THE COMMUNALLY DERIVED ETHNIC
Self in Richard Rodriguez’s
Hunger of Memory

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To date, Richard Rodriguez has been read as an individualist, and his *Hunger of Memory* (1982) as a manifesto for ethnicity-erasing assimilation. This essay seeks to complicate the Rodriguez-as-individualist reading of *Hunger of Memory*, as well as to question the possibility of a world in which ethnicity no longer matters. The view of Rodriguez as an individualist has a tradition dating back to the earliest criticism of *Hunger of Memory*, with its most salient aspect being the direct line drawn between individualism and Rodriguez’s assimilationist arguments in the book. Among Chicana/o scholars, some of the most prominent cultural and literary critics in the field have called attention to this connection. In his landmark study, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, Ramón Saldívar writes, “In instance after instance, he [Rodriguez] emphasizes the absolute separation between the private and the public life of men and women, the priority of the individual private inner self over the social public outer self” (158). This is an example of Rodriguez as individualist. Immediately preceding this analysis, Saldívar argues that, “Rodriguez chooses to assimilate without ever considering whether he acted by will or merely submitted to an unquestioned grander scheme of political ideology” (158). This is an example of Rodriguez as assimilationist. Saldívar is not alone in suggesting a connection between assimilation and individualism. In her analysis of *Hunger of Memory*, Norma Alarcón centers her critique on the “hyperindividualized project in Rodríguez [sic],” which in turn leads to Rodriguez’s “refusal of ethnicity, except as a private phenomenon” (143–44).

The penetrating analyses of Saldívar and Alarcón raise an important question: What is the nature of the connection between individualism and assimilation? And, as a follow-up question: Is it a necessary connection? Readers outside the field of ethnic studies might be inclined to assume just the opposite: that individualism and assimilation stand opposed to each other since individualists would resist assimilation to a group identity of any sort. For instance, Raymund A. Paredes, in his reading of *Hunger of Memory*, underscores the conventionalism that assimilation to a shared cultural identity entails. Paredes brilliantly identifies the literary form of the book as a “conversion narrative” (281), and follows this insight with the remark that, “Apart from his preference for the traditional Latin liturgy of the Catholic church,
nothing reveals Rodriguez’s rigid conventionalism more clearly than his adherence to the doctrine of assimilation” (283).1

What unites Paredes’s critique with that of Alarcón and Saldívar is an awareness that arguments about assimilation have a long history of fomenting nativist sentiments as an instrument for maintaining social inequality. For this reason, Saldívar’s critique specifically questions Rodriguez’s apparent lack of historical and political consciousness, a criticism echoed by Cristina Beltrán: “Yet the multiplicitous pleasure of transformation in Rodriguez comes at the cost of depoliticizing race and neglecting the past” (60). For the politically conscious, what links individualism with assimilation is an awareness that, historically, the rhetoric of individualism has often been deployed by some on the right as an ideology for maintaining the status quo—or, more specifically, for preserving and attempting to justify social inequality and their own privileged position in society.

What is problematic about Hunger of Memory is that Rodriguez adopts a posture that associates him with anti-progressive dimensions of conservative ideology, and thus inclines readers to understand his distinction between “private” and “public” as aligned with the tradition of maintaining inequality rather than that of striving to increase opportunity. The confusion is exacerbated by the effectiveness of a corporations-are-people, regressive-taxation, winner-take-all propaganda machine that appropriates the useful fiction of classical liberalism that all people are “born” equal (as opposed to “created” equal—as if each were born with equal opportunity rather than society having to engender democratic access to opportunity). The pro-rich rhetoric turns the classical liberal narrative on its head in order to justify and reproduce the extreme advantages enjoyed by the ultra-wealthy, all of which constitutes the sociopolitical context in which Hunger of Memory is read. As such, when Rodriguez makes arguments that oppose private to public, he is easily misread as operating from, and endorsing, the same assumptions. Likewise, Rodriguez’s arguments about the cultural and linguistic dimensions of assimilation are easily misinterpreted as the justification of exclusionary practices predicated on cultural xenophobia. A close reading of Hunger of Memory, as I will argue here, should lead us to reject both of these conclusions. Rather than sanctioning social inequality, Rodriguez’s account stresses social mobility; rather than justifying privilege, Rodriguez offers a trenchant critique of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Rodriguez’s arguments about assimilation are indeed tied to arguments about the individual in society, but not in the way that has been heretofore assumed. Specifically, in Hunger of Memory, Rodriguez argues, unequivocally, for recognition as an individual (a cornerstone
of progressive liberalism). He is not, as many critics have read him, advocating a more individualistic culture (libertarian or otherwise). Just the opposite: Rodriguez’s analysis of public and private identity inverts both the solipsistic notion of individuals as disconnected monads and the deployment of the rhetoric of individualism to justify inequality. Instead, Rodriguez stresses the intersubjective nature of society, and sees the public-private intersection as vital to both community and greater socioeconomic equality. In short, Rodriguez’s individualist stance is a surface posture underneath which one finds a more fundamental desire for community. Likewise, Rodriguez’s assimilationist surface arguments—as suggested by 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”—reveal a much more trenchant resistance to hegemony, to the potential tyranny of various ethnic, racial, and gendered discourses mapped onto ethnic bodies (3). Taking precedence over subordinate (and often criticized) arguments linking individualism to assimilation are Rodriguez’s desire for human connection and his rebellion against ethnic hegemony which, taken together in his autobiographical works, consistently connect ethnic identity with community.

