscores the ambiguous relationship that colonizer and colonized have with the roles they assume in history. Colonial events leave real and imagined residual effects on the processes of nationalization and subjectification that individuals face. It is through the recognition of an alternative discursive space that the decolonial imaginary can produce other versions of historical narrations like Rodriguez’s, uncovering negated pasts that reconfigure the stories told and the roles participants held (Pérez 127). Remaking subjectivities that have been either negated or overlooked is foundational to the texts of Rodriguez and Pérez. Rodriguez can be read, then, as attempting a decolonial American project as he revises brown as a performative term that can unite disparate and impure ethnic, racial, sexual, and national histories. Pérez positions the decolonial imaginary “as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history” as the colonial evolves through time to become the postcolonial, [it is

in] “that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (6). The negotiation of his national subject position in public culture is the driving force behind Rodriguez’s texts. Approaching his texts as part of a larger decolonial impulse opens up nuanced perspectives on authentic Americanization that rupture and reinscribe colonial discourse. I believe that Rodriguez follows the lead of thinkers like Anzaldúa, Sandoval, and Pérez in order to create an alternative space for marginal/oppressed subjectivities in public culture.

Rodriguez’s autobiographies suggest that he performs his Americanization out of a desire to be something other than an Other in the public culture. He wants to imagine a space where his colonial past (Latin American) and postcolonial present (Anglo-American) are not in conflict or caught in a time lag. Brown becomes the alternative space for Rodriguez to disrupt the dominant historical narrative on race and identity in America. Rather than accepting the black–white binary that pervades subjects’ interaction in public life, Rodriguez represents complex and ambiguous processes that negotiate an impure identity in the aftermath of conquest. Pérez identifies how historically someone like Rodriguez could be classified as an adaptive immigrant, but I believe that his autobiographies also traverse space and time as they imagine the possibility of coloring everyone’s past and present. Inside this decolonized imaginary, Rodriguez offers an alternative imagined space in which Americans openly share the geographical, ideological, and physical contradictions and impurities of their conflicted pasts. A positive side effect of such an alternative space is that if it is accepted it would also help ride pervasive internal colonialism in the United States.

In his autobiographies, Rodriguez describes the residual effects of colonialism that have assigned the various roles he assumes throughout his life. It becomes urgent that he establish links among language, colonialism, racialization, performance, and autobiography. Being Latino or Hispanic (he will accept either label for the right price, as Rodriguez himself tells the readers in the essay titled “The Third Man”) becomes part of his new public identity. The passage that follows introduces brown as functioning performatively when his autobiographies are viewed as a whole. In a scene that synthesizes major themes from each book individually, Rodriguez grapples with private and public American life, identity, and language; all the while positioning himself as in an argument with a brown identity category like Latino/Hispanic:

My private argument with Latino is no more complicated than my dislike for a dictation of terms. I am Latino against my will: I write for several newspapers—the *Los Angeles Times* most often—papers that have chosen to warrant “Latino” over “Hispanic” as correct usage. The newspaper’s computer becomes sensitive, not to say jumpy, as regards correct political usage. Every Hispanic the computer busts is digitally repatriated to Latino. As I therefore also become.

In fact, I do have a preference for Hispanic over Latino. To call oneself Hispanic is to admit a relationship to Latin America in English. *Soy* Hispanic is a brown assertion (*Brown* 109-110).

Rodriguez is aware that people who look like him historically have not had the final say on official decisions that shape American culture. The concept of Hispanic and Latino become political issues that someone like he, the actual brown body discussed in the creation of the terminology, does not control. Brown is used in public American culture as a label for identifying sameness or otherness in national subjects. Privately, he is in contention with the currently popular Latino label. He prefers to use the highly political term Hispanic when self-identifying. Rodriguez plots the historical significance of Hispanic and grounds it firmly in the Nixon administration; it is originally used as a way of cataloguing bodies with ethnic/historical ties to Latin America on the United States census. Thus Hispanic is political inherently for Rodriguez. He laments that he as a subject must assume a position in the culture that is contingent on the political correctness of his current employer. However, for now Rodriguez is classified as Latino—even though he asserts that Hispanic is the browner option. Latino clearly also has roots in Latin America but it is not as politically charged as Hispanic. After all of these years Rodriguez has grown comfortable with his political ties to language. The issue for my work is not whether Hispanic or Latino is the preferred official term; rather the point is to show, following Austin, how words perform actions and in this case, identities.

II. Rodriguez's Relationship to Hispanoamérica

I find most telling in the foregoing quote that Rodriguez proclaims his preference for Hispanic over Latino because of its colonial roots in Latin America. Rodriguez chooses the more transnational, politically charged category of Hispanic precisely because it attests to the physical and ideological border battles that divide America—

north, south, east, and west. Of course, this is his private quarrel—one that he yet again positions ambiguously to a public audience—and because it is his, I do not care to be critical of his choice. I will note however that Latino also has a definitive linguist affiliation with Latin America and even Spain if we consider Latin as a language.

However, I want to focus on how Rodriguez's choices are performances of his identity—that is to say I want to focus on how he does things with words. Autobiography as a genre has a complicated past in the Americas. It is complicated because the United States and the countries of Latin American view the usefulness of autobiography differently. In the United States, it is from the position of the individual “I” that the autobiographer speaks. In Latin America, however, the autobiographer oscillates between a historical and a current cultural condition/position/location. Sylvia Molloy discusses how autobiography has evolved in Hispanoamérica because of its various historic colonial conditions:

Si en el caso de los escritores coloniales la escritura del yo era legitimada por Otro institución para que se escribía (la Corona, la Iglesia), en el caso del autobiógrafo posterior a la Colonia esas instituciones pierden su función. [...] Si ya no se escribe para el Rey ni para la Iglesia, ¿para quién se escribe? ¿Para la verdad? ¿Para la posteridad? ¿Para la historia, disciplina que muchos autobiógrafos convertirán en fuente de validación? [...] ¿Para quién soy yo un ‘yo’? O, mejor dicho ‘¿para quién escribo ‘yo’? La vacilación entre persona pública y yo privado, entre honor y vanidad, entre sujeto y patria, entre evocación lírica y registro de los hechos, son solo

algunas de las manifestaciones de la vacilación que caracterizó (y acaso sigue caracterizando) la escritura autobiográfica en Hispanoamérica. [If in the case of colonial authors writing as the “I” was legitimated because it represented institutions of power such as the crown or the church, in the case of the autobiographer in the aftermath of colonialism, these institutions for which the “I” spoke lost their power. If one no longer writes for the King or for the Church, for whom do they write? For truth? For the posterity? For history, a discipline that many autobiographers [not Rodriguez clearly] convert into a wealth of fact? For who am I an “I” or better yet, for whom do I write ‘I’? The vacillation between a public identity and a private “I,” between honor and vanity, between subject and nation, between lyrical evocation and testament of facts, are but a few of the manifestations of ambiguous and dynamic vacillations that characterized and continue to characterize Hispanoamerican autobiography.]

I exclude Rodriguez from Molloy’s classification of autobiographers who convert history to fact because, as I have suggested throughout this project, Rodriguez does the exact opposite: he challenges the relationship between history and fact. However, I do not exclude Rodriguez from the overall point Molloy makes. The negotiations that Hispanoamerican autobiographers make place them ambiguously between worlds, countries, and languages. In fact, Rodriguez exemplifies the ambiguous positioning that

Molloy proposes in her mention of the public identity/persona and the private identity/character of a Hispanoamerican autobiographer. Rodriguez navigates an alternative space in discourse as an autobiographer between American and Hispanoamerican genre ideals when he proclaims himself as consciously being Hispanic because of its connection with Latin America/Hispanoamérica.

