NOR SHALL DIAMOND DIE: AMERICAN STUDIES IN HONOUR OF JAVIER COY

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(EDS.)

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Latino Autobiography, the Aesthetic, and Political Criticism: The Case of *Hunger of Memory*[1]

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Introduction: Political Criticism and the Aesthetic

"My book is necessarily political," states Richard Rodriguez in the first chapter of his autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (7); and indeed, this sentence could be applied to almost every autobiography; and certainly to every *ethnic autobiography*. This literary form has historically been a space full of political consequence because it allows what is normally disallowed: the voicing of unpopular and repressed ideas and values. In a culture in which minority citizens have often had to struggle for their rights, ethnic autobiography states a case for citizenship and for the value of the ethnic self. It is no wonder, then, that the ethnic school considers autobiography an excellent "handbook" to sociopolitical reality. Adopting an anthropological stance, they assume that, because ethnic autobiography recreates a collective past, it has become a particularly useful means of understanding cultural history (Hokenson 97). Many ethnic autobiographers, for their part, have also embraced the baffling question of identity—how group identities contribute to the self an essential quality, a crucial part of self-definition.

That said, let us not forget this, autobiography *is* literature as well. Though it was once considered "The Dark Continent of Literature" (Shapiro 1968), critics and writers have won the battle in giving this once marginal genre the recognition it deserves. One of the reasons why autobiography was unjustifiably ignored in the past was that some scholars and critics tended to assume that it was not a form of "imaginative literature" as valuable as fiction. The common belief was that all the autobiographer had to do was copy him- or herself down: no invention or artistic creation was necessary; "just remember and write," the argument went. This nonsensical view, of course, has been proved totally wrong. The autobiographer is a creative artist, and frequently the limitations of language, the slipperiness of experience, the elusiveness of memory, the difficulties of comprehending and recreating experience, become the very *subjects* of autobiography. Like the novelist, the autobiographer has to recapture time, shape the shapeless, narrate an engaging story, make many one and one multiple, transform an inner image into a picture-mirror for others, reconcile the particular and the universal, the idiosyncratic with the shared communal values, the historically verifiable with the imaginative.[2]

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[1] I wish to acknowledge that the research that led to the writing of this essay was done during a stay at the University of Riverside (CA), financed by a New Del Amo Program (NDAP) Grant, 2001-2002.

[2] See Shapiro 1968: 422.

And yet, autobiography studies are being affected of late by the same problem that is affecting literary studies in general. In American Studies, the aesthetic—mostly for political and ideological reasons—has fallen into disrepute; it has been denounced from various positions as repressive, immoral, hopelessly fetishistic and ideological; it has been accused of elitism, and even of "fraudulence." Culture and cultural theory have been so much the focus of American Studies during the last twenty years, that to raise questions about the literariness of texts and their aesthetic function may appear suspiciously reactionary (Ickstadt 264).

In January 2002, Oxford University Press published *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age.* In his introductory historical overview of American criticism, Emory Elliott explains that the recognition that works of art are inevitably political in some way, and that those engaged in political action nearly always employ forms of expression that are to some degree artistic, has inspired new research under the banner of "cultural studies" and has disturbed many traditionalists who still hold to the idea of art for art's sake (5). Several scholars included in this volume express their concern at how dangerous it is today to talk about aesthetics, because it has recently been the right, rather than the left in the United States that has found aesthetic politics most attractive, embracing a notion of the transcendence of art that tends to ignore and erase history. As a consequence of all of this, the notion of literary greatness has, for the most part, slipped into the hands of academic conservatism or of brilliant critical eccentrics, like George Steiner or Harold Bloom. It is thus a relief that volumes with titles like *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* do get published; and it is also good news that even a classic Marxist like Terry Eagleton has felt the call of aesthetics. His 1990 book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* made a good beginning in the attempt to mediate "between those who argue that aesthetics is somehow independent from political ideologies and those who hold the view that aesthetics is merely a component of a bourgeois ideology to be purged from the disciplines of the arts and humanities" (Elliott 17).

I am, therefore, very much in favor of a renewed theory of the aesthetic that gives account of "a fundamental plurality of aesthetic production and reception, of different and rivaling aesthetics, i.e., of aesthetics different in purpose, use and function at different historical moments or for different social groups" (Ickstadt 265). It has to be proclaimed that the social and historical location of art and its criticism, and the recognition of literature's entanglement with certain political views, does nothing to deny its peculiar power to move and engage, or to deny the critic's responsibility to account for that power. I contend that literature cannot be imagined as divorced, by way of the aesthetic, from moral and political issues; yet, I also think that "no criticism that refuses distinctions between aesthetic and instrumental functions of language can do justice either to the aesthetic or the ideological" (Levine 9).

