

The Language of Memory: Literatures Within Histories

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Abstract

In *Days of Obligation* Richard Rodriguez demonstrates a literary means of describing culture through lived experience, thereby situating his personal narrative at the intersection of prevalent histories and their continuing stories. In effect, by articulating his analysis of culture through the literary style of autobiography Rodriguez reflects on his persona as a cultural subject in order to invoke and implicate the tensions between the diasporas that surround him and in which he resides. Narrative history becomes for Rodriguez the vehicle through which to describe culture and to subsequently challenge, overcome, or invest in the cultural myths we constitute for ourselves.

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As memoir, as literary autobiography, Rodriguez's work invites the reader to consider the nuances of cultural awareness that lie between concrete, static points of identity. For Rodriguez, the language of memory is the openness of personal history made confession, made argument in the name of a self whose fluid boundaries participate in many dialogues with culture. In *Days of Obligation* Richard Rodriguez demonstrates a literary means of describing culture through lived experience, thereby situating his personal narrative at the intersection of prevalent histories and their continuing stories. By articulating his analysis of culture through the literary style of autobiography, Rodriguez in effect offers a phenomenological account of his lived experience of culture. In doing so Rodriguez reflects on his persona as a cultural subject in order to invoke and implicate the tensions between the diasporas and competing traditions that surround him and in which he resides. Narrative history, then, becomes for Rodriguez the vehicle through which to describe culture and to subsequently challenge, overcome, or invest in the cultural myths we constitute for ourselves.

Richard Rodriguez's second book, of the four he has written so far, *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father*, is a collection of essays whose central topics range from contemplation of national and ethnic identities, to differing senses of time and space in Catholic and Protestant cultures, to even the very process of writing autobiography itself. In the confessional mode, Rodriguez makes available his intimate interpretation of the world around him, blending critical analysis of scenes in which racial/ historical tensions bear on him with memories of his youth and departure from youth. Nell Altizer in a review of *Days* published by the University of Hawai'i Press, *Manoa*, describes this work in writing that "Rodriguez's quest is personal...It is also historical and sociological, tracing in each essay the sands shifting from North to South America and back again" (Altizer 201). Indeed, on the grounds that the ten essays

and introduction that make up the text can be read as distinct from each other, as not so much linearly organized but rather compiled samples of cultural analysis with a literary inflection and with common themes, the piece as a whole makes for a postmodern gathering of experiences that speak in tandem with one another to Rodriguez's life in the world.

“India” and The Politics of Difference

Perhaps the most succinct way of describing Rodriguez's work is by depicting *Days of Obligation* as a series of meditations on distinct though related themes of identity. For instance, the beginning chapter in *Days* is titled “India,” and is a telling example of Rodriguez's reflection throughout the text on racial histories and the forms of identity by which he defines himself or refuses to define himself. The essay is organized as a sequence of interactions with individuals, with groups of people, and with perceived cultural histories, both icons and supporting structures. Rather than relating his experiences in a linear, diachronic approach to writing on culture, Rodriguez presents “India” as a multi-faceted account that intersperses the histories of European oppression and Indian survival with everyday experiences of language and religion. Rodriguez therein positions himself as a witness providing testimony of historical processes in their unfolding, synthesizing personal narrative with encompassing cultural transitions. However, inasmuch as *Days* is a personal interpretation of the public experience of culture, it might serve us better here to think of Rodriguez's autobiography not so much as testimony, but rather dialectical engagement with the culture that he describes.

In this context, the chapter “India” becomes not only a site of comparison between deeply personal experience and general, public histories, the chapter also thereby introduces the reader

to Rodriguez's means of writing narrative history, as something between and beyond the competition of private autobiography and a wider, necessarily far more diverse take on history as such. The consequence of writing in this style is then of course that the personal intertwines with the political, and Rodriguez's personal writing therefore involves itself in discourses on language, religion, sexuality, and race. Thus, we should read *Days of Obligation* with close attention to how Rodriguez embeds his personal narrative into the broader context of the political struggles of how to construct or otherwise determine identity.

In light of this concern as to how to read Rodriguez's work, it is all the more important to understand the rhetoric by which "India," for example, is organized. Taken from a distanced perspective focused more on the form of the piece than its content, at least for the moment, it becomes clear that a primary way in which Rodriguez postulates his analysis is through a binary logic of tension; he identifies several large-scale oppositions that he claims inevitably shape our experiences of culture and encounters with history. Jeffrey Louis Decker affirms this in a review of *Days*, titled "Mr. Secret," in writing that "a series of informative oppositions – between youth and maturity, optimism and cynicism, comedy and tragedy, America and Mexico, fatherland and motherland, Protestant and Catholic – organizes Rodriguez's literary imagination" (Decker 128). The most pronounced of these, and that which contains each of the others in a general sense, is the opposition between the private and the public, and even as Rodriguez lines up these binaries (Mexico is Catholic, tragic, cynical, mature, the motherland, while the United States is Protestant, comic, optimistic, young, and the fatherland,) the underlying current is assuredly about his conception of the public invading his conception of the private, as well as the inverse of the private leaking into the public.