Whereas the postmodernist critique emphasizes the extent to which various discourses construct, constrain, and ultimately deny agency to subjects, Rodriguez sees the discourses of language and culture as the vehicles through which the ethnic subject gains greater agency. Like Caliban, ethnic subjects acquire agency through acknowledging and then mastering the cultural and linguistic discourses that situate them. For Rodriguez, identity is negotiated through discourse rather than imposed by it, and interpellation is intersubjective rather than wholly subjectivizing. Rodriguez demonstrates these unstated philosophical underpinnings in a most Butleresque manner through the performativity he enacts in his own text. 2 To adapt J. A. Marzán’s cogent analysis of Rodriguez’s “public theatricality,” the authorial referent of “Richard Rodriguez” as he presents himself is “a monument to postmodernism and reinvention” (63–64). Marzán titled his essay, “The Art of Being Richard Rodriguez,” and, as that title suggests, it is precisely through his posturing that Rodriguez enacts his being.

This performative being, however is not without limits. Ethnicity, insofar as it is visible to others, is inscribed on the body just as are narratives of race and gender. And though the interpretation of those markers is social, the site of interpretation is always on the body itself. The ethnic self is inescapably an embodied self, and thus always someone whose consciousness and personal identity are
inflected by ethnic experiences and filtered through the perceptual lens of alterity. Rodriguez personifies the inescapability of ethnicity. Not only does his presumed authority as a commentator on Latino issues derive from assumptions about his ethnic Chicano status, but readers also continue to experience him as an ethnic author. Rodriguez’s very consciousness is informed by the embodied-ness of his ethnicity, with the emotionally-powerful theme of nostalgia for a lost ethnic past in *Hunger of Memory* bearing testament to the extent to which Rodriguez’s sense of self bears the indelible tincture of an ethnic perspective. Rather than endorsing some form of solipsizing, Ayn Rand-like individualism, Rodriguez’s sense of the self—or the ethnic self—reveals a deeper impulse to forge and nurture community.

In what follows I will attempt to engage Rodriguez on his own terms in order to suss out the nature of the relationship between individualism and assimilation as presented in *Hunger of Memory*. I will develop this argument by first flashing forward to the elaboration of Rodriguez’s worldview as presented in his two subsequent books, both of which constitute part of the context in which *Hunger of Memory* is now read. I then turn to a close reading of the summer construction job scene in *Hunger of Memory*, which Rodriguez offers as a critique of racial essentialism but, importantly, does so in the service of the larger aim of both increasing the agency of racial subjects and of expanding community. This essay illustrates the extent to which Rodriguez’s desire for greater connectedness with others runs far deeper than surface arguments of his that have drawn critical scrutiny—such as his controversial views on bilingual education and the overstated dichotomy he draws between ethnic and mainstream cultures through the stand-ins of private and public identity. Though not everyone will agree with the account that Rodriguez offers, or be comfortable with the complicated and intertwining intellectual genealogy of his ideas (the political impurity of his brown thoughts), a close reading of *Hunger of Memory* calls for a decoupling of its arguments from an assumed direct and uncritical inheritance of conservative ideology, especially given that Rodriguez’s radically class-based critique subverts—and his communally-derived notion of the ethnic self completely inverts—the individualist rhetoric that favors anti-progressive financial elites and seeks to institutionalize inequality. Far from urging an unquestioning and naïve assimilationism either in tandem with or replaced by an atomized individualism, *Hunger of Memory* is more fundamentally an expression of the desire to link ethnic identity with community.
A Communally Derived Ethnic Self

Much of the critical resistance to Rodriguez's representation of the ethnic self and his use of the word private comes from the association of the self with classical liberalism (the tradition from which the modern notion of the self sprang) and, more problematic, with the ideology of conservative individualism. Though having the great virtue of enabling the useful (if still aspirational) political fiction that everyone is created equal in a democracy, one of the demerits of classical liberalism is that for most of its long history, it failed to grant the status of person to all but privileged white males. It is this troubled history that Alarcón alludes to in her analysis of Rodriguez's views when—in reference to the summer construction scene in the “Complexion” chapter of *Hunger of Memory*, which I will discuss in greater depth below—she criticizes Rodriguez for privileging the “rights of individuals” over those of groups, and for his validation of the “bourgeois classical liberal political subject” (Alarcón 143).

The problem with this view, Alarcón explains, is that “(im)migrants are constituted as the other of the bourgeois classical liberal political subject. Thus the political economy’s constitution of this grouping (i.e., immigrants) is rejected for the pleasures of the hyperindividualized citizen-subject” (143).