I believe that Rodriguez's decision to align himself with the politics of Hispanic as a term substantiates his ambiguous role as a speaker and writer who represents his particular American experience. It is from this alternative third space that Rodriguez outlines the conflicts of interest and allegiance in his autobiographies. With its narration from a first-person perspective—"I" becomes the protagonist—autobiography is an ideal way for Rodriguez to represent his life as a performance of an authentic Americanized speaker and writer.³⁰ Rodriguez sees his identity in the United States as informed by the various colonial histories that converge in the constitution of his brown, racialized body. In discussing the colonial histories that shape the remaking of his authentic American subjectivity, he invokes the effects of both Spanish and English colonialism. The colonial legacies of Spain and England produce a conflict for Rodriguez because they each privilege a different focus in the narration of the subject— "I" versus "We." In *Brown* Rodriguez writes,

No other country in the world has been so confident of its freedom
from memory. Yet Americans comically (because unknowingly)

³⁰ G. Thomas Couser notes, "Often a way of measuring individual achievement against cultural standards, autobiography becomes [...] a medium for measuring communal achievement against individually intuited standards" (5). Rodriguez's autobiographies easily fall under the rubric of American autobiography also.

assume proxy roles within a centuries-old quarrel of tongues. England and España divided much of the Americas between them. England gave her colonial territories a remarkable code of civil law, a spectacular literature, a taste for sweets, and the protean pronoun that ushered in the modern age—"I"—the lodestar for Protestant and capitalist and Hispanic memoirist. Counter-Reformation Spain gave its New World possessions *nosotros*—the cupolic 'we'—an assurance of orthodoxy, baroque, fugue, smoke, sunglasses, and a piquant lexicon for miscegenation. Every combination of races is accounted for in New World Spanish. (Except Hispanic.) (Or Latino.) (110-111).

Rodriguez creates and represents this alternative space in which an American-Hispanoamerican-brown subject will not let this public-private political debate go on any longer through his negation. It is that passage that I would like to ask critics of Rodriguez to reconsider in relation to his location in Chicano/Latino/Ethnic and American Studies. He fashions himself with the Anglo/Latino American identity because he strongly believes that his cultural allegiances are first and foremost to the United States. However, his private individual life also reflects the struggles and significance that the Hispanic identity suggests for him and for other postcolonial subjects. Because of his historical condition as Other in the United States, Rodriguez recognizes the conflicts people marked as non-normative face when attempting to enter into pure American authenticity. In this quote Rodriguez suggests that the colonial legacy of Spain's *nosotros* for Latin

American subjects inevitably also surfaces in his understanding of his identity as Other in America.

It is at this point that I turn to feminist critic Judith Butler's understanding of the autobiographical "I" and apply it to Rodriguez's texts. Butler argues that one of the basic challenges to the autobiographical "I" pertains to available language: "For this 'I' that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs that availability of persons in language" (xxiv). Butler connects self-expression to the subject's placement and position in language. Rodriguez is also concerned with this role in the narration of his "I" subjectivity; although he finds a place for himself inside American English, he has to negotiate the expectations of speakers of other languages in the development of this "I." Therefore, for Rodriguez, the choice of autobiography as a means to declare his position in language and culture forms a major part of his Americanization and Hispanoamericanization.

Rodriguez's performances in his autobiographies are so interesting because they are ambiguously positioned by him and others as at once American and Hispanoamerican. In many ways he wished to be viewed as colorless in America; however he acknowledges that his works are always classified ethnically/racially because they are judged according to his Mexican cultural roots and because of his brown skin. Crises around national belonging arise so frequently through autobiographers' words, according to Sylvia Molloy that, the identity crisis is then "necesaria para la *retórica* de la autofiguración en Hispanoamérica [necessary for the rhetoric of self-figuration in Hispanoamérica]" (15). Rodriguez's texts focus on negotiating the colonial past that

shapes his present identity: his class status in the United States, his ethnic Mexican roots, and how his color has been interpreted internationally. The issue of belonging both to Mexico and the United States permeates his memories as he narrates the crises that have defined his public and private identities. Molloy suggests a relationship between performance, memory, and autobiography:

La evocación del pasado está condicionado por la autofiguración del sujeto en el presente: la imagen que el autobiógrafo tiene de sí, la que desea proyectar o la que el público exige. [Evoking the past is conditioned through the subject's self-figuration in the present: the image the autobiographer has of himself/herself, that which he/she was to project or that which the public demands] (19).

One's image of oneself, or the image one hopes to project, forms part of the literary performance of the autobiographer. For Rodriguez, this image is also related to his imagining an alternative decolonized space in which various representations and performances can emerge from his subject position.

III. Performing Repeat Penetration Through Autobiography

Language consistently resurfaces as a major theme throughout Rodriguez's autobiographies. Viewing the three autobiographies as individual pieces of a larger whole makes it clear that the texts themselves are a foundational part of Rodriguez's performances as an author, subject, and American intellectual. The language once foreign to him, the language that plagued him, now provides the wherewithal for him to narrate and constitute the life and struggles toward Americanization of his protagonist, Richard

(“*Rich-heard*” as he heard the nuns pronounce his name). Much as for Roland Barthes, for Rodriguez, part of the performance takes place through the text itself. For Barthes, quasi-philosophical vignettes, pictures, photographs, and hand-written notes all contribute to the self-configuration he develops in his autobiography. Let us consider the impulse of performance from his first hand written-note in Barthes’s dedication: “*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*” For Rodriguez, the physicality and language of the texts also occupy a major part of his performances. Superimposing the self-portrait of Rodriguez from the covers of *Hunger of Memory* and then *Brown*, for example, I believe suggests *Brown* as a return to themes in his first autobiography (which also has a picture of his face slightly turned to the side displayed on the cover) but from a perspective reflecting how life not only ages, but inevitably changes an individual. Language, in its various usages, becomes a vehicle through which Rodriguez declares and constitutes his authentically ambiguous American life and progression over almost three decades. In this chapter I investigate the complicated ways the English language has enabled the performance that has been productive in the articulation and creation of Rodriguez’s alternative identity—not as victimizer or victimized but as an authentic American able to accomplish much with words that once did not belong to him.

In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez demonstrates how American assimilation and acculturation came through the moral/educational imperative that the priest and the nuns represent to his family in the privacy of his home. As mentioned in the first chapter, the nuns arrive at the Rodriguez household because they want the Rodriguez children to speak the dominant English language in public and in private. The children are expected

to become Americanized by using and manipulating the official language of the dominant culture.

Language abilities as a performative element in Rodriguez's life is established through the nuns request that he speak English in private and public situations. Recall how they emphasize that it is through speaking English in school that he will have more success in his classes and in American society as well. If he is to perform convincingly the role of an assimilated, English-speaking American, he must be able to converse in public with peers and teachers. Performance theorist and literary critic Elin Diamond writes, "Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged" (1).

Rodriguez's description of the priest's and the nuns' entrance into his family home makes it clear that speaking English is entangled with racial and colonial histories. Pérez, too, speaks of the importance of the traces that performances leave behind (in her case, colonial traces) with relation to power and the creation of alternative spaces in which different performances can occur. Those traces can be seen in the political, cultural, and religious pressures represented by the priest and nuns' demand that Rodriguez become an actively English-speaking subject; traces are to be found also in his job at the *Los Angeles Times*, which defines him as a Latino writer.

The act of conducting his private and public exchanges only in English, signifies that Richard's performances successfully meet the expectations of the dominant culture. Again, there is interplay between Spanish and English colonialism in Rodriguez's work.

Discussing the role of knowledge under the European/Western hegemonic regime of colonialism, Quijano argues, “[The colonizers] forced the colonized to learn the dominant culture in any way that would be useful to the reproduction of domination, whether in the field of technology and material activity or subjectivity, especially Judeo-Christian religiosity” (541). The colonial mission of domination was manifest in Latin America in forced religious conversion. For Rodriguez, Spanish and English colonialism come together in the domestic transgression represented by the church officials. There are traces of Spanish colonialism in that event because the priest and the nuns bring with them the same coerciveness Spanish missionaries exerted in converting the native inhabitants of the New World to Christianity.

Another defining component here that resembles colonial missionary work in Latin America is linguistic conversion; the church officials are manipulating their privileged position as representatives of powerful institutions like the church and the educational system, to enforce a language conversion in the Rodriguez household. The nuns’ demands require establishing Richard as an English-speaking public individual in accord with Anglo-colonialism. They also suggest the performativity of language itself as the vehicle through which Rodriguez declares his ambiguous identity.