Yet what is most striking about this way of articulating cultural narrative, as in binary tension within itself, is that, as Decker notices, Rodriguez “does not seek resolution to these conflicts, nor does he deny either term of these binaries,” remarking that “instead he aims at something less analytical and, perhaps, more prophetic” (Decker 128). This rhetoric is strategically most obvious in Rodriguez’s discussions of ethnicity, of the relationships within and between Indian-ness, Mexican-ness, and American-ness as he claims that each identity in various ways participates in our conceptions of the other identities.

Correspondingly, Rodriguez plays with anecdotes and analysis alike in the chapter, in that he juggles between brief personal narratives and extended arguments about the Indian-ness within Mexican-ness. He writes as a central thesis of the chapter that “I take it as an Indian achievement that I am alive, that I am Catholic, that I speak English, that I am an American,” in turn asserting that “my life began, it did not end, in the sixteenth century” (Rodriguez 24). As a reflection on his own experience as a consequence of racial and ethnic forces colliding and synthesizing, “India” presents us with a bold, at times polemical, investigation of these cultural frameworks.

The work of French literary theorist Roland Barthes in the text *Mythologies* helps situate the following discussion of cultural awareness, especially in regard to the popular/ historical understandings of ethnicity and sexuality that Rodriguez plays off of in “India.” Barthes writes of mythology, which is taken as in a linguistic study as a kind of speech instead of in the sense of religious worship, that “myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form” (Barthes 236). Thus, to analyze Rodriguez’s work with a mind to linguistic study as well as with a literary filter in part inspired by New Historicist approaches to cultural studies is then to identify, deconstruct, and examine the major pressures in the text that

Rodriguez takes on. In playing with cultural mythologies in order to tell his own story Rodriguez interjects his experience into the discourses of language, race, and sexuality and invokes his autobiography as evidence of certain transitions taking place, or as in anticipation of their taking place.

As with much other analysis of cultural mythologies, it remains a challenge in Rodriguez's work to not perpetuate or even augment harmful stereotypes of indigenous peoples, and there is a great deal of criticism that correctly argues that Rodriguez is not appropriately mindful with his portrayals of what he identifies as Indian-ness. For the reader, the task is to read "India" with a critical mind aware of the background of cultural violence on which Rodriguez foregrounds his critique of the Indian-ness within Mexican-ness and American-ness. The rhetorical choice of playing with the misnomer 'India' in both the title and throughout this chapter is thereby also of interest, for Rodriguez invests in this identifier of indigenous peoples and continually affirms it by contrasting it with Spanish, Mexican, and gringo American identities. What then remains to be called into question is whether or not, or perhaps to what degree, Rodriguez's logic of cultural tensions unnecessarily falls into the trap of a historically-instituted hierarchical binary of racial classification between Indian and European identities.

As an illustration, Rodriguez begins "India" with a dramatic scene of self-reflection in which he watches himself in the mirror. He writes "I used to stare at the Indian in the mirror," and that "no one in my family had a face as dark or as Indian as mine" setting up the following essay to be an extrapolation of this interaction with the reflected self (Rodriguez 1). This image is significant not only for its obvious appeal to a kind of psychoanalysis on the psychological level, of peering into one's face, one's physiognomy in search of meaning and history on the surface level of bodily features, but also because rhetorically the discussions that ensue can then

be understood as a continuation of this moment. Rodriguez, as he admits in several interviews with writers like David Cooper from the publication *Fourth Genre*, is primarily concerned with telling his own story. Inevitably, however, by searching for identity, by challenging his identifiers, Rodriguez involves himself with greater historical transitions.