Alarcón’s reading also exposes the link between classical liberalism and its misappropriation by the class-protectionist wing of conservative ideology: “Rodríguez [sic] demonstrates that neoconservative liberal cynicism knows no bounds, as it rhetorically feeds its own trope machine by the selective filtering of the discourse of emancipation” (150–51). Such “selective filtering,” takes the form of what behavioral psychologists call the fundamental attribution error in the self-congratulatory credo of the wealthiest one-percent’s far right, the style of plutocrat whose justification for excessive socioeconomic inequality goes something along the lines of: If I am rich it is not because I have been fortunate or benefitted from socially-funded infrastructure (such as public roads, social opportunity, well-funded schools that come from living in the right zip code, and so forth), but because of my own hard work and individual talent alone. The argument appears is persuasive for a surprisingly large number of people for two reasons: because the other ninety-nine percent cling to the dream that they will be rich themselves someday, and because this bit of sophistry can feel intuitively true if taking the syllogistic premise that those who work harder do better in life for the conclusion that therefore, if you’re richer than everyone else, you must have worked harder than everyone else. But while as a society we would
want to foster talent and incentivize hard work, it is a numerical absurdity to believe that any one person can be hundreds of times more talented or hard working than anyone else. What plutocratic individualism denies is the inequality of opportunity that is endemic to American society and the extent to which the most affluent and successful tend to be those who have disproportionately benefitted from greater social and economic access. Bill Gates could never have become “Bill Gates” had he been born in the libertarian paradise of Somalia. Without access to the opportunities afforded to him by the society that he is born into, his talents would not be given a chance to develop and the financial rewards of his hard work would fall more in line with those of, say, working-class immigrants—who, if wealth were directly proportionate to hard work alone, would be among our wealthiest citizens.

Rodriguez’s arguments for class mobility—around which his arguments for assimilation revolve—are the polar opposite of the rhetoric of individualism adumbrated here. Alarcón’s criticism of Rodriguez’s individualism, however, comes from a different intellectual tradition—that of minority discourse. When Alarcón speaks of Rodriguez’s individualism, she is contrasting his assimilationist stance to political identification with one’s ethnic community. In addition to the fact that most immigrants come from cultures that are less individualistic than mainstream American culture, the marginalized status of Chicana/os inclines many to stress ethnic community (solidarity) over individualism, in part as a means of self-defense against marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation by more dominant groups. In respect to Chicana/os and other minorities, the rhetoric of individualism is often deployed not only as an instrument for maintaining current inequalities but also for preserving hierarchies of class, race, gender, and even culture. Given the long association between individualism and assimilation in this context, it is no wonder, then, that Rodriguez’s assimilationist stance leads many to read him as a neoconservative, though Rodriguez’s arguments about public individuality—which he sees as a means to greater equality and opportunity through recognition as a person—depart radically from that of individualist strains of conservative ideology. Since divergent intellectual traditions intersect in confusing ways here, and since the use of the same terminology in a different sense presents such an obstacle when it comes to discussing Rodriguez’s stance in *Hunger of Memory*, the most penetrating question to ask, here, is this: Do we read Rodriguez’s position as seeking to protect civil liberties, or merely to protect the advantages of the wealthy and privileged?
Perhaps the most iconic example of where this crucial question comes to bear, and which is also one of the touchstones where criticism of Rodriguez is most heated, is Rodriguez’s opposition to affirmative action in *Hunger of Memory*. His stance on the politicized issue readily associates him with attempts to dismantle equal opportunity programs through an individual-merits argument that protects the status quo by ignoring the existence of disadvantage and obscuring questions of access and opportunity. In this formulation, the criticism of affirmative action easily dovetails with an ideology of individualism that benefits the privileged and their legacies. As it turns out, however, this is not how Rodriguez frames his own critique of affirmative action, which centers instead on the degree to which existing programs fail to accurately distinguish between advantaged and disadvantaged persons, and at what point a person stops being disadvantaged. The first prong of this critique is evident in remarks that Rodriguez made as late as 2003: “for not defining carefully who, in their eyes, was disadvantaged or not” (qtd. in Torres 178). What stands out in Rodriguez’s account is the extent to which he stresses considerations of class, both economic and cultural: “It became easy to underestimate, even to ignore altogether, the importance of class. Easy to forget that those whose lives are shaped by poverty and poor education (cultural minorities) are least able to defend themselves against social oppression, whatever its form” (*Hunger* 149–50); “The strategy of affirmative action, finally, did not take seriously the educational dilemma of disadvantaged students. They need good early schooling” (151). In comments framed around a preoccupation with questions of social justice, Rodriguez cites his objection to race-only policies that do not also consider class: “Forget the inadequacies of affirmative action as they pertained to working class Americans. Forget the fact that it was unfair to lower class whites” (qtd. in Torres 178). Rodriguez continues by raising a point about the difficulties of bureaucratic attempts at racial categorization: “Forget the fact that Hispanic is an absurdity because it’s not even a race” (178).³

The second prong of Rodriguez’s critique is of the assumption that disadvantage is permanent. The standards of socioeconomic disadvantage that Rodriguez emphasizes can change over one’s lifetime, but affirmative action policies that considered race and gender foremost made it “difficult to distinguish the middle-class victim of social oppression from the lower-class victim. In fact, it became hard to say when a person ever stops being disadvantaged” (*Hunger* 150). Rodriguez considers himself among the number of those who are no longer socially disadvantaged. Indeed, following his own progression
from socially disadvantaged child to “middle-class American. Assimilated” provides the narrative structure of *Hunger of Memory* (7).