Everyone in the academy would endorse the view that when one chooses to talk about minoritized literatures in the US, one always chooses to engage in a political act. But perhaps not everyone would go along with the Manichean tendency of forcing the critic to stand "with us, or against us," leaving no room for a dispassionate analysis of ethnic literature. When reading certain kinds of extremist criticism, one gets the impression that, while there persists a strong tendency among traditional critics and teachers to universalize beauty and art and to judge works on the basis of how they measure against the ideal (often implying that "artistic merit" and "minority writers" are mutually exclusive), there has also emerged, as a reaction, the opposite tendency to apply an unexamined weight of sanctimony to the appreciation of *some* minority writers, often implying that marginalization or powerlessness *equals* virtue, and thus turning literary criticism into hagiography.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedwick has put it, something similar happened with the Feminist "separate spheres criticism" of the 70s and 80s, when other feminisms started a backlash against white feminist criticism, and supplanted it with a counter-criticism that could be even more sanctimonious in its diligent fault-finding than had been earlier attempts to value nineteenth-century women authors who had long been neglected or under-appreciated. In between there should be room for a sort of "reparative criticism" (11) that concerns itself less with the political failings of a text than with an appreciation of the complexities of the attempt to represent, with the linguistic tools available to any author, the social, political and psychological problems that concern him or her; a criticism that allows for the critique of one aspect of a text or a writer without the *trashing* of everything that writer is and represents. And this tendency to "trashing" is what is going to occupy me in the subsequent lines, because it is easy to perceive that some segments of ethnic criticism assume that "bad politics" equals "bad art," whereas "good, obedient politics" equals "good art." I use the word "obedient" because the essentialism into which some kinds of identity politics has fallen *prescribes* that ethnic writers think and write in a specific manner, if they wish to be positively reviewed by critics from their own ethnic group. In the field of ethnic autobiography, more specifically, autobiographers are inevitably called upon to be the voice of their people. This is evidenced, for example, by the well-known reception given Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which was attacked by many Chinese-American critics for being *"a very personal* description of growing up in Chinese America." Jeffrey Paul Chan also worried that Kingston "may mislead naïve white readers." That is, the notion that Kingston was presenting an example of Chinese-American life that was misleading or inaccurate implied that the author did not have the right to present her personal experience as such. In the eyes of Chinese-American critics, she was not telling her own story but (mis)telling the story of her people (qtd. in Browder 6).

Exactly the same thing happens with some Latino/a criticism. Artistic prescriptions like the one I transcribe below appeal to that identity politics that, apparently, all Latinos must embrace:

> We Latinos must assume the role of historians, politicians, journalists, sociologists, teachers. We must take on the role of educators with respect to *latinidad*, because no one else is doing the job. To do that job effectively, we must celebrate cultural diversity, take pride in *La raza*, in our Spanish language, in our cultural heritage. [...] And we must be proud of the autochthonous roots: of the Aztecs who invented the calendar, of the Mayans who before the age of the telescope, traced the orbit of Mercury about the sun, of the Incas who developed the art of irrigation and built the majestic terraces and edifices of Machu Picchu in polished stone. (Alegría 106)

That is, Latino writers have historically had to work within "the trope of their given identities" (Browder 6), to speak for their people, as a representative of their people. However, not every "people" is what it appears to be, and in a multiethnic society, Americans have always shifted identities (the constant use of words like "hybridity," "*mètisage*," "*mestizaje,*" and so on in postcolonial criticism only evidences this). How much of ethnicity is a construction? Is there such a thing as an authentic ethnic or racial identity? Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a Cuban-American, seems to have a very different answer to the above-mentioned essentialist proclamation:

> "Hispanics": my trouble is that I don't see myself as Latino, but as Cuban—*cubano, cubiche, cubanazo, criollo*—To tell the truth, the Latino is a statistical fiction [...] the Latino exists principally for the purposes of politicians, ideologues, *salsa* singers, and Americans of non-Hispanic descent [...]. A common language doesn't ensure a common culture. (88)

There is, of course, an ethnic identity; just as there is a gender identity, as the feminism of difference has proclaimed for many decades. Is literature an expression of racial and gender identity? Of course it is, but with some nuances, and this is what some critics seem to forget: that autobiographers have a sex and an ethnic origin, but they also have a social class, an age, a past, a state of health, a job, a psychic mood, a street, a town, a nationality, a body, a childhood, a school, a wife, husband, partner, or friend, a dog, a book, a family. That is, the new geography of identity demands that we think about ethnic writers in relation to a fluid matrix instead of an exclusively Anglo/Latino binary opposition. Because, to assume that all Latino writings—by virtue of the fact that they are part of a "minority culture"—must necessarily express a revolutionary ideology is clearly a mistake (Flores 83). And this reductionist analysis has the danger of causing what Paul Lauter has recently reported: that some Latino/Hispanic writers are valued as important *figures* in the cultural, ethnic world of the US; but not as skilled practitioners of words. Their works are valued as politics (history), as racial statements (sociology), within the context of canon theory (the politics of literature), and as representations of specific community values (anthropology). But very seldom are they discussed in terms of "is it a good or a bad piece of literature?"—the central question of aesthetics (Lauter 208).