Rodriguez's self-reflection in "India" comes off at times as a polemical take on not only his personal, intimate interpretation of his ethnicity and nationality but also on what it means to have indigenous, Spanish, mixed ancestry for anyone. This is of course one of the audacious aspects of his autobiographical style, which is to say that Rodriguez makes similar sweeping gestures that seek to confront stable, politically charged identifiers like "Indian" that describe him, and which all too often are used in the service of power to displace or otherwise obscure the histories and cultures of entire peoples. Rodriguez goes on in the beginning to claim that "Mexicans imagine their Indian part as deadweight: the Indian stunned by modernity; so overwhelmed by the loss of what is genuine to him – his language, his religion – that he sits weeping like a medieval lady at the crossroads" (Rodriguez 2). He extends this portrayal of the Indian, claiming that "he resorts to occult powers and superstitions, choosing to consort with death because the purpose of the worlds has passed him by" (Rodriguez 2). If the chapter "India" is about Rodriguez working through his interpretation of his relationship with Mexico, and his identity as the son of Mexican immigrants to the United States, then this insight into how he treats his so-called Indian-ness within that history is particularly interesting. These moments of reflection characterize the spiritual influence of Mexico that Rodriguez develops later in the essay, a Mexico which he identifies as a tragic culture with which his relationship is considerably complicated because he has so distanced himself from it.

Bridging conversations about the essence of Mexico and the heritage it carries from indigenous origin as it translates into an American context within the United States; Rodriguez argues that “America is an idea to which natives are inimical. The Indian represented permanence and continuity to Americans who were determined to call this country new,” propelling this claim further by alleging that “Indians must be ghosts” to an American perspective (Rodriguez 4). Rodriguez is thus clearly interested throughout the piece in defining, redefining, and otherwise reinterpreting these identities of Indian, Mexican, and American, especially with concern to how they affect one another in his own life. The relation between what it might mean to be Indian and what it might mean to be American for Rodriguez is a rich site for discussion precisely because of the tensions that Rodriguez describes, particularly in light of how he discusses these identities in his autobiographical work. What is interesting here is that it seems that although “Indians must be ghosts” to general American culture, Rodriguez implicitly suggests that his participation in American-ness carries with it Indian culture and Indian history. And yet, as Maarten van Delden writes in the article “Crossing the Great Divide,” “for Rodriguez, the fact that he is an American does not mean that he is no longer as Indian” (van Delden 262). Rather, in effect this points to Rodriguez in *Days* becoming American through embracing or questioning his relationship with indigenous cultures in the Southwest.

He complicates these identities by questioning “is it the nature of Indians – not verifiable in nature, of course, but in the European description of Indians – that we wait around to be ‘discovered’?” (Rodriguez 7). He continues this line of thought, playing with cultural stereotypes, writing that “Europe discovers. India beckons. Isn’t that so? India sits atop her lily pad through centuries, lost in contemplation of the horizon. And, from time to time, India is discovered” (Rodriguez 7). Here Europe and India become counterpoints of each other, distinct

cultures that Rodriguez imbues with character and temper. Within these depictions of cultures as persons, the portrayal of India as a personhood becomes the feminine, pensive representation of the historically situated indigenous cultures of what is now Mexico and the United States.

Rodriguez's treatment of Indian-ness receives the attention of critics who work to unpack and dispute these characterizations of the Indian-ness within Mexican-ness precisely because he sets up Indian, Mexican, and American identities as polarities. In doing so, critics like Decker, Paige Schilt, Kevin McNamara, and Norma Alarcón call into question the tension between Mexican and American identities as well as between the public selves and private selves that Rodriguez narrates in *Days of Obligation*.

Of the more markedly acerbic reviews of Rodriguez's work, Decker claims that "from the perspective of Chicano historiography, his work may be irredeemable" (Decker 125). While it is true that Rodriguez's work has contributed to ongoing discussions about Chicano identity, and has drawn a great deal of attention to the discourse of identity within the Chicano movement as an openly gay man, Decker identifies that the work of *Days* does not sufficiently retract from Rodriguez's earlier work, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. It is in this text specifically that Rodriguez comes out as an opponent of bilingual education and affirmative action, citing a universalist, cosmopolitan understanding of relationships between immigrant home life and participation in the state as citizens. While *Days* stands out as a distinct work, Decker does not absolve Rodriguez of his earlier efforts to challenge leftist, Chicano rhetoric in the public discourse of education. As a severe critic of Rodriguez then, Decker offers an insightful look into this second autobiographical work of Rodriguez.

Decker points out, for instance, that "Rodriguez does not compose his life along the lines of the counter-narrative developed by Chicano historians. But neither does this necessarily mean

that Rodriguez takes an ahistorical position outside the Mexican-American experience” (Decker 125). On the contrary, Rodriguez actually embeds himself in the discourse of the Mexican-American experience by questioning its limits and its essence. What Decker’s take on *Days* reveals is the degree to which Rodriguez situates himself in these discussions about identity. Decker’s argument helps us understand that even though many Chicano intellectuals consider him a right-wing propagandist for his work in *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez’s work in *Days* complicates yet again these constitutive patterns of identity, and calls into question the very ties by which we organize our senses of the shared-life of culture. Rodriguez’s distance from thinkers within the Chicano movement provides yet another layer of intrigue for reading *Days*, in which Rodriguez sorts out his participation in larger historical transitions.