His opposition to affirmative action programs, with their progressive intent, led many readers to assume that Rodriguez was a defender of privilege and entitlements. By opposing a program that sought to narrow the inequality gap between minorities and the rest of society, Rodriguez had inadvertently framed himself as ignoring institutionalized racism and other forms of systemic disadvantage. Adding to this impression was the autobiography’s narrative arc, typical of the Benjamin Franklin or Horatio Alger ascent narrative, which depicted its protagonist as triumphing over any environmental obstacles that might put him at a disadvantage. To some readers, this suggested the kind of minority success story (where the exception is taken as the rule) often used by defenders of the status quo to dismiss the force of systemic disadvantage faced by others. Other readers felt that since Rodriguez had benefitted from affirmative action himself, that he was guilty of subscribing to a last-one-through-the-gate mentality. Rodriguez’s arguments for assimilation and against affirmative action drew reader attention to the surface-level arguments of *Hunger of Memory*, framing reception of the text in a polarizing way, and consigning to neglect a more fundamental concern with opportunity and economic integration for ethnic subjects in a much broader sense—with negotiating an ethnic identity in a world of inequality, prejudice, unequal access, and cultural difference.

**Paradigm Shift: Changing Frames and the Evolution of How We Read *Hunger of Memory***

Twenty-first century readers of *Hunger of Memory* read quite a different text than those readers and critics who read the book at the time of, or shortly after, its original reception. In 1982, the book’s critique of affirmative action and bilingual education, flashpoint issues at the time, had the adverse effect of distracting otherwise sympathetic readers from a much deeper preoccupation with the search for an ethnic identity and the desire for community. Likewise, readers distracted by perceived partisan cant in this or any text, accordingly frame the text in a biased way. By aligning his stance with the conservative position on politicized ethnic issues—regardless of the different path he took to those conclusions, and regardless of the myriad ways in which he completely departs from hardline conservative ideology—Rodriguez led his readers to misread him. The policy issues taken up by Rodriguez were, and continue to be, particularly polarizing because they are sometimes used as wedge issues to secure the white vote.
Rodriguez further exacerbated unsympathetic readings of *Hunger of Memory* by resorting to reductive binaries, such as that between “ethnic” and “mainstream.” Objections to these overdrawn oppositions represent a dominant strain of the negative criticism directed at Rodriguez. Saldívar, for example, is just one of many to shine the spotlight on Rodriguez’s sharply drawn distinctions between private and public. Alarcón also notes “the deployment of the extremely dichotomized political categories of the private and the public” in *Hunger of Memory* (Alarcón 141). The result of which, as noted by A. Robert Lee, is that the book remains “a jousting-ground for notions of cultural centre and periphery, the canonical as against the ethnic self” (53). The dichotomies continue in Rodriguez’s second book *Days of Obligation* (1992), such as in the metaphorical and rhetorical oppositions drawn between Mexico and the United States, and between Catholic and Protestant cultures, prompting Rosaura Sánchez to observe that “The discourses of ‘difference’ with which he plays in these essays are not the product of social relations but rather mythic/metaphysical and fetishistic ‘differences’” (157). The same argument could be made about Rodriguez’s association, in *Hunger of Memory*, of the private with the past (and with his Spanish-speaking family), and the public with the present (and mainstream society). Succinctly put, Rodriguez himself is largely to blame for the charges of hyperindividualism and uncritical assimilation leveled against him.

Later critics looking past the distracting binary metaphors foregrounded by Rodriguez offer a major shift in approaches to reading him. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, for instance, offers a more nuanced postcolonial account of *Hunger of Memory* that sees past the surface binaries to note that “the autobiographical texts of Rodriguez and Naipaul are works of mourning which extend beyond the merely personal, casting light upon the struggles of the postcolonial marginal subject who is caught between the desire to assimilate and the recognition of the losses such assimilation incurs” (152). These texts “attempt to work through their postcolonial ambivalence and alienation” and thus they “move beyond the oppositional politics of their critics into a postcolonial space that resists such reductive dualism: not black or white, not love or hate, but both ambivalently” (153). Browdy de Hernandez’s approach, by modeling the theoretical concept of hybridity, exemplifies the general drift of much of the recent scholarship on Rodriguez and other ethnic authors grappling with identity issues.

Those scholars writing after 2002 (the year *Brown* was published) have within their critical purview the complete arc of Rodriguez’s autobiographical trilogy, published in ten-year increments. Depending
on where one focuses the critical lens, Rodriguez’s autobiographical odyssey from *Hunger* to *Days* to *Brown* may seem like either a mere expansion of Rodriguez’s thinking or a complete revision of his ideas. Though in this essay I emphasize the consistency of underlying philosophical sentiments (such as how he views the relationship between self and society) in Rodriguez’s trio of autobiographical books—later installments of which inform our reading, or rereading, of *Hunger of Memory*—I wish here to note that the wider scope offered by the trilogy also reveals an evolution in Rodriguez’s treatment of what are more proximate themes (such as the specific posture taken in each text when grappling with the issues of ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation). In *Hunger of Memory*, for example, Rodriguez is evasive about his homosexuality, whereas in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez’s identity as a gay male is central to the “Late Victorians” chapter, which explores the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic on his community. Even more striking, the tropological dichotomies so dominant in Rodriguez’s first two books are replaced in the third book by the titular trope of “brown,” a dichotomy-dissolving metaphor for cultural and racial miscegenation.