This is, it seems to me, what has happened with Richard Rodriguez's[3] and, to a lesser extent, with Gustavo Pérez Firmat's[4] autobiographies. A very simple indication of how, even while writing their texts, they could anticipate that critics would be aprioristically predisposed to judge their work in terms of their political tendencies, is that both of them explicitly mention the fact:

> I have become notorious among certain leaders of America's Ethnic Left. I am considered a *dupe, an ass, the fool*—Tom Brown, the brown Uncle Tom. (Rodriguez 6, my italics)

> My personal history and conservative politics set me apart from many of my professors and most of my peers, who looked up to Fidel Castro and who spoke of the Cuban Revolution as a model for the rest of Latin America. [...] I was just another right-wing *gusano* from Miami towing the party line. (Pérez Firmat 195)

Hunger of Memory

Richard Rodriguez's autobiography has received hostile reviews from most Chicano critics, while it has, in general, been favorably reviewed by Anglos. This fact is revealing in itself, and this is precisely why I felt attracted, as an outsider, as a scholar who is neither one nor the other, to try to get a comprehensive picture of such divergent receptions.

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[3] I choose Rodriguez's text because it is probably the best-known Chicano autobiography and, since it has raised so much controversy, it has received plenty of scholarly attention that I can use to illustrate my points.

[4] Apart from the fact that *Next Year in Cuba* is a very recent publication (1995), one has to note that most of the Cuban-American critics that have access to scholarly journals in the United States are also Cuban exiles like Pérez Firmat himself, and, as such, are very likely to share his political, anti-Castrist views. His previous book, *Life in the Hyphen*, has received very critical, political counter-arguments from Max J. Castro—mainly centred around Pérez Firmat's reductionist view of the Cuban/American relationship, "divorced from any larger historical, political, or communal context" (294)—all of which are legitimate, since what he is reviewing is an analytical book about Cuban-American identity that could be classified as a mixture of sociology, history, anthropology and philosophical reflection, not as literary autobiography.

One of the most basic tenets of autobiographies is that they present two distinct selves: the author as author and the author as character—that is, as an earlier self. Rodriguez's autobiography is just as much about the efforts of the adult writer to recapture his past as it is about his earlier attempts to go beyond that self. That is, there is a double quest: the quest of young Richard to achieve selfhood by identifying with American language and culture, and the quest of the older Rodriguez to resolve some present unrest about who he is by recovering his younger self and the locale of his own past.[5] However, we can distinguish not the characteristic two, but three distinct selves in *Hunger of Memory*. Besides the self-as-child (the author as character) and the self-that-is (the author as narrator), there is a third voice: the expository voice of the provocative speaker, of the social commentator, the one who says that "my book is necessarily political" with which I have opened this essay. It is this third self that carries the narrative throughout the introductory chapter, provocatively called "Middle-Class Pastoral." The chapter opens with a "once upon a time there was a socially disadvantaged child," and continues with the assertion that he is a middle-class American, an assimilated man, and that his is "an American Story."

These words bring the resonance of critics, scholars, and teachers' words, when they discuss others' works; but they are very unlike the words of common autobiographers, even if they indulge in frequent meta-autobiography. And that is precisely the role that this "second expository voice" adopts at times and juxtaposes to the more traditional and lyrical voice of the adult autobiographer.[6] It is Rodriguez-as-narrator who takes over in Chapter One, which is a rather traditional chapter on his school days and his problems with bilingualism. Chapter Two breaks with the linear chronology, constantly bouncing us from past to present, from his school days to his days at the British Library as a Fulbright researcher, but Rodriguez's voice is clearly audible in his nostalgic longings, specially when he concludes this chapter saying "It would require many more years of schooling [...] before I turned *unafraid to desire the past*" (Rodriguez 73, my italics). Chapter Three, "Credo," focuses on religion and the imprint that the Catholic Church left on little Ricardo in primary school and on the adolescent in High School; and Chapter Four is a description of the child's suffering and complex over the color of his skin and his lack of "masculinity," by Mexican standards. We have reached page 139 (of a total of 195) and, up to now, the book has been an extremely well-written autobiography, as most white scholars have pointed out in their essays.[7] However, Chicano scholars have virtually concentrated their appreciations of the whole book on the thirty-odd pages they hate, which constitute the chapter entitled "Profession." Here, the dominant voice is that of a very political, polemical and outspoken Rodriguez, and it is this voice that has enraged many representatives of ethnic minorities: Rodriguez has been accused of treachery, of "selling out to white Americans, and of becoming a Reaganite right-winger" (Durczark 110). Hispanic activists and critics in particular have attacked Rodriguez for preaching assimilationism, for being a traitor to his people.