For Rodriguez, however, the performance is not just important when the action is occurring but after also; it is also the chronicling of such events in written form. His manipulations of the English language demonstrate the effects of the nuns’ domestic intrusion on the creation of his public identity. J. Hillis Miller suggests early on that the act of writing, that is to say “[d]oing things by putting them in words and writing them

down [...] always leaves a trace” (11). Rodriguez, by being a public figure and an author, puts his ideas into words and writes them down with the end result of leaving behind various traces (see Miller’s and Diamond’s work on the performance of language and the traces that are left behind). These traces are exemplified in Rodriguez’s autobiographical writings. The written traces that Rodriguez leaves behind represent, as Molloy’s work suggests, memories of past events, especially his national (be)longing. Rodriguez’s use of language throughout his autobiographies narrates his evolution as a subject who must consistently negotiate conflicting identities in the United States.

Let us reconsider in some detail the performative elements in the priest/nuns scene from *Hunger of Memory*. The nuns’ demand that English be spoken exclusively signifies education having become a moral imperative; the nuns then assume the active role of authority figures, and the Rodriguez’s family assumes the passive role of good, devote subjects. In discussing the aftermath of the nun’s entrance into his childhood home, Rodriguez, in *Hunger of Memory*, writes, “We remained a loving family, but one greatly changed” (22). The ramifications of this disruption are multiple. The family’s everyday interactions and performances are significantly altered. The parents and the children now communicate with each other in English as a direct result of the nuns’ colonial mission. Recall that the nuns at once represent the power of the educational system and the church. The previous performances of colonial indoctrination leave the political traces that Diamond defines as critical to establishing the performative elements of a situation.

Acculturation and assimilation are the direct results of the nuns' educational transgression of the Rodriguez home. The use of English rather than Spanish also reflects the demands of the church/education system—in that alone there is a coalescence of national, educational, and domestic performances. As Pérez notes, the construction of coloniality tends to negate the ambiguous roles that both the colonizers and colonized play (7). It is from this alternative space, a location in-between colonialist and colonized, that Rodriguez's works speak. I read Pérez's suggestion of an oppositional interstitial space in which subjects reinscribe and remake their histories and identities as foundational to reinterpreting Rodriguez's autobiographies. This is precisely his intent. Perhaps this is not so overtly true in *Hunger of Memory*, yet when Rodriguez's texts are taken together, it is clear that he is narrating the life of a subject who, whether he likes it or not, is not easily definable or identifiable in the United States. Most of Rodriguez's concerns in his earlier writings center on the fact that his brown body automatically places him in an inferior space to the mainstream, dominant culture. As he evolves as a character and author, his tone changes from one of complaint or frustration into the active formulation of alternative subjectivities for all American subjects in flux. I believe that Rodriguez's autobiographies, though originally motivated by a desire for "sameness," can also be read as combating colonialism through their remaking of an alternative discursive and performative brown space. The remaking of alternative spaces in language opens up new discursive performances for subjects to negotiate in culture.

IV. Assimilation Through Language

In order to understand the function of language, assimilation, and subjectification in the works of Rodriguez better, we must at this point directly engage with Austin's work on performative speech acts as (trans)formative, which is relevant to Rodriguez's speech acts in *Hunger of Memory*, *Days of Obligation*, and *Brown*. Rodriguez's texts, taken as a whole, enact performances. What he does with language is to present the ambivalent and ambiguous emotional, physical, and ideological progression of a colonized subject coming into his own in the United States. One of Austin's aims is to address the difference between using language simply to state something and using language actually to do something. Austin calls this the "constative-performative distinction—the distinction between doing and saying" (47). There is a relationship between declarative and informative language and language that requires action. Constituting subjects in and through language itself is part of the performance. For Rodriguez, doing and saying are also central themes in his works—in the act of writing he is at once informing readers of his history and also constituting his identity as similar but different for the audience.

Language, then, does not only relate facts but can also transform the listeners and speakers. Though informative speech acts are also helpful for Austin, and by extension now Rodriguez, performative speech acts contribute more to understanding the way language influences the complexity of people. The example of the nuns demonstrates how language does more than just report the facts. The information or facts they bring to the Rodriguez household is that the children do not speak English according to cultural and educational expectations. However, the motivation for reporting these facts is to cause changes in the speaking abilities of the children in public and private. "There is

something,” Austin offers, “which is *at the moment of uttering is being done by the person uttering*” (60). The nuns are not simply informing Richard’s parents of their children’s inability to function in English. They are simultaneously indicating that something must be done about that deficiency. The actions the nuns’ words cause are not only transformative but also performative. Thus, the nuns’ speech act can be defined as what Austin labels an “[a]ct which is *the achieving of certain effects* by saying something” (120). The effect is that now the language of the dominant culture is used in most, if not all, future interactions between the Rodriguez parents and children. Rodriguez’s written texts are performative speech acts that inevitably reinforce the nuns’ speech acts of many years earlier. If it were not for the effective transmission of the nuns’ acculturation message, Rodriguez might not have constituted his public identity in this way through his autobiographies.

Rodriguez and his family factor into Austin’s speech-act theory precisely because they, like the priest and the nuns, use words to do more than just report or inform. They embrace the nuns’ advice to assimilate and employ English as their dominant language. This scenario resembles Austin’s presentation of the six key components necessary for achieving felicitous performatives. Here is an overview of Austin’s main points:

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect [...] the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked [and] must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely [...] and the participants

must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves consequently (14-15).

The religious affiliations of church officials provide the convention on which the acceptance of their demand for English is based. It is the symbolic figure of “la Iglesia” to which Molloy speaks when she questions for whom the Hispanoamerican autobiographer historically is writing. The effect of the nuns’ domestic transgression is that the Rodriguez family must start using English much more actively. The circumstance is appropriate to the nuns’ position as both divine representations and English-language school officials. The demand that the children improve their facility in English is also, according to the religious figures, culturally appropriate. The parents also deem this appropriate, for they require their children to use English in and out of the home. The children speak English from this point forward both in private and public, as Rodriguez recalls. Thus, language and speech acts prove critical to understanding how a focus on the home, language, and Americanization function throughout Rodriguez’s autobiographies.

Rodriguez nostalgically fantasizes about the time before English entered the intimacy of his home life, but, as *Hunger of Memory* suggests, he still clearly maintains his desire for assimilation into public life. He does not identify his submissions as mistakes. Even though he realizes that some elements of his past were lost and others were freely given up, Rodriguez is also aware of what was gained by his submitting to the colonial impulse to speak the dominant language: “I would have been happier about my public success had I not sometimes recalled what it had been like earlier when my

family conveyed its intimacy through a set of conveniently private sounds” (*Hunger of Memory* 5). For Rodriguez, the house and its Spanish sounds had offered solace and immense joy. Spanish language exchanges previously represented the accepted conventions of the house; everything verbal was in Spanish. For Rodriguez, the major benefit of speaking Spanish was family intimacy. It was only after the nuns’ entering the Rodriguez household that their lives assumed a public (American English) rather than a private (Mexican Spanish) focus. Although the family’s intimacy was forever altered, it is also clear that Rodriguez’s public identity was created as a direct result of these performative speech acts. If performatives, like performances, are penetrative, then Rodriguez reifies them to show the function of ambivalence and ambiguity for colonial subjects as they negotiate their identities.

Although the nuns’ insistence on the use of English dominates the interactions in the house between family members, it is now Rodriguez who assumes the position of authority because he, too, does things of his own accord with English words. In “Bilingual Education: Outdated and Unrealistic” Rodriguez notes, “Beyond any question of pedagogy there is the simple fact that a language gets learned as it gets used, *fills one’s mouth, one’s mind*, with the new names for things” (59, emphasis added). Because of the nuns’ enforcement of the dominant language, Rodriguez is now strategically positioned in such a way through the use of English that he is an authoritative figure. It is after being influenced by the language that he is subsequently able to influence the minds of those who read his English words. The cultural submission he makes provides the basis for constituting his dominant position as an author. Rodriguez is manipulating words in such

a way that he now is narrating his own experiences. Extending Pérez and Bhabha's arguments for opening up an alternative third space for agency, I read Rodriguez as able to constitute in his autobiographies an alternative space in which he is both the object and the subject of his own decolonial history.