The critical reception of each successive book in the trilogy noted changes in Rodriguez’s approach to dominant themes revolving around linguistic and cultural issues. Martha J. Cutter’s insightful analysis of the interlingual voice in Rodriguez’s writing, for example, notes a linguistic and cultural progression over the three books from a direct opposition between English and Spanish in *Hunger of Memory*, through “an uneasy dialectic between English and Spanish” in *Days of Obligation*, to the resolution of this dialectic in *Brown* by “using, yet also refashioning, English, so that English becomes interlingual, miscegenated, brown, and inflected by Mexican Spanish, by ethnicity itself” (190). As I have been alluding to by reference to how we read *Hunger of Memory* in the contemporary context, each subsequent Rodriguez book informs how we read that book today.

As Cutter’s account suggests, we now have to read *Hunger of Memory* in light of the more revised cultural dialectic presented in *Days of Obligation* and the arguments made for racial, cultural, and linguistic miscegenation in *Brown*. But even critics reading *Hunger of Memory* in that updated context are prone to criticizing Rodriguez for his excessive individualism, and linking this to his arguments about assimilation. In raising the possibility of “the false universality behind the ideal of assimilation,” Paula M. L. Moya follows Alarcón’s example in referring to Rodriguez as a “neoconservative,” an epithet he earns, in Moya’s analysis, by his opposing of “individual to collective identity” (103). As her book, *Learning from Experience*,

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*a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*
appeared in the same year as Brown, Moya did not yet have access to Rodriguez’s third installment when writing those words. Nevertheless, Moya’s critique raises two important points: one, that the idea that individualism and assimilation are inherently linked persists as a dominant assumption in the field of Latina/o studies; and two, that Ernesto Laclau’s concern about hegemony and the particular masking as the universal is something that we must always be on our guard about. That is, when it comes to negotiating one’s identity amongst different identity groups, how does one avoid the false universality of any single, hegemonic identity group?

It remains an open question as to whether mainstream culture, the same as the dominant narrative of any given minority culture, can ever be fully immune to the possibility of becoming hegemonic. But the conceptualization, in Brown, of mainstream culture as the product of continuous cultural miscegenation is an account in which the evolution of cultures inherently resists such hegemony. What Rodriguez seems to be seeking in his articulation of the ethnic self is freedom not from belonging to a community, but from hegemonic collective identities. Rodriguez wants ethnic subjects to be free to negotiate the complicated interaction between ascribed and self-identifying aspects of their identity. Thus, in his communally derived individualism (Brown 131, 200), Rodriguez has much more in common with his identity politics critics than has been conceived of to date. One can easily imagine one of his critics uttering a version of what Rodriguez writes in Brown: “Americans are so individualistic, they do not realize their individualism is a communally derived value . . . ‘In order to be individualistic, one must have a strong sense of oneself within a group’” (200). In this passage, the notoriously slippery Rodriguez is unequivocal: he rejects the notion of an individual without a community. These ideas rest on the surface in Brown, and because they so clearly express Rodriguez’s philosophical stance on the topic I have here cited passages from that later work. But Rodriguez’s commitment to the idea of the interdependence of individuals and communities is also to be found in Hunger of Memory, and it is to that text that I now wish to return my focus.

Public Identity: or, Recognition as a Person in Hunger of Memory

In the “Complexion” chapter of Hunger of Memory, Rodriguez deconstructs the conflation of race with class through arguments that seek to maximize the agency of ethnic subjects, and to emphasize their social connectedness to others. He does this, characteristically, by offering an anecdotal account of his own experiences—at a sum-
mer construction job—that he compares with that of others who are socially situated in similar, and yet different, ways than himself. The vivid scene that he depicts serves not only to illustrate the complex interdependence of race, ethnicity, class, and the myriad other aspects of identity, but also to underscore that it is only through connecting with others that there can be an ethnic self. Rodriguez does this by contrasting those who are recognized by others as individuals with those who are known to others only as indistinguishable (and therefore fungible) members of what is mistakenly perceived as a homogenous group—a notion of community that is diametrically opposed to that of a diverse society. The overall effect of the scene is to illustrate the importance of community and of recognition by others within communities.

Rodriguez’s fascination with the masculine image associated with working men initiates the scene, in which, having just completed his undergraduate degree at Stanford, Rodriguez hopes to fulfill his yearning to be one of “los pobres” [the poor, with, here, the added connotation of disadvantaged] by taking a summer construction job (Hunger 136). While there, Rodriguez experiences an epiphany, a realization that in having long since crossed discernible class lines he has also, as he sees it, crossed the color line. By the end of the summer Rodriguez, who had spent much of his childhood ashamed of his dark complexion, has come to reevaluate his racial identity: “After that summer, a great deal—and not very much really—changed in my life. The curse of physical shame was broken by the sun; I was no longer ashamed of my body. No longer would I deny the pleasing sensations of my maleness. During those years when middle-class black Americans began to assert with pride, ‘Black is beautiful,’ I was able to regard my complexion without shame” (136). It is Rodriguez’s realization that he has fully entered the middle class—combined with the insight that how one’s race is perceived has a lot to do with one’s social class—that leads him to no longer view his complexion as a mark of shame. As a middle-class man his dark skin is no longer shameful, but exotic—a complete reversal of the social value of his complexion.