The Chicano intellectuals Raymund Paredes, Ramón Saldívar and Lauro Flores do not hide their accusatory tone and their resentment in their respective analyses, because characteristically they are mainly preoccupied with Rodriguez's views on bilingual education and affirmative action, and only in this context do they consider his autobiography. That is, *Hunger of Memory* is generally perceived as a collection of politically-charged statements rather than as a literary work (Durczark 110), as my analysis of the reception given Rodriguez by these Chicano scholars will show.

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[5] See Hazlett on Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*.

[6] Eakin (1992) also "hears" two voices in HM, although somehow differently.

[7] See Eakin (1992), Couser, Durczark.

Ramón Saldívar's essay, in which he condemns *Hunger of Memory*, and praises Galarza's *Barrio Boy*, offers the following proclamation:

> That Rodriguez has been embraced by the liberal American media and by the humanistic academy while Galarza has not, tells us much about the socializing function of education and about the political ideologies that operate within American higher education [...]. *Hunger of Memory* is a perfect example of our tendency to disguise the force of ideology behind the mask of aesthetics. (33)

I quote this paragraph precisely to clarify that I don't belong to the "humanistic academy" or the "liberal American media" that "has embraced" Rodriguez, for the very simple reason that I am Spanish, and live in Spain. On the other hand, even if I do not think that a critic needs to justify in public his or her ideological tendencies, I wish to clarify that the fact that I devote most of my research to the study of women's and ethnic literature is telling in itself. I am, therefore, only guided here by a very simple literary reason, that being that the first time I read *Hunger of Memory* I did it with "innocent eyes" (in so far as that is possible); that is, I had no idea who its author was, or what his ideological inclinations were. This is probably why I could appreciate a text I found 1) originally written (because Rodriguez departs from the traditional, chronotopic life-as-a-journey structure, in favor of a thematic, symbolic, epiphanic organization of his life-stages; 2) rich in its employment and acknowledgement of literary antecedents which engage this text in the rich tradition of Western autobiography; and 3) written in an extremely "artful prose."[8] Whether these three reasons work for or against an author, indeed, also tells us much "about the political ideologies that operate within" American literary criticism.

We all know that it is very attractive and compelling for a critic to demonstrate how a work of literature's ostensible position disguises certain attitudes toward gender, politics, or race. Behind the surfaces of narrative and verbal strategies lies the reigning ideology that literature ultimately pursues or confirms. I would argue that it is even a *responsibility* of the critic to expose such ideology. But that does not mean that the concentration on, or preoccupation with a work's ideology should *displace* or even *discard* interest in anything else that might be going on in that work, in favor of an all-encompassing trashing. What I am also trying to say is that deference to and admiration of a text (as mine of Rodriguez's text) does not necessarily imply political complicity with it; that "the text is not to be taken as a kind of enemy to be arrested"; and that recognition of the aesthetic value of a politically controversial text need not be "a politically suspect activity" (Levine 4, 16).

Ramón Saldívar's dismissal of *Hunger of Memory* in his aptly entitled essay "Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography," can be said to be grounded on four basic, unforgivable "sins": 1) that Rodriguez's political ideology runs against the identity politics of *Chicanismo*, of *la* raza; 2) that Rodriguez has chosen to paint a portrait of individualism; 3) that Rodriguez does not follow the structural pattern Saldívar seems to consider appropriate; 4) that Rodriguez does not follow the "lessons of the masters." Let me explain these four points.

According to Saldívar, Rodriguez's embrace of the English language "opened doors to society's networks, rewards, and recognitions but also subverted the family's sense of intimacy." That is very true, and it is one of the persisting concerns in *Hunger of Memory*. As a child, Richard was painfully torn between assimilation into mainstream culture and allegiance to his subculture, which was passed on by almost monolingual parents. The boy associates Spanish with private intimacy, but with a profound public alienation, and comes to see it as an obstacle to full selfhood in America; so that in making the transition from private life to public life in school, from Spanish to English, he even suffers a temporary speech impediment (Couser 213). There comes a point at which young Rodriguez has to choose, and this is Saldívar's comment about that choice:

> he chooses [...] to reject the duality of his working-class origins and his middle-class manners; he chooses to market his existential anguish to the most receptive audience imaginable: the right-wing establishment and the liberal academic intelligentsia. His writings against bilingual education [...] and against affirmative action [...] involve him [...] in a political service to the Right. (27)

Evidently, the critic is castigating the author here, not the work. When dealing with literature, I still wish to believe, literature must precede all the rest. If a work is subordinated to the political views it transmits, one ends up attributing the author's ideological flaws to the literary work.