By writing down his stories for readers, Rodriguez is, on one hand, telling about a performance that leaves traces behind while, on the other hand, he is also demonstrating his agency in constituting a space for himself through the act of writing and speaking back. He narrates his story in order to show how he remembers it or perhaps how he wishes it had happened. Writing, then, helps Rodriguez to negotiate between his memories of the past and the construction of an alternative space in language where he is an empowered, authentic, and authoritative speaking subject. Juan Velasco writes:

La escritura actúa en este caso como acto de recuperación
simultánea de un espacio geográfico y de un pasado histórico...
[adding] ... y al mismo tiempo como espacio de recreación de una
identidad que se sitúa en los intersticios de ambas culturas
nacionales lo que constituye un espacio cultural y político propio.
[The writing process acts, in this case, as an act of simultaneous
recuperation of a geographic space and a historic past, and at the
same time as a space to remake an identity that situates itself in the
interstices of both national (Mexican and American) cultures, which
constitutes its own cultural and political space] (107).

The act of writing, at once from inside and outside the geographical and historical borders, reinstates for Rodriguez the interstitial space that Bhabha and Pérez deem an imperative to colonialism. In his autobiographies, Rodriguez constructs an ambiguous, penetrated yet penetrating identity, as one that opened up for him through his use of language.

Assimilation for Rodriguez is a strategy first to enable him to become part of dominant culture and second, after many inevitably failed attempts, to find an alternative space to represent his life's history. The ambiguous positions Rodriguez has had to assume in order to become a writer and public speaker connects with Bhabha's notion of the various repertoires available to colonial mimics in the aftermath of conquest (110). Rodriguez's written texts exemplify how one can perform a strategic recovery from a colonized state of being. The way Rodriguez copes with conflicts is to allow pieces of his past and present to inform his conceptualization of an in-between identity. Rodriguez's autobiographies negotiate this in-between state of being as he constantly addresses his racial and ethnic past, (Mexico) and his present state (United States). It is through these written negotiations that Rodriguez locates an alternative space for himself as an authoritative yet ambiguously colonized subject able to critique the biased colonial narrations that focus solely on his otherness as a disempowered state of being.

V. Narrations of Conquest as Performative Speech Acts

Rodriguez's creation of an alternative space for his life's history unmasks the biases in colonial narrations of history. Bhabha notes, "If colonialism takes power through the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of a farce" (122).

Of course, it is not only through farce that colonialism gains power; it is in the actual narration of biased histories that language, farce, and performance, are intertwined.

Because Rodriguez's autobiographies constitute his individual history as a valid part of American history, they counteract the privilege that the colonizers' rendition of events holds. Mary Louise Pratt indicates that the purpose of her study is "to be able to talk about literature in the same terms we use to talk about all other things people do with language" (vii).

Therefore, it is crucial to take into consideration what Rodriguez is saying about conquest in his autobiographical works and to acknowledge his critique of the effects that narrating subjects with the privilege of dominance have on many other people. Those so privileged are the authorized speakers capable of fictionalizing and fabricating events to such an extent that it is impossible to know whether the history books are factual or form part of fictional literary discourse.

The European narrations of colonial events, then, can be read as performative speech acts simply because the "things they do" actually indoctrinate colonized subjects to feel they are historically disempowered and helpless against the colonizers' advances. As Pratt writes, "Literary discourse must be viewed as a *use* rather than a *kind* of language" (xiii). The way language is used to benefit the image of the colonizers must not go unnoticed or be accepted at face value. Figuratively, the role of the actors, the number of speaking lines, the length of face time, and so forth, are all assigned by the Europeans who narrate when people enter and exit this socio-historical drama. Rodriguez's autobiographies affirm that colonial histories themselves need to be approached with

caution or, at the minimum, with the deliberateness a reader has when approaching a literary work.

Investigating how the Europeans prescribe roles of empowered and disempowered subjects of the conquest shows strong biases for promoting their own political agendas. Velasco notes, “El texto [en la literatura chicana] abre un Nuevo espacio ideológico y de representación que se sitúa entre lo mexicano y lo americano” (118). [The text, in Chicana/o literature, opens up a new ideological and representational space that situates itself between that which is Mexican and that which is American.] Rodriguez subscribes to the definition of what Chicano literature means as Pérez has put them forth in identifying Chicano histories. I believe Rodriguez’s texts also are classifiable as performative speech acts. In his retelling and questioning of biased historical narrations, he is imagining a decolonial and alternative space of ideology and representation. His texts offer a voice different from those commonly heard in overtly biased colonial histories. Pérez argues that the decolonial imaginary becomes a tool for writing silenced voices into history (33). In the version of history that Rodriguez presents, he presents his marginal voices in culture not as disempowered but rather as imbued with agency. This characterization is important for Rodriguez, since it allows for the creation of new spaces in order to represent ideologically and physically Chicano male and female subjectivities, past and present.

The symbolic dominance that colonizers have on narrations of conquest is apparent in more than just biased historical narratives. The ability of Europeans to represent themselves extends into how Europe views its privileged positions in various

ways. Recall that in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez explains, “Europe has been accustomed to play the swaggart in history—Europe striding through the Americas, overturning temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood” (8). Whether they are creating myths of conquest or changing cultural and ideological views of the colonized, European narrations of colonization use words to mark native, indigenous cultures as less civilized than they—and thus a space is created in which the colonizers become the saviors of the savages who populated foreign lands before occupation. The Europeans know they are the “swaggarts,” the arrogant, boastful narrators in this historical drama who deem themselves the victors; thus the “things they do” by verbally chronicling their events they experience enables them to position themselves as historically, culturally, and always superior.

The European recollection presented in their narration dominates the conceptualization of the colonizers as swaggarts and the colonized as passive objects acted upon. It is Rodriguez’s work that destabilizes this set up of activity and passivity because of the ambiguity to which his texts admit. The colonizers have won the right to constitute themselves as the victors because the Indians are symbolically the effeminate losers in the violent colonial interactions. The Europeans’ image as powerful and symbolically masculine is left intact precisely because their narrative says it is. The colonized Indians are marked as inferior because of their inability to narrate their own versions of socio-historical events and because they are labeled as passive. In his discussion of the historical circumstances that have pigeonholed Mexicans as the sons of La Malinche, Paz argues any explanation that is based solely on historical “fact” is

insufficient but not necessarily false (72). As Bhabha suggests, it is impossible to know the extent of the influence the colonizers had and still have on their colonized subjects. However, Paz, much like Rodriguez, encourages an approach to history that incorporates a more complete view of what actually transpired. Following Paz, Rodriguez attempts to recover the empowered roles that the colonized are oftentimes denied because of inadequate historical narrations.

The connection between passivity and the colonized Indians is a strategic gender alignment through words and narrations that illustrates the superiority of the European version of conquest. As I suggested in the second chapter, the major strategies of resistance and negotiation that Rodriguez employs with words stem from the concepts of consumption, absorption, and rejection in the epistemology of penetration. All of these concepts offer inlets from which different interpretations and narrations of passive subjectivities can be explained. In an interview with Hector Torres, Rodriguez says, “I really do make the feminine principles in that book [*Days of Obligation*], which is the Indians’ absorbing qualities stronger than the conquistadors’ aggressive qualities” (*Days of Obligation* 181-182). By labeling the colonized Indians as passive, the Europeans are connecting themselves to the concepts of strength, aggression, and action. As these characteristics are socially deemed masculine, the European version is accorded the privilege that masculinity holds in culture.. Interestingly, Rodriguez’s words and images perform gender subversions. The “feminine” principles that generally connote passivity and weakness are employed paradoxically by Rodriguez. The vigor and strength of *Days of Obligation* comes directly from the subversion of the Indians’ allegedly passive acts. It

is not the colonizers' aggression that takes an authoritative and primary role but, rather, the ways in which inferior subjects strategically rework, revise, and negotiate their identities in the aftermath of colonial contact. The Indians may not be able to narrate exactly the course of actions but they do consume, absorb, reject, and rework pieces of the European culture as part of their culture.