Another critic of Rodriguez’s work is Norma Alarcón, who grounds her essay “Topology of Hunger: The ‘Miseducation of Richard Rodriguez’” in an analysis of *Hunger of Memory*. While her criticism is primarily directed at *Hunger*, it applies also to similar themes of identity that Rodriguez works through in *Days* and is helpful here for situating following discussions of the contrast and tensions between public and private life. She centers her argument on the assertion that “displacement and dislocation are at the core of the invention of the Americas” (Alarcón 151). For Alarcón the constitutive elements of identity for Chicanos, but also for all peoples oppressed by European colonizers in the Americas, are compressed by the hegemonic pressure to conform to the standards of the oppressive, WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant) culture. In reading Rodriguez’s work then, Alarcón is critical of the relationships between Indian-ness and American-ness, and urges us as readers not to forget or dare to minimize the violence implied in the historical collisions of these identities.

For example, Alarcón cites as a criticism of his piece “An American Writer” how “in Rodriguez’s vocabulary, the outside appearance is Indian/feminine, but the ‘essence’ inside the body is aristocratic/masculine” (Alarcón 147). Throughout Rodriguez’s work there is the tension between European and indigenous histories, all carried within, as he portrays it, his body and in his language. As mentioned earlier, Rodriguez characterizes Indian-ness as feminine, yet while some critics read him as trying to rescue femininity from the cultural prejudice of Indian and feminine as inferior or as inherently irrational, Alarcón argues that this portrayal does yet further violence in condemning femininity to passivity or consigning indigenous peoples to injustice in popular representations of their cultures.

Furthermore, Alarcón claims that this tendency is most clearly articulated in Rodriguez’s understanding of a binary logic between private and public lives, or rather that his estimate of Indian identity and Mexican character is expressed within the terms of a public/private logic. She writes that “in Rodriguez’s writing trajectory, difference is aesthetic and private, identity is political and public and must be subordinated to prevailing hegemonic views of the public sphere” (Alarcón 151). The concern for Alarcón is that Rodriguez does not sufficiently detail the violence of cultural oppression in his accounts of identity and racial-formation, and that what is at stake in his universalist attitude towards identity is the risk of limiting conversations about indigenous lives to middle-class perceptions of indigenous culture.

As a response then to Alarcón, Kevin McNamara offers a review of *Days* that is in favor of the ways in which she deals with Rodriguez’s work. McNamara begins his essay “A Finer Grain: Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation*” by writing that “playing national myths, group identities, and received ideas off each other, Rodriguez creates himself as a point where cultures converge and are renewed” (McNamara 106). McNamara goes on to warrant that the

Rodriguez's "essays also offer a way to think beyond the increasingly ethnically polarized condition of the nation, and, indeed, the world" (McNamara 106). Shed in a positive light, as compared with Decker's and Alarcón's criticism, McNamara positions Rodriguez's universalist identity as a spring-board from which we can think all the more creatively about identity.

The literary strategy of establishing one's cultural criticism within one's autobiography then becomes more powerful, from McNamara's perspective, because it is necessarily within the context of our own lives that we sort through the pressing challenges of identity and its construction. There remains here to be a means of negotiating Alarcón's criticism with McNamara's, as Alarcón's critique seems to apply just as much as McNamara's to *Days*. That is to say, rather, that even as Alarcón focuses on the consequences of Rodriguez's portrayal of indigenous cultures, McNamara's analysis also provides a legitimate and insightful way of reading Rodriguez.

Truly the difficulty here and throughout the popular criticism of Rodriguez's body of work is that critics range from scholars on linguistics, race, and history, and that many of these thinkers read Rodriguez with a mind to pigeonholing him within a specific political commitment. The strange and interesting part is that Rodriguez does not easily fit into any conventionally defined position, and it is this aspect of his writing that inspires reviewers like Ilan Stavans to claim that he is thereby "the embodiment of that complex fate shared by those born twice American: hybrids always living in the hyphen, with one leg here and the other across the Rio Grande" (Stavans 22). While most critics want to set Rodriguez in a fixed position, his work through autobiography continually challenges the politics of difference that derive from popular conceptions of identity. Rodriguez seems to argue, both explicitly in the content of *Days* but also

in his means of writing, in the form of his work, that identity is something far more fluid, flexible and ineffable than many of us take into account.