The second big mistake Saldívar finds in *Hunger of Memory* is that Rodriguez does not write an "autoethnography":[9] or, in other words, that he paints an individual portrait of himself: "He feels himself capable of functioning only as an isolated and private individual, deprived of any organic connection with his ethnic group, his social class, and finally even his own family" (27), states Saldívar in an accusatory tone. Whereas Ernesto Galarza's presentation of the self is historical rather than private and personal, whereas "Galarza chronicles his life as a child and then as a young man always measuring his personal experiences with respect to the collective experiences of [...] *la raza*" (Flores 87), "privacy and isolation are [Rodriguez's] essential features" (Saldívar 27). The question, then, is: does this fact make one work better than the other? It might; but an affirmative answer demands that it be supported with convincing literary and narrative reasons, and not only with the confirmation of a fact which only reflects a critic's personal taste. Saldívar simply denies Rodriguez his right to explore and narrate his *private* experience: "The social, political and historical world of bilingual education and affirmative action is illuminated *only insofar as it relates to his private life*. The essence of that world in itself remains peripheral to the central concern of his story" (27, my italics).

That is, what is often taken to be the essence of autobiography, transmitted by Philippe Lejeune (1975) in one of the most often-quoted definitions of the genre, is here considered a flaw, just because in Chicano autobiography, so the argument goes, "individual experience and collective historical identity are inextricably bound" (Padilla 6). One could, perhaps, resort to Richard Coe's study of childhood autobiographies and learn that all autobiography is, to a certain degree, "an assertion of uniqueness" (Coe 41), because this is, precisely, what Rodriguez clearly states in his prologue: "Mistaken, the gullible reader will [...] take it that I intend to model my life as the typical Hispanic-American life. But I write of one life only. My own" (7).

Or one could, perhaps, resort to Genaro Padilla himself, a Chicano critic who alerts us about "the heavy burden of collective representation," which could create for Chicano autobiography the same problem it created for African American slave narrative, that "nineteenth-century whites [...] read slave narratives more to get a firsthand look at the institution of slavery than to become acquainted with an individual slave" (6). What is implied in this warning is that the orthodox thematic, presentational and structural prescriptions imposed by Chicano critics are not very unlike those imposed on African Americans by the white abolitionist sponsors, editors, amanuenses, and publishers.

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[8] A fact that Saldívar also admits (29), but chooses not to discuss.

[9] Autoethnography is a term employed in recent postcolonial and multicultural theorizing for hybrid texts that combine autobiographical and ethnographic writing practices. It situates the writer in a social milieu, or *ethnos*, that is irreducibly tied to the subject it constructs. See Watson 83.

The third "sin" is that Rodriguez does not rely on chronology, or does not fit into Bakhtin's "chronotope" narrative model, which Saldívar finds the most suitable for ethnic autobiography.[10] Moreover, he resents that Rodriguez follows the Augustinian model when he says: "As in Christian hagiography where we are given basically two images of the individual, that of the sinner *before* rebirth and that of the saint *after* crisis and rebirth [...] so Rodriguez's life story is structured on the archetypal pattern of redemption, albeit in Rodriguez's case, a secular redemption" (Saldívar 28).

However, if he resents this archetypal pattern it is not because Saldívar despises the traditional pattern of spiritual or success autobiography—what he has written about Rodriguez could apply just as well to Franklin's *Autobiography*—but because Rodriguez's conversion has been one that could be described as "from rags to Beverly Hills"—one only has to note the spiteful tone of the sentence "In Beverly Hills indeed has this Caliban made a man" (28). This kind of commentary, which should be absent from serious literary criticism, is what deprives Saldívar's argumentation of the scholarly authority he otherwise deserves.

The last reason for discarding *Hunger of Memory* is, as outlined above, that its author does *not* follow the lessons of the masters. This is rather paradoxical, after having read, in the previous paragraphs, how Rodriguez was criticized for having *followed* Augustine and the models of spiritual autobiography, and for having *followed* Rousseau in attempting to write an "autoautography" à la "moi, moi seul"![11] In other words, because Rodriguez follows Augustine and Rousseau in the conversion structure and in the individualistic, autonomous self-portrait, respectively, he is liable to censure; conversely, because he does *not* follow Augustine and Rousseau in other respects, he is even *more* liable to censure, as we shall see below.

As stated by Saldívar in his three facile, repetitive tags, (1)"Augustine and Rousseau knew" that historical questions are inseparable from authentic self-understanding (while Rodriguez "speaks to us from a position beyond history"); (2)"Augustine and Rousseau knew" that *"an author cannot simply tell us"* the "truth" about himself without undertaking some kind of philosophical reflection on the place of his private life in public history; and, finally, (3)"Augustine and Rousseau knew" that *"the poetic self-expression requires* the autobiographer to confront nostalgic desire with present circumstances" (28-29, my italics).