Absorption, according to Rodriguez and Bhabha, then becomes an effective process of subjectification for the Indians to perform and expand their repertoire of positions as colonized subjects. Returning to the opening lines of *Hunger of Memory* that I discuss as central to language and cultural acquisition earlier in the first chapter of this project, Rodriguez actively negotiates his reading and speaking subject position in the aftermath of colonialism through the concepts of absorption and consumption: "I have taken Caliban's advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle" (1). By stealing their books, Rodriguez positions himself with agency not only in order to take the books but also so he can consume their messages in ways that inform his identity. Because he steals the books and absorbs their content, Rodriguez is empowered with the ability to manipulate and maneuver his speaking and writing national subject position. Rodriguez's autobiographies also negotiate ambiguity to identify alternative spaces that extend his performance from solely that of a colonized subject.

VI. Rodriguez and (Homo)Sexual Dissimulation

Rodriguez's outward anxiety concerning acknowledging or performing the identity of "homosexual" continues in *Days of Obligation*. As I have shown, his autobiographical writings have evolved since *Hunger of Memory* was originally published. In his current

work, he is directly addressing issues of homosexuality and as I have argued, opened up an alternative queer space of agency for colonized subjects. However in the texts themselves, dissimulation is still the strategy he employs when discussing tabooed subjects. Dissimulation is, according to Paz, a major strategy employed by Mexicans negotiating their identities in culture. It is a performance because it requires constant dedication and commitment to maintaining a lie so that it becomes synonymous with a role that one assumes. This passage from Paz highlights the connections I see among the ambiguous performances that Rodriguez negotiates throughout his autobiographies:

Dissimulation is an activity very much like that of actors in the theater, but the true actor surrenders himself to the role he is playing and embodies it fully [...] the dissembler never surrenders or forgets himself [...] but this fiction becomes an inseparable—and spurious—part of his nature [...] the lie takes command of him and becomes the very foundation of his personality (42).

Though Paz is talking about Mexicans in general, I submit that Rodriguez be understood as representing the Mexican, American, Mexican-American and Hispanoamerican, depending on the contexts in which he is read, presented, and catalogued. That Rodriguez's texts dissimulate his (homo)sexuality has been a topic of controversy for some time now, and I believe it needs to be revisited with an understanding of the performative subtext that unites all three of his autobiographies. Rodriguez distances himself from the homosexual label because of his awareness of society's negative opinion and potential rejection of such an affiliation. It is not that he claims to be heterosexual.

For example, he is not fabricating stories about girlfriends. He merely avoids admitting to any sexual interactions. As Paz describes, this fiction, this lie, takes control of Rodriguez and becomes an integral part of how he explores the character of Richard. The act of dissimulating is so integral to how Rodriguez situates his sexuality in his texts that it becomes a continuous feature.

Though still dissimulating, Rodriguez approaches homosexuality with much more bravado in *Days of Obligation* than he did in *Hunger of Memory*. At a gay friend's funeral, Richard the protagonist observes, with fascination, interest, and anxiety, the affection between a middle-aged gay couple. He maintains the lie that he is unlike them in any way, yet this scene is also a step forward for Rodriguez because he is directly engaging the topic of homosexuality in his work. I do not believe that in 2003 Rodriguez deserves accolades for specifically talking about homosexuality. However there has been much criticism focusing on his inability to talk and write openly about it. Therefore I see this scene as his attempt to take up the homosexual question while negotiating American and Mexican understandings of deviant sexualities.

Here, too, [at the church where the funeral is held] is the gay couple in middle age; interchangeable plaid shirts and corduroy pants. Blood and shit and Mr. Happy Face. *These know the weight of bodies.* [...] *These learned to love what is corruptible*, while I, *barren skeptic*, reader of St. Augustine, curator of the earthly paradise, inheritor of the *empty* mirror, I shift my tailbone upon the cold, hard pew (47, emphasis added).

I have already noted that both Paz and Rodriguez warn that the observations and gazes of others are potentially threatening. In this instance, it is Richard the protagonist who, through dissimulation, positions himself as the observer looking upon a homosexual relationship from a safe distance. However, Rodriguez as an author is also positioned externally in this scene as he assumes a dominant, narrating role. At the same time, the gay males are positioned as the recipients of Richard's gaze and are unable to narrate their version of the events at the funeral. Much like the colonizer's versions of historical events, the speech acts employed here provide only one side of a complicated story regarding Rodriguez's constitution of his sexuality.

Rodriguez's observations of the gay couple at the church promote the religious images of purity and sanctity that he is attempting to uphold by dissimulating. His observations also become the ground where two allegedly opposed lifestyles (the solitary one Richard leads and the communal one the gay couple leads) regarding the homosexual penetration event converge. Rodriguez makes various connections between himself and St. Augustine. St. Augustine in Catholicism is understood as removed from the world. Rodriguez's dissimulation here allows him to imagine himself as removed from homosexual interactions and connections. He cannot, or does not want to be, associated with these gays, who embrace their "corruptible" desires. He performs this distancing through his writing to show how different these men are from him—that he is, in fact, not like them at all.

The reference to blood, shit, and a happy face implicates the body directly. These versatile gay men appear happy, according to Rodriguez's observation. The blood and shit can be read as allusions to the homosexual penetration event, and even "Mr. Happy Face" can be seen as vernacular for the penis in the climactic moment in the sex act. When considering the homosexual subtext in this passage and then Rodriguez's anxieties about preserving the sanctity of his allegedly impenetrable body, a relationship between the images of blood and shit become undeniably associated with homosexual anal sex. Further, the author's distancing and judgment is implied: "These know the weight of bodies [...] these learned to love what is corruptible" (*Days of Obligation* 47). *El pecado nefando contra natura* is the corruptible act in question. However tacitly coded by Rodriguez, the weight of bodies for this middle-aged gay couple is that of their own bodies interacting in a variety of sexual and nonsexual ways.

As Rodriguez presents Richard the protagonist as isolated from sexual and intimate experiences, the authorial voice that he uses in his narration demonstrates his subjectivity as unlike that of these gay men. This is the desired effect of his public dissimulation. The gay couple's public openness is not something with which Rodriguez admits familiarity. He eagerly watches and consumes the image of a loving gay couple and notes how they have experienced each other's body; though messy at points (with shit and blood), the result of their closeness and connection was a happy one. Rodriguez's tone shows that he is jealous of this gay male couple. Rodriguez recounts how he sits alone, watching them, observing their actions with homoerotic fascination but at a safe distance. The role he plays is as an observer, not as a participant; the urgency of

maintaining the sanctity and impenetrability of his body is of utmost concern to him in the accomplishment of his performance. These gay men have achieved a subjectivity that does not judge their same-sex desires but, instead embraces it; they do not need to lie or masquerade as other than who they are. This is something Rodriguez is yet to do overtly in his texts.

Interestingly enough, a major facet of Rodriguez's dissimulation is to explicate that he himself is unaware of such knowledge as the weight of bodies, such as these gay men know. Although Rodriguez is still committed to dissimulating with regard to his homosexuality, his vigilance in these men signifies his dissatisfaction with his learned and self-imposed solitary performance. He reflects on his own body in relation to these gay men when he describes sitting alone and shifting his tailbone on the "cold hard pew." In other words, his swishing his bottom, can be both a sign of anxieties surrounding his current location at a funeral and as a sign of his sexual desires, which remain unfulfilled. The pew is cold to Rodriguez because it is devoid of another body. Unlike Rodriguez, the middle-aged gay couple exudes warmth in their happiness and flesh-on-flesh connection. The reference to the pew as "hard" on his tailbone also merits inspection with regard to the epistemology of penetration. In this church, while Rodriguez reflects on his bodily purity, his tailbone acknowledges the hard surface beneath his bottom. It is almost as if he is reevaluating his disembodiment and the decision to maintain this lie. He implicates the anal region directly, because, while he watches the gay couple who love that which is corruptible, his longing for what they know surfaces. He is aware of the hard pew

beneath his anal region and must be unsatisfied that, in his pursuit of purity and impenetrability, all he is left with is a seat on a cold, hard wooden church pew.