That the meaning of race can be transfigured so suddenly gives the lie to the notion that race has any natural and self-evident meaning. The semiotic baggage of skin color is loaded in social space: “My complexion becomes a mark of my leisure. Yet no one would regard my complexion the same way if I entered such hotels through the service entrance. That is only to say that my complexion assumes its significance from the context of my life. My skin, in itself, means nothing. I stress the point because I know there are people who would label me ‘disadvantaged’ because of my color” (137). Rodriguez is
unequivocal here in his rejection of essentialist notions about skin color, but the chapter is easily misread as a disavowal of racial disadvantage, or of the existence of insidious forms of systemic racism in society. Rodriguez’s account does not seek to deny the existence of racism, however, but rather to stress the means of agency for racialized subjects. Since the semiotic charge imparted to phenotypic features has more to do with discourse, culture, signification, and relations of power than biological difference, then racial subjects can subvert racial discourses through cultural and linguistic acts. That is not to discount the epistemic value of experience, however. Two decades later, Rodriguez will muse that people of the same race may share enough similar race-based experiences to cast their thoughts in similar hues—that is, to thus engender a racial consciousness through which experience is in turn filtered: “But do we really think that color colors thought? . . . In the case of brown thought, though, I suppose experience becomes the pigment, the grounds, the mise-en-scène, the medium of refraction, the impeded passage of otherwise pure thought” (Brown 33–34).

Rodriguez’s arguments about class also stress the extent to which one’s socioeconomic class is inextricably bound up with fluency in what he sees as the more powerful discourses of language, culture, and education. Aware of the overlap between the two, Rodriguez often makes little effort to distinguish between social class and economic class explicitly. To do so, in part, risks distilling out abstractions unnaturally isolated from the intricate web of social reality in which they are enmeshed. Nevertheless, his engagement with class is more cultural than economic.

The other brown-skinned English speakers at the jobsite are dubbed by Rodriguez as “middle class,” though at least some of them are employed in menial and physical labor almost identical to that of the working-class “Mexican aliens.” The “Mexican aliens” are undocumented workers but what most strikes Rodriguez is that they are hired as a group: “They came and left in a single old truck. Anonymous men. They were never introduced to the other men at the site” (Hunger 134). The brown-skinned men who speak English, in contrast, are not at all anonymous, and they are not considered interchangeable. They are not seen by others only as indistinguishable parts of a homogenous group. Their individuality is recognized: “there was no single type of worker. I am embarrassed to say I had not expected such diversity” (133). For Rodriguez, it is this recognition as an individual that, paradoxically, connects them one to another and to society as a whole. As Rodriguez sees it, the nature and quality of intersubjective relationships hinge upon such recognition.
Ironically, it is Rodriguez’s initial inclination to lump people into homogenous groups (by occupation in this case) that leads him to this realization. He takes the summer construction job hoping to affirm his manhood as one of the “mythical Mexican laborer[s],” to “at last become like a **bracero**” and prove that he knew what real work was (127, 131). But not long into the job, he realizes “that I was fooling myself if I expected a few weeks of labor to gain me admission to the world of the laborer” (133). Mere participation in similar occupational activities does not make him one of **los pobres**. He can no longer assume, as he previously had, that “a disadvantaged life was circumscribed by particular occupations” (137–38).

In noting his own failure to experience working-class life truly, though briefly engaging in genuine physical labor, Rodriguez is also offering a caveat about the assumed uniformity and cohesiveness of group identifications. He can no longer justify lumping together people of the same race, gender, or ethnicity: “All Mexican-Americans certainly are not equally Mexican-Americans” (150). There is great diversity within any minority group, and despite the importance of common experiences among those sharing a race, gender, or ethnicity, shared experiences alone do not guarantee a shared identity—nor do they ensure the cohesiveness of such groups. Moreover, as evidenced by the example of the middle class Mexican-American workers at the construction site, identification with a minority group need not exclude one from identification with and within larger society, nor vice versa.

Rodriguez concludes that group identification is most inclusive through the “public identity” that the shared language of English gives access to (25–28). One might argue that identifications that span many languages, such as religious identities, are much more inclusive. But given his preference for the Latin mass over that conducted in many different local languages, Rodriguez would likely stress that those sharing an identity across the language barrier literally have nothing in common to *speak of*. Rodriguez takes the position that minimal fluency in the principal language of a place offers the most satisfying and inclusive means of identification and recognition. The dominant language of a society is so inclusive and expressive, that even most freely-choosing *ethnic* individuals would opt to use it as their identity discourse of choice. At least, that is the scenario as painted by Rodriguez, and as modeled by the life he depicts in his autobiography.