Regardless of whether Augustine and Rousseau "knew" all of those conventions or not; regardless of whether their autobiographies actually feature them or not, if I have italicized some of Saldívar's phrases it is because I wish to highlight his language: *"an author cannot simply tell us* [...]," *"the poetic self-expression require* [...]." Where is it stated what literature *"requires"*? Where is it said what an author *can/cannot* tell us? In my view, an autobiographer can only tell us what deeply moves him or her, and not what a critic *would like* to read. In fact, what Saldívar has done is to convert Spengemann's anatomy of the three methods of presentation *most generally used* by autobiographers[12] into *sine-qua-non* requirements, the contravention of which "is remarkably problematic" (Saldívar 28).

I will just mention one more of Saldívar's assertions, which is really the only one that makes an indirect reference—if most "problematic"—to the literary form of the text:

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[10] As I said some lines above, this departure from conventional autobiographical narrative models is precisely one of the gifts I found in *Hunger of Memory*.

[11] James Olney (1993) explains how, if we look at African autobiography, we shall not find *"autoautography,"* the kind of text that features an individualistic, Rousseaunian "Moi, moi seul"; but what he calls *autophylography*.

[12] The historical, the philosophical and the poetic. See Spengemann.

> In the case of Richard Rodriguez, can we be certain that the referent, his life, his anguished search for self-definition, determines the figure, the pastoral/hagiographical rendering of it in the text of *Hunger of Memory*, or is it the other way round? Is it because he writes his life-story as a nostalgic desire for lost innocence and a sublime search for personal redemption that we come to *believe through his artful prose in the lost innocence and personal redemption of his life*? If so, then the referent of his autobiography is not simply a referent at all but something more akin [...] to a fiction. (29, my italics)

In this case the critic has become an omniscient judge who is not precisely judging the qualities of a work of art, but the integrity of a real person ("the referent") whose "innocence and personal redemption" are questioned, if not denied ("something more akin to a fiction"). Leaving aside the fact that a critic should not play God, there are, I think, two important issues raised in this assertion, concerning two very much debated questions in autobiography studies: that of truth versus fiction, and that of reference in autobiography, both of which have been extensively studied by John Paul Eakin (1988, 1992), among others. Fortunately, the old and stale question of autobiographical truths versus the inevitable fiction inherent in the genre has certainly ceased to be a concern of the critics. Indeed, just as it is impossible to conceive of a "pure novel" in which everything be fabricated and detached from reality, contingent reality is completely unliable to reproduction; only comparisons, analogues, or metaphors can possibly work. That is, "any repetition of the past is necessarily a repetition with a difference" (Eakin 1992: 51). On the other hand, even though Saldívar cites, and even paraphrases, Paul De Man in that sentence, he seems to be endorsing precisely most of the anti-structuralist, traditional beliefs about the self, language and literary form; namely, that the self is a fully constituted plenitude pre-existing language, and capable of being expressed in it; and that language is a transparent medium of expression permitting unmediated access to the world of reference beyond the text (Eakin 1992: 29-53). Or, in Yves-Cgarles Grandjeat's words, Saldívar "appropriates deconstructivist discourse for reconstructivist projects."[13]

Responding precisely to the debate raised by poststructuralist theories of autobiography, which see the self as a mere representation, a textual signifier that is part of the unstable processes of signification, Olshen suggests that the problem lies in mistaking the self-image for the self, and the misnomer "autobiographical self" for the subject. Consequently, he proposes the use of three terms in theoretical approaches to autobiography, to avoid confusion: "subject" (in the sense of a center of awareness; what would have been called "autobiographer" in a more confident age); "persona" (the autobiographical ego, the textual signifier or literary subject, entirely constituted by discourse); and "self" (a kind of subjective structure maintaining the subject's sense of his/her own identity, and his/her sense of unique, persistent, cohesive being). Avoiding binary oppositions, Olshen explicates that it is the autobiographical persona, not the self, that in his view is constructed entirely in and through the language of autobiography. The self, connected to both the subject and the text, is only partly so constructed. That is, autobiography ought not to be described as the inquiry of the self into its own origin and history. It is, rather, the inquiry of the "subject" into the origin and history of him- or herself; but this use of "self" is only a reflexive shorthand for the person's sense of the structure of experience, behavior, achievements, and so on that constitute a *constructed* "life." So, what is produced in the text is at best what Olney calls "metaphors of the self" (1972), or what Renza calls "textual renditions of the writer." This, Olshen calls "persona."

If we accept this tripartite division of the autobiographical "I" and apply it to Saldívar's approach to *Hunger of Memory,* we can appreciate that, firstly, what he is judging is

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[13] Pronounced during a lecture entitled "Across and Beyond Boundaries: Ana Castillo's Literary Nomadism or the Un-mapping of Chicana/o Literature," during the 2002 EAAS Conference at Bordeaux. Unpublished.