Though Rodriguez imagines his body as having transcended to a removed and impervious state, it appears that his goal of nonsexuality has not been achieved. His voice echoes an unsatisfied acceptance of his learned and self-inflicted state of impenetrability. Rodriguez performs the role of the pure virgin, safe from the dangers of his homosexuality. However, his longing to know about what “these” types of gay couples know is undeniable. Much as when Rodriguez looks at and consumes the image of the *braceros* in *Hunger of Memory*, in this instance his homoerotic viewing highlights a fascination with that middle-aged gay couple. Thus, his choice of the word “transcend” seems at once telling and suspect. Though the disembodiment he found through rigorous gym exercise did enable him to maintain an image of corporeal purity, Rodriguez’s discontent with his lack of contamination (read interaction and connection) suggests that he has not reached a transcendental state of being. Rather, Rodriguez is positioned ambiguously, vacillating between his desire to watch and consume the image of the middle-aged gay couple and his desire to adhere to Paz’s urgency for dissimulation and impenetrability.

VII. Rodriguez’s Autobiographies as a Self-Fashioning

Dissimulating requires an intense commitment to a fabricated role. In *Hunger of Memory* and again in *Days of Obligation*, it is clear that Rodriguez finds dissimulation to be a fruitful strategy when he is constructing his subjectivity for readers. In his final autobiography, *Brown*, Rodriguez moves away from dissimulation and openly embraces

the concepts of impersonation and theatricality as foundational to the authentic American experience. Just by viewing the title of chapter three in *Brown*, “The Prince and I,” his words are clearly performing an intertextual reference.³¹ The intertextual reference represented in the title of that chapter is Prince Lightfoot, from the Stanford Indians’ football games, a man who masquerades as a quasi-mascot to the team; the other main character juxtaposed with Prince Lightfoot is Richard the protagonist. Rodriguez implies that both characters, the Prince and Richard, are in costume and thus performing their identities. This is a provocative assertion that I believe Rodriguez makes to problematize and point out how commonplace roles and performances are in the American culture. Rodriguez, I think, includes himself in this equation to demonstrate how performance and theatricality are integral processes of Americanization that he and other colonized identities maneuver in imagining and representing their self-construction.

Role-playing is just part of negotiating a public identity for Rodriguez. He goes so far as to admit, “I was experimenting with impersonation” (*Brown* 48). A second scene in *Brown* is framed by Rodriguez as follows:

Three hundred years or so after Thanksgiving, the descendants of the first colonists would dress as Indians to portray themselves as authentic to their landscape, to portray the old country as having no claim on them, therefore. This was the Boston Tea Party.

³¹ Rodriguez undoubtedly is gesturing towards the play *The King and I* (he references it on page 78) either yet again to attempt to place his work at the level of great theatrical works or simply because of his awareness and fascination with thematic from the text.

My interest is in this intersection—the intersection in America of the private theatrical with the public theatrical; that of the closet and the meetinghouse; the impulse to play and the fear of play (53-54).

Rodriguez identifies the colonial encounter as significant in the construction and play of identities. He is also taking a contradictory stance in American public and private culture, a position that he characterizes as a closet and meetinghouse. Note the socio-sexual reference to the closet. Rodriguez is engaging colonial and other oppressive regimes that structure ideas of public versus private, open versus closed, authentic versus inauthentic, and real versus fake.

For Rodriguez, constructing and performing an identity is now more complicated than for what Paz's notion of dissimulation can account. Dissimulation suggests an implicit understanding of role playing, but now he consciously refers to himself and his actions as explicit performances. Describing an important football game between rivals Stanford University and UCLA, Rodriguez states, "I am wearing a costume I have copied from an illustration in *Esquire*—loafers, khakis, blue shirt, a red sweater draped over my shoulders" (*Brown* 54). Though his garb might not necessarily be classified as a costume by many, I think this is precisely why he defines it as such. The performance that Rodriguez intends through that uniform is one of authentic middle-class privilege. Bhabha's work intersects here to elaborate the connections among colonial mimicry, impersonation, and authenticity. He notes, "The desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial

representation” (88). Colonial mimicry itself can be classified as a form of dissimulation, because colonization obliges (through various forms of coercion and violence) the standardization of bodies. The image of privilege that Rodriguez’s “preppy” attire conveys in his pursuit of yuppie-American style is only a partial representation. By mimicking their clothing, Rodriguez represents himself as almost, but not quite, the same as a member of the dominant culture, or as Bhabha notes, almost the same but not white (89). The clothing is part of the representation that allows Rodriguez’s performance in public life to be viewed as mimicry. Although he may be able to don the costume of (class and racial) privilege, his difference is still undeniable. By copying the style of the group of which he wants to be a part, Rodriguez attempts to impersonate them. If he can look like them and act like them, then perhaps he can be deemed as equally authentic. I believe that this is the motivation behind his self-conscious identification of the similarities between himself and the Prince.

For Rodriguez, dressing like the models in *Esquire* is a self-aware performance; this is where the title “The Prince and I” establishes a link between the performance and (in)authenticity of both Rodriguez and Prince Lightfoot. In his writing, Rodriguez describes himself as a colonial mimic, an assimilated American, or an avid performer who impersonates elements of the dominant culture to gain greater success in public life. Although in this particular instance Rodriguez’s performance is as a preppy college student, his emphasis on his attire as a costume demonstrates that mimicry is not limited to speech or language but is found in visual media as well. The importance of the visual in mimicry has been essential to Rodriguez since *Hunger of Memory*. Recall the scene in

the chapter “Complexion” in which his dark skin is a mark of leisure—a tan represents for the privileged class a specific lifestyle, perhaps the result of skiing in the Swiss Alps.³² There are a number of ways in which subjects, colonized and otherwise, can impersonate public images. Dissimulation is but one approach. To copy a style or way of speaking also proves fortuitous when one is attempting to establish an identity in line with the majority. Although it is easier to consider a feathered headdress as more a symbol of masquerade than khakis and loafers, Rodriguez’s references here, coupled with Bhabha’s discussion of “authenticity” for colonial mimics, show how various subjects are always at least partially performing or impersonating as they locate themselves inside colonial discourse and inside the nation. Rodriguez and the Prince’s mimicry highlight a racialized form of ambiguity. Prince Lightfoot’s Yurok ancestry establishes him an authentic subject capable of mimicking tribal costumes and performances. However, the way in which his costume is sensationalized based on stereotypical images associated with Native Americans in general reinforces a form of masquerading as Other. Rodriguez has the opposite situation regarding his specific tribal costume. For him, the yuppie clothing is not a performance of otherness but a masquerading of sameness—that is to say, a representation of whiteness in American culture vis-à-vis wardrobe.

What these similar yet different acts of constituting a stereotypical identity illustrate is the ambiguity of performance itself. One character impersonates with the intention of standing out, whereas the other does it to blend in. Rodriguez, choosing to impersonate an identity partially his own and partially dramatized, is just like Prince

³² *Hunger of Memory* 121.

Lightfoot impersonating an Indian mascot to the crowd at Stanford. The major difference is that Rodriguez's attire is acceptable because it conforms to the standards of the dominant culture. Prince Lightfoot's attire, too, adheres to the dominant culture's expectations but in a way that negatively portrays tribal authenticity. The comparison of Rodriguez to that of an unofficial Indian mascot who mimics tribal dances of the past suggests how integral impersonation and performance are in constituting a space for oneself inside the nation. To mimic stereotypes shows the importance of the performative precisely because it perpetuates the very same stereotypes. One's subject position is comprehensible because of one's presentation of self vis-à-vis chosen costumes. Rodriguez problematizes standard conventions and normalcy by highlighting his own ambiguous communal performances and those of Prince Lightfoot.