But there is a downside to complete reliance on language as the glue that holds people together in society. It presents the most formidable border to cross. One can’t master another tongue, and go back
and forth between languages, as easily as Rodriguez is able to cross the color line when invited to an upscale cocktail party in Bel Air. And differences in language proficiency contribute to differences in class. Though participating in equivalent occupations the class differences among the workers at the construction worksite are easily identifiable. The English-speaking “middle-class” workers can fill out their own work sheets (134). In comparison, the Spanish-speaking workers are viewed as a collective, and collectively paid by the contractor (135). The ability to read and fill out the work sheets is symbolic, evincing talismanic power in its capacity to separate racially indistinguishable people into distinct socioeconomic classes. The act of filling out the work sheets indicates proficiency in the customs and language of the dominant culture. And because those who can’t fill out their own time cards are paid less, Rodriguez’s work sheet metaphor demonstrates the ways in which one’s economic class is partly determined by one’s cultural class. Class mobility, as is true in similar ways even for those people whose mother tongue is English, seldom goes against the current of acculturation and education.

The most problematic part of Rodriguez’s reading of the scene is that it downplays the vulnerability that their undocumented legal status imposes on los pobres. When I was a boy, the police came onto our property to arrest a cousin of mine whose backbreaking job moving irrigation pipe on a potato farm would be the rural analogue to the type of work available to los pobres in Rodriguez’s tableau. His crime: working without the proper documentation. He was deported and I never saw him again as he died prematurely a few years thereafter. He spoke little or no English, but fluency in English would have done him little good in the face of a force as impersonal and systemic as immigration law. Rodriguez’s example would be more convincing had the “Mexican aliens” Rodriguez uses to illustrate his point been US citizens who spoke no English (134). Nevertheless, his point that class mobility has a cultural or discursive component, and is not strictly economic, is well taken. Undocumented workers who are fluent in English are, among other things, less likely to be conceptualized and treated as noncitizens or irredeemably culturally Other.

It is also important to note that though cultural fluency may go a long way toward social integration, socioeconomic inequality remains sharply demarcated along lines of race, gender, and ethnicity. That the complicated apartheid legacy of economic division follows contours such as these indicates the extent to which these other aspects of the texture of social reality are cross-threaded into the weave. Rodriguez’s account offers an explanation for the perpetuation of social inequality, but it seems to leave out dimensions of social inequality that others...
take for granted. Nevertheless, Rodriguez seeks to increase the agency of marginalized subjects in his account, and does so by trying to give them a voice. It is the lack of a voice, Rodriguez insists, that makes the members of disadvantaged groups vulnerable. Whether externally imposed by others (“them Mexicans”) or an act of self-identification (“nosotros,” Spanish for “we”), the collective identity of los pobres denotes the absence, in the public arena, of an individual identity—which, Rodriguez argues, prevents their recognition as a person by others. Unable to speak English, los pobres “lack a public identity” (138), which is contingent on linguistic and cultural aptitude within the social and geographic context that they inhabit. Though for the moment in similar economic, occupational, and racial circumstances as the unassimilated workers, Rodriguez notes of himself that, “If tomorrow I worked at some kind of factory, it would go differently for me. My long education would favor me. I could act as a public person—able to defend my interests, to unionize, to petition, to speak up—to challenge and demand. (I will never know what real work is)” (138). Sociologists make a similar point when distinguishing between generational poverty and situational poverty, between the underclass and the transitory poor. The middle-class divorcee may experience a temporary lowering of income and lifestyle immediately after the divorce, but retains all the cultural knowledge and other hidden advantages of a middle-class upbringing.

The class divide, as Rodriguez characterizes it, has more to do with the disparity of cultural knowledge than the inequality of incomes. As Frederick Douglass before him—realizing, in one of the most iconic and inspirational scenes in American literature, that the key to mental and, in Douglass’s case, physical emancipation is literacy—Rodriguez recognizes the need to read the letters of social discourse in order to participate more fully in it, to have a voice of one’s own. As any academic from a working class background can testify to, trying to fit in in academia, with its career-oriented middle-class culture, involves profound culture shock. And the career prospects of any would-be academic relate directly to the postcolonial mimicry and mastery of the dominant culture and discourses of academia, including having to write in the academic language of the field and situate oneself within the academic conversation as prerequisites to having one’s work accepted by colleagues and peer reviewers. So it goes with larger society, argues Rodriguez. The voice that does not speak in the language of shared discourse is not heard. It is participation in the realm of public discourse that Rodriguez advocates when extolling assimilation, and prophesying its inevitability among the descendants of immigrants.
Assimilation of any kind involves trade-offs, and Rodriguez’s title, *Hunger of Memory*, communicates his sense of loss and nostalgia for a culturally ethnic childhood. Poignantly depicted by Rodriguez is what was lost—ways of thinking and feeling, fluency in his mother tongue—in order to gain access to something else. In this sense, assimilation can be constricting. But, as Rodriguez notes in *Brown*, assimilation is not a zero-sum game in which one must give up everything in exchange for only marginalized and unsatisfactory participation in a dominant culture inherently opposed to one’s cultural heritage. The culture (and language) to which people assimilate is also changed in the process of assimilating diverse cultures, an idea eloquently expressed by Rodriguez at public talks through an image that he links to the figurative title of his most recent book, *Brown*: when all the different crayons melt in the sun they become one color, the culturally and racially miscegenated hue of brown.