Rodriguez's "self"; secondly, he is treating the "self" as if it were the "subject"; and, finally, he is forgetting that the "persona" is always a literary creation artfully designed. Whether that "persona" is to a reader's moral or ideological liking or not is a very personal question, but certainly one that should not guide a literary critique.

Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy* deserves Saldívar's and Flores' applause because it seems to follow their prescribed rules: that the presentation of the self is historical rather than private and personal, that it is rooted in the temporality of traditional autobiography, and "presented in the simple form of a travelogue and character reminiscence" (Saldívar 30) and, most importantly for our purposes of showing how some criticism is more political that literary, that "in Galarza we are not offered a tale of assimilation" (Saldívar 32). After their foregoing, extensive analyses of Rodriguez's faults, one cannot help but suspect that the very few lines, comparatively speaking, devoted by the Chicano critics to the sanctimony of Galarza's text could be partially related, equally, to political reasons of the opposite kind, namely, that Ernesto Galarza has been—very justly—embraced by the ethnic left for his actions as a social activist, and as a benefactor of the Chicano community, through the *Bracero* Program, among other things.[14] That is, because he is "politically good" it goes with only a few paragraphs' explanation that his text is also good.

I will not get into an in-depth analysis of the splendid reception given to *Barrio Boy* by Chicano critics, for that would be beyond the scope of this essay. But I cannot refrain from making a comment on one of Lauro Flores' statements. According to this critic's viewpoint, because Ernesto Galarza and Richard Rodriguez lived in the same city (Sacramento), because both went to a prestigious University (Stanford), and because both are now intellectuals and, thus, both their lives are cliché success stories which carry them "from labor to letters," Flores concludes that: "One would expect both men to expound, if not the same, at least similar ideologies [...] to adopt cultural perspectives and ideological stances running against the grain of the conservative views which lie at the heart of the fundamental ideology of the hegemonic classes in this country" (84).

Certainly, that "one" is problematic, to say the least. According to such cause-and-effect argumentation, "one" should expect every writer born, say, in Madrid and educated in the same institutions around 1900, to have had in their mature age the same liberal, free-thinking, democratic ideology. I wish that had been the case: it would have saved the Spaniards a bloody civil war and forty years of dictatorship. In any case, because Rodriguez did not "expound" Galarza's and Flores' ideology, again, he seems to deserve the punishment of the literary critic who knows better than the author, since he does not hesitate in disclosing for us that the *hunger of memory* of the title sounds like "an astute marketing strategy" that leaves "a certain ring of incongruence and falseness." Not only has the critic converted Rodriguez's autobiographical act of grief into political grievance, but, moreover, he's again moving on slippery ground here, for to speak of "truths and falseness," as Saldívar has done before, or to speak of what should constitute one's personal "memory" is to enter into the most private realms of a human being ("the referent"). Perhaps Flores refers to the kind of historical or cultural memory that Raymund Paredes also misses in *Hunger of Memory*, when he judges the book as "extremely superficial" on the grounds that "Rodriguez tells us hardly anything about living inside ethnic culture: nothing about children's games or rhymes, [...] no legends, no *corridos*, no stories of the Mexican Revolution [...]" (285). In other words, the book is, once more, disappointing because they are not reading the book they would like to be reading, but something utterly different. As a matter of fact, ethnic children are stereotypically expected to delight in lengthy descriptions of what Richard Coe calls "their private, exotic *trivia* and *curiosa*" (211-18). But Rodriguez has deliberately avoided such ethnic stereotyping that prescribes them as "marketable exoticism" on the one hand, or as vessels of rebellion and protest on the other, as he expresses very clearly at the beginning of his book:

> Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnamable ancestors. I assume I retain certain features of gesture and mood derived from buried lives. I also speak Spanish today. But [...] what preoccupies me is immediate: the separation I endure with my parents in loss. This is what matters to me: the story of the scholarship boy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents. This is my story. (5)

I would totally agree that this statement has a ring of superiority over other Chicanos; but arrogance is a human defect, not a literary deficiency. On the other hand, I do not wish to reopen the debate as to whether Rodriguez's book is or is not a simple story of assimilation, because the ambiguities that constantly appear have been aptly studied and exposed by several (non Chicano) critics[15] that seem to agree that proclamations like "Here is a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself" (Rodriguez 48) and its author's autobiographical journey to childhood clearly show how only on the most superficial level can this autobiography be read as a "success story," since it reveals a profound ambivalence about assimilation (Browdy 151).