By discussing Timm Williams, the name of the character that portrays Prince Lightfoot in the Stanford sporting drama, Rodriguez draws broad inferences that allow Williams' performance to be compared with that of a variety of other, less ostensibly theatrical performers. Williams' conceiving Prince Lightfoot was his own performative creation of his identity as an Indian/Native American. Rodriguez writes, "Timm Williams liked to dress up. He sought, through the theatrical invention of himself, to portray his true self to himself by playing the Indian publicly" (*Brown* 57). There are multiple layers of identity, (in)authenticity, and self-presentation in this example. By donning the Indian headdress and performing Indian dances, hexes, chants, and so forth, an integral part of Williams' identity is glorified in a public venue.

Because both the characters of Richard and the Prince focus on displaying public identity through costume, they are similar in yet another way. For Williams, he is an authentic group member, a Yurok descendant, who gains a public identity as an Indian through his performances on the field of the college games. He is still a mimic, though, because the way he represents his culture is through colonial stereotypes; these acts of impersonating colonial stereotypes suggests how performances can be parodies that have negative implications. Rodriguez's public impersonations, whether at the game or in other venues he describes in his autobiographies, do not always allow for such an easy public acceptance by the audience. The irony for Rodriguez is that, Williams, as an Indian mascot, is the more believable and authentic performer. Rodriguez with his preppy costume seems more like the performing subject than Williams.

Performances, then, are always open to interpretation by the audience and actors. Performing in front of a large group means that there will be more people watching and inevitably evaluating the acts. Rodriguez spends much attention in all three of his works on what he calls "the intersection in America of the private theatrical with the public theatrical" (*Brown* 54). His position on the importance of both the private and public, with special interest paid to the public component with regard to subjectification, now is interwoven with the concepts of performance, impersonation, and theatricality. Rodriguez, though, shows in his text how he has publicly played the role of assimilated model American. Rodriguez concludes his comparison with Williams: "I am content to stand in relation to Timm Williams, as to someone who sought a limelight in which to portray himself. [...] I substitute my own longing, my own solitude, which had nothing

to do with the compulsion to make or to wear an Indian costume” (59-60). Though the motives for their performances are significantly different (Williams to be seen as stereotypically Indian, Rodriguez as an authentic, middle-class, colorless, educated preppy), the impulse to present oneself through both private and public performances extends impersonation as a vital process of Americanization. To impersonate universal American stereotypes, which is what both Williams and Rodriguez do, highlights just how foundational performing is for colonial stereotypes as well as in negotiating one’s identity as an authentic American subject.

Rodriguez is enamored by movie posters because what they symbolize and glorify. These posters influence his evaluation of the importance of role-playing in American and Hispanoamerican culture. As a strategic process of subjectification, role playing and role assumptions reflect, for Rodriguez, a desire to immortalize oneself. Bhabha writes, “The desire of colonial mimicry—an interdictory desire—may not have an object, but it has strategic objectives [...]” (89). This quote brings to mind both the desire to mimic and its usefulness. The strategic impulse motivating performances of impersonation is to succeed in providing a convincing performance while impersonating. For Rodriguez, however, there is an object that he wishes to mimic: the middle-class preppy man. This is the object of his desire in more ways than one. Rodriguez’s mimicry is aimed at glorifying and impersonating pieces of American public culture that he believes are privileged.

A commitment to performance, as we saw in the discussion of dissimulation, proves theoretically essential for Paz, Bhabha, and Rodriguez. For Rodriguez, enacting

different characters is a strategy for achieving public success. It is not surprising, then, that he elevates the roles of popular stage and screen actors. “An irrational hope within the human psyche” Rodriguez notes, “is the hope of finding one’s role, a role that will represent one—the Marschallin, Hamlet, Margo Channing—as opposed to one’s puritan authenticity. The role is the immortal part; we [are] but transient spirits” (*Brown* 60). For Prince Lightfoot, Rodriguez, and other subjects, performing a *magnus opus* in a public venue where others witness it, is a major goal in life. Finding the iconic role that will permanently mark his (creative, personal, professional) contribution to the larger culture is in many ways what Rodriguez is attempting to accomplish through the written constitution of his identity in his autobiographies. The suggestion now is that some people are made to play certain roles—and we can only assume that there is a nod to his performances inside such a statement.

For Rodriguez, what someone truly is, “one’s puritan authenticity,” is important, but on a smaller, private scale. However, finding an important public role to assume is the stuff of public legends. Prince Lightfoot will be forever immortalized as the quasi-mascot of the Stanford Indians because of his repeated impersonations and because of his inclusion in Rodriguez’s text. Rodriguez implies that Williams accomplished his goal much as Gertrude Lawrence did in the New York theatrical production of *The King and I*. She was buried in the ball gown that her character in the play wore (and that she was wearing when she died) (*Brown* 78). Rodriguez’s didactic moment in his theorizing the importance of impersonation comes when he writes, “She will be buried in this ball gown. From which we can take it—if we take nothing else—that roles are to be taken

seriously, not only by those of us who listen in the dark, but also by those transfigured personalities who move, for a time, in the light” (79). All three characters, Timm, Gertrude, and Richard, go through various transformations that become symbolic of who and what they are both in their own eyes and those of others. According to Rodriguez, it is because of the symbolic importance the gown held to the theater public, that Gertrude is buried in the dress. This example demonstrates ambiguity for Rodriguez (here specifically regarding Bhabha’s notion of partial representation) because inauthenticity itself can become authentic transfiguration.³³

Much as Rodriguez seeks to problematize what is classifiable as a costume—khakis and a blue shirt or a Plains Indian headdress—he now wants to complicate the utility and productivity of performances for people in society. He argues, “I only mean to suggest we live in a nation whose every other impulse is theatrical, but whose every other impulse is to insist upon ‘authenticity’” (67). The implication here is paradoxical to Rodriguez because there does not seem to be any authenticity on which to fall back. Instead, people are always representing some version of themselves or acting out some perceived socio-cultural expectations as a means of self-constitution. Assuming a certain role in public life is something that filters down from the demands of the nation. Images produced and reproduced convincingly suggest that acting out one’s role in life is a viable means for success. Rodriguez speaks to the conundrum of performance that all subjects

³³ Depp underscores Rodriguez’s ability to connect his experiences with those of his student readers. “For as much as Rodriguez claims an idiosyncratic predicament,” Depp writes, “students from many backgrounds have come to identify with his tension” (11). There is something in Rodriguez’s story that attracts readers. I believe it is the way he negotiates his conflicted identities that resonates particularly with students who are also facing the conflicts of coming of age and finding and claiming a place of their own.

must negotiate as they find their place/role in the nation. He is troubled, however, by the denial of such theatrics and replacing it with feigned authenticity.

For Rodriguez, what one wears is inevitably a foundational part of the identity that is being discursively and socially constituted. Rodriguez recognizes that representing an identity may depend on one specific act or moment. Who a person is or how that person wants to be understood (because of the role he or she plays) in public contexts is dependent on various factors. Diamond addresses these factors: “The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest on *a* performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotions and political effects, all become discussable” (5). Identity, then, can be understood on some level as part of performance because it is integral in the successful constitution of the subject. How one portrays oneself reflects partly one’s own interpretation of a role/identity and one’s perceived expectations of others regarding this same role/identity. The headdress that Williams wears means something because of the historical references it implies. There is a stereotypically scripted historical dimension to the identity of the Indian in colonial discourse, and, as Rodriguez points out, Williams and the audience are all eager to consume this stereotypical image. Rodriguez himself knows that his public American construction, either written or physically played out, is much like that of Williams or Lawrence because they are doing something symbolic with their words or actions regarding emotions, embodiments, and cultural politics.

For Rodriguez, performing through his writing has always been part of his identity. In an interview with Claudia M. Milan Arias, Rodriguez reminds critics, “But

Brown is a literary performance, not a scholarly one” (278). In other words, *Brown* as a text and as a term becomes a space wherein certain historical conditions and cultural performances merge. The literary performances of *Brown* combine the identity of the individuals and that of the nation that have stereotypically come to represent them.