McNamara affirms this in writing that Rodriguez demonstrates this point “by showing how identity is produced by combination and re-combinations of these cultures, many of them elective,” and that therefore “Rodriguez makes most vivid the activity of cultural miscegenation and his belief that identity is constructed in, and as part of, public life” (McNamara 112).

McNamara throughout his essay picks up on the binary logic of Rodriguez’s work, arguing that Rodriguez’s take on the public sphere is actually in the spirit of a bold cosmopolitanism, and that Rodriguez is innovative in his use of style and argument. Contrary to Decker’s and Alarcón’s criticism, McNamara focuses more on the American perspective of *Days*, as in how Rodriguez portrays American-ness as an amalgamation of peoples and persons that overcome their boundaries in order to become a mixed, multiracial and multi-lingual peoples.

Indeed, McNamara writes that “the vitality of the U.S. has long rested on the ability of immigrants to integrate into American society, to overcome the stagnation induced by the cultures’ putative defenders, and to transform it” (McNamara 110). Throughout *Days*, Rodriguez resists what he identifies as the Protestant impulse in American culture to isolate oneself within public life, to celebrate the individual over the community, before and instead of the community at large even. This impulse stands in stark contrast to the universalist, Catholic approach that Rodriguez imparts in *Days* and in other works, for as van Delden affirms, “...important, however, in Rodriguez’s portrayal of himself as a Catholic is his emphasis on Catholicism’s communitarian dimension.” (van Delden 264). To be Catholic is to celebrate one’s participation in a public spirituality, one that spans entire continents and centuries. Rodriguez seems to argue that to sequester oneself within what the political right wing in the U.S. would call identity-

politics, is to remove oneself from public discourse. Rodriguez thereby sets up his argument that the privileging of private lives over public participation for fear of being controversial is a sign of stagnation within a culture.

McNamara closes his essay by stating that “Rodriguez’s case for miscegenation also rests on his belief that cultures, no less than people, are caught up in the rhythms of becoming and dying, and that people give meaning to cultures at least as much as the other way around” (McNamara 119). In this sense, the politics of difference that Rodriguez constructs in “India” and throughout *Days* is grounded in the belief that participation in public life is liberating. Further, reviews of Rodriguez’s work suggest that in order to exercise our awareness of the shared-life of culture, we ought to consider how Rodriguez offers his experience as an observer, and heed his example of writing in between or even in spite of the lines that we draw between us. For, as McNamara concludes, “in the intricate, often unconscious activity of everyday life, the common life of cultures and individuals is made new” (McNamara 119). It is in autobiography that we find an appropriate means of telling history and narrating our participation in culture.

To the point that his work is not just memoir, or prose that is historical analysis, Rodriguez imparts character and personality to the terms of identity that he develops in the piece, so that Mexico the culture is as living and interactive an idea as the people with whom he builds discourse about Mexico the nation, Mexico the geography. And yet as he describes Indian-ness, or the Indian, whose essence is apparently found in the tragic disposition of Mexico in “India,” we sense a contrived need to set again the Indian as other, as an identity against which Rodriguez judges himself.

Within the realm of the binary logic of his work, which sets different identities against one another to claim that their miscegenation produces something more interesting, and that

indeed produces Rodriguez himself, we ought then to consider how he registers indigenous culture within his Mexican heritage. As a second-generation American, his parents having traveled from Mexico in their youth, Rodriguez spends much of “India” as well as much of *Days of Obligation* as a whole, sorting through precisely this genealogy. He writes of this in the beginning of “India,” that in tracing his personal history “I collected conflicting evidence concerning Mexico, it’s true, but I never felt myself the remnant of anything” (Rodriguez4). For Rodriguez what he takes with him from his family’s involvement in the diaspora from Mexico to the United States is not the sense of ethnic tethers to the past but instead something more like a tendency to welcome seemingly contradictory identities into his conception of himself. And so, to clarify what is at risk in this analysis of “India,” we should then heed carefully when Rodriguez continues this point by writing that “my past was at least this coherent: Mexico was a real place with plenty of people walking around in it,” affirming that, indeed, “my parents had come from somewhere that went on without them” (Rodriguez 4). Mexico becomes the measure of memory against which Rodriguez describes his sense of culture.