Toni Morrison's argument in her essay "Speaking Things Unspeakable" is a useful demonstration of the way a process of inclusive "both/and" thinking is key in our analysis of her art as opposed to the Manichean "either/or" logic which is at the core of much of the racialization found in cultural critiques (qtd. in Elliott 16). If we apply this inclusive thinking to Rodriguez's autobiography, one immediately realizes that *Hunger of Memory* offers a double-voiced response to the dilemma of the marginal ethnic subject: with one voice, Rodriguez sings the praises of assimilation and detachment from his ethnic group, while another, sometimes unconscious voice, responds with a nostalgic lament over the personal losses that assimilation imposes (Browdy 151), and tries to expiate guilt by writing pain. That is, *Hunger of Memory* is as much a story of escape as a story of return, as Rodriguez emotionally states in this passage, which narrates a scene at the British Museum Library, in London, while he was doing some research with a Fulbright grant:

> After years spent unwilling to admit its attractions, I gestured nostalgically toward the past. I *yearned for that time when I had not been so alone.* I became impatient with books. [...] One day I heard some Spanish academics whispering back and forth to each other, and their sounds seemed ghostly voices recalling my life. Yearning became preoccupation then. Boyhood memories beckoned, flooded my mind. (72)

And this ambiguity; this lack of definition about where one really belongs, is a landmark of most bicultural autobiographies, due to the sheer fact of living "in the hyphen," as Pérez Firmat says with his bilingual linguistic game:

> Where am I most me? Which of these two locales that I have described is my true place? [...] Miami or North Carolina? Cuba or America? This book grows out of my need to find an answer to these questions, or at least to understand more completely why I cannot answer them [...]. I write to become who I am, even if I'm more than one, even if I'm *yo* and you and *tú* and two. (8)

Critic Genaro Padilla, much more open-minded and temperate in his evaluations than his Chicano colleagues, explains in his monograph on the history and formation of Mexican American autobiography that Richard Rodriguez is by no means the first Chicano autobiographer who has publicly disaffiliated himself from his culture so as to assume the mask of the middle-class American, and also admits that as much as they represent themselves as assimilated middle-class Americans, there are repeated narrative intrusions or even a different text that superposes itself, disclosing evidence of cultural confusion and divided loyalties—the condition of a destabilized identity. "We must train ourselves upon such contradictions to arrive at a *literary and cultural analysis* that will make clearer the formation of our inherited literary discourse," he warns Chicano scholars and critics. And his call for prudence is specifically addressed to the kind of stipulating, radicalized Chicano criticism I have been examining along these lines, when he says:

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[14] Of course, he is also a prolific writer.

[15] See, for example, Browdy, Couser, Durczark, and Eakin.

> Whether Rodriguez and his antecedents should be disavowed is an issue readers must decide for themselves. However, precisely because their lives refuse to conform to some of the images *we have created for ourselves*, especially in recent years when we have *radicalized that self-image*, their autobiographies do force us to recognize variations of the Chicano self. (Padilla 35)

No further comment is necessary. What is implied here is that the type of contemporary Chicano, working-class in consciousness, socially and politically left-wing, radically hard-line vis-à-vis assimilation and the ethnic policies of the United States government, and a staunch defender of bilingualism, is not *the* only paradigm of the contemporary Chicano; and, therefore, the presentation of such a self-paradigm cannot be expected by critics as a requisite for every Chicano autobiographer that gets published. Padilla's remarks also prove that radical politics should not substitute literary and cultural criticism.

I wish to finish with a brief mention of a different kind of political criticism: that which concentrates on sexual politics, of which Rodriguez's autobiography has also been a target. If the Chicano critics disavow *Hunger of Memory* because its author does not comply with the agenda of Chicano politics, the gay critic disavows it because Rodriguez does not use its pages to come out of the closet! In his book *Gay Lives*, Robinson laments not having been able to include Rodriguez's autobiography, and he asserts that, because Rodriguez is gay, he "owes us a gay autobiography" (403). Robinson wonders whether Rodriguez's "deep repression" in *Hunger of Memory* is connected with his being a Mexican-American or with his being a Catholic. According to Robinson, the homophobic teachings of the Catholic Church have presented gay Latinos with a formidable barrier to self-acceptance, especially when loyalty to the Church is perceived as a way to maintain their increasingly fragile ties to the family and culture of their childhood.

Again, the question is: does a writer have the right to choose what he wishes to keep private, or do particular communities have the right to demand that an autobiographer discuss aspects of his or her life that hold special interests for certain self-defined groups whether they be determined by gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, or class?

By way of conclusion I would simply state—and I wish to believe—that writing, for most writers, regardless of their ethnic origin, implies not only a commitment to communication, or to the assertion of racial and cultural identity, but also to the craft of writing itself (Ickstadt 269). I would like to argue, with Heinz Ickstadt (265), for the reinstatement of the aesthetic as a distinct discourse not *separate* from or *against* American (autobiography) Studies but emphatically *within* it, since the aesthetic does not deny the political, ethical, or historical dimensions of literary texts but engages them and mediates between them.

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