Whether through dissimulation, impersonation, or mimicry, performing is foundational to finding one’s identity and, by extension, one’s role in culture. For Rodriguez, authenticity is yet another form of performance. The only truly authentic state of being for all subjects is brown—even white subjects, which, for Rodriguez, is more a mythical notion than a true identity category. Authenticity and theatricality thus pertain to issues of race and culture directly because all subjects perform their identities in culture on some level.

VIII. Conclusion: Rodriguez’s Autobiographies as Alternative Spaces

Rodriguez, I believe, is intrigued by the relationship of discourse to the construction and successful performance of public and private American identities. Assimilation for Rodriguez is fundamentally about performing appropriately and efficiently in English. It is always his brown color that leads people to doubt, or at the very least, question, his authentic membership in American culture. For Rodriguez his ambiguous location in the culture, as a brown, queer, Latino/Hispanic public intellectual and target of critics, is confusing for many. The reasons that his multiple and hyphenated identities are so complicated for many is because of the push for the pretense of purity and colorlessness in the American imagination. The political projection, again based on consensus findings, is that the term Hispanic soon will become an “oxymoron: America’s largest minority” (*Brown* 103). Hispanics will assume the highest numerical value of bodies in

the United States. This however does not mean that they will be the dominant majority. Quite to the contrary, Rodriguez believes that they will be a complicated group because although they are numerically dominant, their cultural force will remain inferior.

For Rodriguez the conundrum of Hispanics arises when understanding their physical and ideological relationship with brownness. Brown is narrated as other in America's history because it is the product of conflicts surrounding the policing of bodies. Rodriguez proclaims, "Soy Hispanic is a brown assertion" (*Brown* 110)! It is not just brown because it is a hybrid of two languages but also because it is a statement that aligns with historical and contemporary debates in the making of America and Americanism. Rodriguez's brownness is a fundamental characteristic of his identity. This is implied with the choice of the verb "ser" in Spanish. To be Hispanic is to be brown for Rodriguez because it represents the political conflicts that have shaped the discourse available to this group. He is only able to identify himself in the United States according to the language available. However in *Brown* he has taken it upon himself to blatantly complicate and queer language through his construction of brownness.

For Rodriguez, autobiography as a genre is performative because it allows him to use words in a very specific manner. He narrates his life from a first-person perspective so he can show that the aftermath of colonization is much more complex and intricate than some versions of history admit. For Rodriguez, a focus on his own experiences in America and Hispanoamérica create a space whence nuanced performances of colonized subjectivities can alternately emerge. I do not see his autobiographical performances as attempts to refute conquest or to negate his own complicated relationship to the United

States, Mexico or his sexuality. Rather, his texts function on three distinct registers to return him to where he began his literary performance twenty-some years ago. In *Brown* Rodriguez writes:

Two decades ago, I wrote *Hunger of Memory*, the autobiography of a scholarship boy. Ten years later, in *Days of Obligation*, I wrote about the influence of Mexican ethnicity on my American life. This volume completes a trilogy on American public life and my private life. *Brown* returns me to years I have earlier described. I believe it is possible to describe a single life thrice, if from three isolations: *Class. Ethnicity. Race* (xiv).

Rodriguez describes his life through the separate categories that constitute its placement in American culture. Rodriguez reconsiders his subject position in public life as Other as he reflects on his life and works. Rodriguez has come to acknowledge an alternative space in culture for many impure subjects that ideologically and physically reflect the historical condition of the United States. Whether subjects are impure because of race, class, nation of origin, legal status, religion, or sexuality, Rodriguez's autobiographies make clear that the processes of public and private Americanization are ambiguous and produce ambivalence in subjects. Reading his autobiographies as an epistemology of penetration reveals how colonized subjects negotiate a more productive location in culture. The assumption that once penetrated one is always emasculated and contaminated is something that Rodriguez problematizes and subverts throughout his texts.

For Rodriguez, it is precisely when marginal subjects accept their position and employ agency that an alternative space in culture opens up. Rodriguez is able to return to his earlier reflections, but now he approaches them with a different lens. The major themes of language, acculturation, and otherness culminate in *Brown*. For Rodriguez, meditating on and imagining a space in which his identity is not condemned because of its tainted past is enabled through his formulation of brown. The goal of such negotiations is to remake and revise the aftermath of colonialism as a space in which ambiguous histories, like his, can come to light.

Finally, I believe that Rodriguez's autobiographies are relevant now more than ever before. With the institutionalization of Hispanic and Latino Studies, we find few prominent public figures that have consistently grappled with their location in culture as Rodriguez has. In 2005, MTV's affiliated network, LOGO (a lesbian and gay station), produced a documentary called *Latino Beginnings*. Three queer Latino youths were interviewed. They were all individually followed around by a camera crew to see how they handle their sexuality and ethnicity in an American subculture that is known for its focus on impenetrable masculinity, religion, and normative family values. The three queer youths that appear in the documentary include a closeted Mexican-American former military lesbian, an openly gay college-aged student with Mexican and Spanish roots who was running for campus office, and finally a flamboyant Cuban American drag queen. Though very different life experiences and histories, what relates all three of their stories and Rodriguez's autobiographies is the ways in which there is a concern of acceptance from parents once information regarding sexuality is made public. At least

two of the main characters overtly struggle with their parents' religious stance on their children's sexuality. One character's parents, who requested that they not be filmed, did appear with their faces blurred.

In all of these cases, the brown queer Hispanic/Latino subjects have decided to take their struggles public. Even though they voice their otherness differently (Rodriguez does not address his sexuality for example in his first text where the Cuban drag queen is extremely proud of his queerness from the first moment we are introduced to him), what becomes clear is that language is central to the construction and successful performance of their identities. The female character never officially on camera admitted that she is in fact a lesbian. Similar to how Rodriguez in the 1980s chose not to directly state his sexuality, this female character makes the decision that the best way to discuss her sexuality is through defining what she will never do in her life. The goal of telling her mother about her brown lesbianism is achieved when she states, "Nunca voy a tener un esposo" [I will never have a husband]. Directly after this information is conveyed, the film crew followed the mother to church where we can assume she prayed for her daughter.³⁴ Therefore it seems that just as in the 1980s, dissimulation is still a viable option for Hispanics/Latinos when dealing with their multiple otherness in America—even in the 2000s. The issue of sexuality in Latino communities is exemplified even more extremely when considering the role family plays in the construction of the Cuban drag queen's identity. The "family" of the flamboyant, drag queen character is a queer

³⁴ I realize that the impulse to come out and say, "I am gay/lesbian" is a contentious issue. When considering race, nation of origin, a history of violence, and so forth, the need to say it out loud should be reconsidered, I think. See for example José Quiroga's *Tropics of Desire* for more information on mediated silences and tactics of secrecy with regards to sexuality. Throughout the documentary, however, this female character stresses the significance of saying the words, "I am a lesbian" directly to her mother.

one created through the House of Infiniti (a Miami drag ball family similar to those which *Paris is Burning* portrays) and his biological family is never even mentioned.

People who represent multiple levels of otherness in America experience ambivalence as they negotiate their identities in opposition to the dominant culture. It is time to reconsider Rodriguez's text because his family's public and private struggles with his sexuality, his religion, his language, and his ambiguous location in American culture are still issues that many brown/queer bodies face today. As opposed to trying to read Rodriguez as defining *the* immigrant experience, or *the* Chicano experience, it is useful to see how his autobiographies illuminate the struggles of various groups who are marked Other in America. Rodriguez's autobiographies are creative, partially fictive stories of his life. They are not a series of factual information. His role as author and protagonist naturally suggest that embellishment occurs. To expect his literary works to be entirely factual and then to criticize him for certain scenes in the texts does not make sense from a literary perspective. Whether Rodriguez recounts truths or employs literary devices to add symbolisms, creativity, or simply to entertain his audience, it is now the time to approach his texts as pieces of literature. His role as a political and controversial figure influences the texts but they should not immediately discredit viewing the texts as socially conscious literature that attempts, from within, to critique the formation of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in America.

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