At this point, then, it is useful to consider Paige Schilt’s essay on *Days*, titled “Anti-Pastoral and Guilty Vision in Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation*.” As a kind of way point between the harsh criticism of writers like Decker and Alarcón, and the indulgent, supportive review of writers like McNamara, Schilt offers us a way of negotiating specifically how Rodriguez orients his narrative voice in “India.” A criticism that Chicano thinkers like Alarcón would support would be that Rodriguez relegates his indigenous heritage, and indeed his Mexican heritage, to passivity, and that he embraces a hegemonic American culture in favor of his family’s history within the diaspora. As Rodriguez describes his face, and the face of the personification of the Indian in *Days*, we should keep in mind Schilt’s point that there is a kind

of guilt visible in his presentation of himself, and that this guilt is a manifestation of the pressures of modern life and modern identities.

Rodriguez illustrates how the gaze of the proverbial Indian marks her participation in the public gesture of community, even in the face of European oppression and genocide.

Rodriguez's main point in "India" and throughout *Days* is that the figure of the Indian survived and continues to survive the oppression of European cultures in the Americas by ameliorating her identity through absorption of European senses of faith and time. There is a power in the gaze of the Indian, pictured as waiting for the European conqueror in "India," as someone determined to overcome terrible violence and continue living in spite of the oppressor's attempt to destroy her.

Correspondingly, Rodriguez writes a sexualized, effeminate vision of the Indian, illustrating how "India waits" and how "India has all the answers beneath her passive face or behind her veil or between her legs" (Rodriguez 7). As an extended metaphor of sexuality and racial heritage, Rodriguez emphasizes here how the encounter between indigenous women and Spanish men was not a scene of total destruction of the feminine, female part of the mestizo culture that was literally born from this violence. He makes a point to appreciate the violence here, however, writing that "the Spaniard entered the Indian by entering her city – the floating city – first as a suitor, ceremoniously; later by force," leading him to question "how should Mexico honor the rape?" (Rodriguez 13). The question for many Chicano writers who review Rodriguez's work is whether or not he goes far enough to portray the violence of this encounter, or if he ends up committing further harm with historical depictions of the Spanish conquest that ravaged the indigenous cultures of Mexico and the United States.

The gaze of the Indian here is the crucial image, the scene of India embodying her power and agency, and scholars like Schilt have intensely debated the implications of this metaphor, to the end where Schilt makes the case that “to critique Rodriguez’s construction of a universal, mobile identity is not to fall into the limitations of essentialist identities based on blood or culture” (Schilt 440). Moreover, Schilt writes that “here Rodriguez disrupts the conventional portrayal of the Indian as the passive victim of colonization and replaces it with the image of the attentive observer, eager for cosmopolitan knowledge” (Schilt 429). In light of Schilt’s critique, Rodriguez’s assertion that “the history of Mexico...is neither mundane nor masculine, but it is a miracle play with trapdoors and sequins and jokes on the living” becomes all the more interesting and revealing (Rodriguez 17). The image of the Indian is therefore one in which Rodriguez’s face becomes a site of discussion and debate in both a historical sense, but also in a spatial sense, within the context of diasporas both centuries old and contemporary.

Schilt also calls on the ironic tone of “India,” whereby Rodriguez displays his distanced-but-intimate relationship with the Indian-ness within Mexican-ness. Schilt goes on to argue that, based on Rodriguez’s universalist approach to identity, “to maintain a Mexican sense of history is not to maintain a parochial and separate cultural identity, but to partake of a sensibility that stretches across historical time periods and territorial boundaries” (Schilt 434). The narrator of “India” reveals that mestizo, or mixed, culture is a signal of Indian survival, emphasizing that “European vocabularies do not have a silence rich enough to describe the force within Indian contemplation” (Rodriguez 23). The sense of history that Schilt describes is closely intertwined with Rodriguez’s portrayal of Indian survival, and so Rodriguez’s image of the Indian, as well as the image of Rodriguez searching for his heritage within his face, creates an opportunity to reflect on identity that goes beyond traditional means of telling history or of developing cultural

awareness. With this intention Rodriguez speaks to the reader, saying that “I assure you Mexico has an Indian point of view as well, a female point of view” (Rodriguez 22). An apparent goal then is to portray identity as something that can hearken back to one’s ancestral roots, and is always privy to the many conversations we can have about who we are and how we understand ourselves.

Thus, as Juan de Castro recounts in *Days*, “it is the openness of the Amerindians to the new, and their curiosity – whether expressed in sexual desire for the European colonizers, or in the appropriation of European culture, language, and religion – that explain the mestizo culture and population of Mexico” (de Castro 110). Schilt agrees with this conception of the metaphors being deployed in “India,” as she writes that “rather than equating Mexico with folk art or the primitive, Rodriguez constructs the Indian as the heir and rejuvenator of an elite Western civilization, thereby contesting representations of Mexico as a place of stasis, death, and decay” (Schilt 430). The portrayals of the Indian, and the Indian-ness within Mexican culture, in *Days* thereby offer us an example of Rodriguez’s work on sorting through the constitutive elements of identity.