And yet, most of the emotional power of *Hunger of Memory*, as the title indicates, comes precisely from the pathos with which Rodriguez depicts what he has lost in the process of being assimilated: “I remember what was so grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained” (6). Though in *Brown* Rodriguez thematizes the ways in which minority and majority cultures shape each other—contaminate each other—in *Hunger of Memory* he focuses on personal experiences revolving around the loss of one in exchange for the other: “As I grew fluent in English, I no longer could speak Spanish with confidence” (28). On an emotional level Rodriguez fetishizes the loss, but on other levels he appeals to his readers to focus on the gain: “If I rehearse here the changes in my private life after my Americanization, it is finally to emphasize the public gain” (27). Through his assimilation to the English-speaking middle class Rodriguez has options not available to the unassimilated *pobres*, collectively marked by their silence. He will never know “what real work is” because “real work” is the absence of choice, being bound to an occupation by dint of a narrow education or the inability to speak in society (133–35). The way to help the Spanish-speaking laborers, as Rodriguez would have it, would be to assimilate them (if not them, their children) through the classroom and the English language. This would open up more options for them—options that flow from participating in a shared language, culture and, for better or for worse, mass society.

The power inequalities in what Mary Louise Pratt would call the “contact zone”—“social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4)—of the construction job site have, as Rodriguez describes it, nothing to do with
race per se (dark-skinned Rodriguez and the other assimilated Mexican-American workers get the going wage), something to do with recourse to political and legal power (the right to organize without risk of deportation, for example), and everything to do with cultural and linguistic dominance. At least, this appraisal follows from Rodriguez’s depiction of the scene. On the California side of the Mexican-American border, English paves the roads to education, public discourse, and recognition as a full member of society. One need not cease to live a culturally ethnic life, but there are disadvantages to forsaking participation in mainstream culture altogether. Social benefits derive from public recognition, which in turn derives from minimal literacy in the dominant language and culture. From Rodriguez’s point of view, it is not enough to say that there is an imbalance of power between cultures within the “contact zone.” The very medium in which relations of power are forged is thoroughly and ineradicably cultural, and culture itself is primarily linguistic. Rodriguez sees learning English as the prerequisite to both joining society and being recognized as a person.

Rather than urging ethnic minorities to act hyperindividualistically, Rodriguez’s arguments for assimilation are in the service of advocating greater community through fuller participation in the society around them. For Rodriguez, the ethnic self is inescapably a communally derived self, which is how the ethnic self is portrayed in Hunger of Memory. But it is only in Brown that it becomes clear that Rodriguez’s notion of the ethnic self is also a culturally miscegenated self, and that the ethnic subject need not forsake ethnic community in order to also participate in society at large. The problematic dichotomies of Hunger of Memory and Days of Obligation are dissolved in Brown, where Rodriguez offers an account in which he no longer gives the impression that ethnic heritage and mainstream culture are mutually exclusive. The reconsideration of Rodriguez that I offer here is a reading of Hunger of Memory that adjusts our interpretative lens in light of a greater appreciation for the philosophical assumptions underlying his “public”—we might say with some irony—stance, arguments, and terminology in that text. Elucidating such a reading are the contours of Rodriguez’s shifting postures and emphases over subsequent books relative to more fundamental and consistent philosophical views, an example of which I have foregrounded here through tracing Hunger of Memory’s surface arguments for individualism to Rodriguez’s more fundamental desire for greater community. There is indeed a link between the emphasis on recognition as an individual and Rodriguez’s assimilationist arguments in Hunger of Memory. But that linkage is far removed from formulations of individualism used
as a tool for repression, and from paradigms of assimilation invoked as a justification for the exclusion of cultural minorities. Rodriguez imagines just the opposite: cultural and linguistic fluency as a means of agency, inclusion, and opportunity for ethnic subjects. *Hunger of Memory* offers a performance of these principles, its author resisting with words the discourses that situate and constrain ethnic bodies.

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**Notes**

1. For an insightful, extended critique of Rodriguez’s assimilationist arguments, see Moya (100–35).

2. Though Judith Butler is often read as arguing that gender identity is completely constructed and therefore can be shed each day at will, her account stresses the continuity of identity—identity as a social performance that is reiterated: “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated” (191).

3. This last point raises the question of whether Rodriguez would consider race as a factor at all, or if he sees class as the only legitimate criteria to consider in regard to opportunity programs. Given his failure to explicitly endorse a modified program of some sort, one might even wonder whether or not Rodriguez would be opposed to any type of opportunity program at all.

4. For additional nuances in Rodriguez’s critique of affirmative action see the “Profession” chapter of *Hunger of Memory* (143–72), especially 143–56.
5. Rodriguez writes in *Days of Obligation* that replacing the Latin mass with English or other languages has led to “ethnic separation” (195).

6. Though principally linguistic, neither culture nor the transmission of culture is *exclusively* linguistic. The persistence of racial and gender narratives and the readiness with which new narratives of race emerge when long-separated groups encounter each other are both demonstrative—as such narratives anchor themselves primarily in visually observable differences—of the power of visual culture. For an insightful analysis, see Samuels.

**Works Cited**