Rodriguez’s express intent in “India” and throughout *Days* seems to be, then, to deploy these images of the Indian and his relationship to Mexican and indigenous cultures within the context of his own life. The effect that this has on the text is that general discourses about identity gravitate towards the framework of one individual’s life, and of course there are several controversial consequences or implications of this choice that several critics have analyzed in depth since the publication of the book. Critics like Schilt take measures to notice and unpack the universalist, cosmopolitan politics of difference that underlie the text, being wary not to pigeonhole the writer politically but also to hold him to each of their professional standards for

discourse. For example, Rodriguez claims that “Mexico is the creation of a Spanish Catholicism that attempted to draw continents together as one flesh,” and yet that “Catholicism has become an Indian religion” by way of assimilation through the indigenous absorption of European culture (Rodriguez 20). As can be seen, there are many complex moments in the text where Rodriguez either contradicts or challenges previous assertions or descriptions he has outlined in earlier passages, and these moments of reflection are all contained within the context of his overall binary logic of the private and public.

Ultimately, Schilt’s review of *Days of Obligation* most closely approaches Rodriguez’s own sense of his work. She writes that “rather than basing identity on the claims of land or blood, Rodriguez imagines an identity sundered from specific territories or local histories” and that “in this model, the subject can transcend the specificity of birth to lay claim to the history and the traditions of the world” (Schilt 439). She concludes this point by attesting that “Rodriguez re-conceptualizes Mexican identity as a universal, ironic, Catholic knowledge of futility” (Schilt 439). While critics like Decker and Alarcón make perfectly legitimate arguments against much of Rodriguez’s body of work, and the politics of difference it represents, Schilt’s essay performs the analysis most in-tune with Rodriguez’s understanding of the situation of the tension between the public and the private realms. Therefore, as a dialectical engagement with the cultures he describes in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez challenges conventional expressions of identity, and affirms a new way of relating narrative history. Through autobiography and memoir Rodriguez sets the whole conversation of the constitutive elements of identity within the framework of his own experience, presenting an impression of indigenous and Mexican cultures that is sexually, culturally, and spiritually potent.

Octavio Paz and the Public Gesture

With the preceding conversation in mind, we ought to take into account how the sexualizing of Indian-ness is a long-standing historical trope in North American diasporas. Indeed, thinkers like Nobel-prize winning writer Octavio Paz have intensely analyzed this pressure of engendered/ engendering ethnicities, especially ethnicities persecuted by European racial hierarchies. For Richard Rodriguez, the cultural and literary predecessor whose influence is most clearly reflected in his work is Octavio Paz, a Mexican poet and writer whose work delves into the myths and other structures of culture that inform Mexican identity. In particular, the essay “The Sons of La Malinche” from Paz’s text *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is interesting in light of Rodriguez’s opening chapter in *Days of Obligation*, “India”, as Rodriguez pays homage to Paz by analyzing the figure of The Virgin of Guadalupe. In this chapter Rodriguez reinvestigates cultural themes on which Paz a generation before had written extensively on, and in noticing this relationship we come to see that the power of their literary essays resides in how it involves a work written within the framework of another.

In “The Sons of La Malinche” Paz insistently searches for a stable definition of Mexican identity. While Rodriguez struggles visibly in *Days of Obligation* with his cultural history, often relying on a notion of American-ness to negotiate more comfortably the boundaries between borders both racial and national, Paz dives into the raw, visceral work of psychoanalysis to recover Mexican identity from the entrapment of defeatist, historical myths about selfhood. Moreover, Paz in doing so also calls into question the very means of writing history that so often goes unchallenged, and he writes that “our living attitude – a factor we can never know completely, since change and indetermination are the only constants of our existence – is history

also” (Paz 71). What is striking here is that Paz inaugurates a connection between psychoanalysis and literary expression as a viable opportunity for thinking about identity and history.

The most obvious point of similarity between Rodriguez’s work and that of Paz is in how both thinkers write about the tensions between indigenous and European ancestries in Mexican identity. As Rodriguez adopts a style more in the vein of memoir, and Paz rigorously works through the psychological dimension of Mexican grammars, (as in popular cultural idioms of sexuality in particular), both take seriously the cultural icons that represent historical transitions into mestizo identity in Mexico’s history. For example, Rodriguez and Paz both dedicate a good portion of their writing to the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or The Virgin of Guadalupe, who is an immensely important figure in Mexican culture. She and her following represent the indigenous translation of Catholicism into native spirituality, and as such are of great interest to Rodriguez and Paz.

These popular icons of femininity mark the cultural interest in a binary understanding of sexuality, as in situating feminine embodied experience within the trope of the prostitute or the trope of the virgin. Both Paz and Rodriguez challenge conventional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in Mexican culture, which typically line up the Spanish with the masculine, with the violent, and the indigenous with the feminine, with a victim mentality. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a representation of the translation of indigenous spirituality into a Spanish, Catholic framework. She is the virgin mother of Jesus superimposed over existing traditions celebrating fertility and femininity.

An Indian man, Juan Diego, had a vision of Our Lady while visiting an indigenous place of worship, and understood her to be an omen of Catholic adoption of indigenous faiths. While

many contemporary Chicano thinkers challenge this legend, citing it as a means of manipulation of indigenous peoples, it remains a popular parable for Mexican Catholics. In contrast to the image of the Virgin, La Malinche was the courtesan of Hernan Cortés, and inasmuch as her legend is simultaneously one of rape and betrayal, Paz asserts that her story is the other side of Mexican conceptions of femininity. She is both a betrayer and the betrayed, for many critics of Mexican culture, and yet Paz tries in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* to recuperate her image as another survivor of European oppression. Therefore, with both of these representations of femininity in mind, Paz and Rodriguez wrestle with deeply significant icons in Mexican culture, and therein dare to take on the challenge of sorting through a genealogy of how popular conceptions of identity derive from the tensions within these legends.

Indeed, Paz identifies a kind of orphan-archetype in Mexican culture, especially in its structures of masculinity, and in response to this he writes that “the Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the Mother of orphans” (Paz 85). While Rodriguez focuses the subtitle, and the underlying tone of the work of *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* on his paternal connection with Mexican culture, Paz works through the relationships between masculine identities in their connection with popular conceptions of iconic femininity. To extend this metaphor of Our Lady, Rodriguez writes that “the Virgin of Guadalupe symbolizes the entire coherence of Mexico, body and soul” (Rodriguez 16). De Castro reinforces Rodriguez’s description of the Virgin, pointing out that “in his writings, femininity is no longer associated with passivity and silence” (de Castro 111). In this way Rodriguez effectively involves his work in that of Paz, taking up themes and problems of Mexican identity and applying them to another, related though distinct context.

In the beginning chapter “India” Rodriguez opens up *Days of Obligation* with an analysis of Indian identity in the diaspora between Mexico and the U.S. and between the past and the present. Even as this chapter splinters into sections that range from brief narratives of a trip to Mexico City to personal conversations discussing the matter of Mexican history, Rodriguez pays close attention to how Mexico and Mexico City especially are represented. In one conversation, as mentioned earlier, Rodriguez writes that “the history of Mexico, I promised her is neither mundane nor masculine, but it is a miracle play with trapdoors and sequins and jokes on the living” (Rodriguez 17). In order to tell the history of Mexico Rodriguez chooses to mark this cultural heritage in a conversation, which is interesting in light of Paz’s notion of sharing the living attitude as a means of writing history.

Significantly, this chapter especially runs much in the style of Paz, for Rodriguez traces Indian identity both in and as resistant to Mexican and American identities throughout the narratives. The similarities between the work of Paz and Rodriguez deserve to be recognized here, for both writers articulate themselves in modes that balance between psychoanalysis, historical narrative, personal memoir, and literary representation of life in mestizo diaspora. Rodriguez confirms in his work what Paz suggests about narrative in his means of description, in how cultural narratives (on the side of the literary) and genealogies of language (on the side of history) are almost indistinguishably intertwined with one another. By this I mean that Paz, in his essay “The Sons of La Malinche,” speaks not only to the structures of cultural memory, but that he also discusses them in a way that allows for us as readers to imagine his language in both literary and historical contexts.

Another key point in comparing these two thinkers is that Rodriguez’s work should be read as a response to Paz’s in that as much as Paz writes about Mexican identity, much of what

he writes falls into the exclusive register of masculinity, and that Rodriguez emphasizes a feminine strain of history repeatedly throughout the chapter “India.” Paz demonstrates a devoted attention of the masculine history of Mexican identity, and he writes of Our Lady of Guadalupe in contrast to La Malinche, who is another figure of enormous import in Mexican culture. As two highly visible icons of history and diaspora, Paz reads Mexican masculinity in between these historical characters who represent femininity both as virtue and as vice.

Paz diagnoses the cultural violence of the term “chingada,” which “denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force” as a symptom of the tensions within mestizo identity (Paz 76). He asserts that “the word is our sign and dal. By means of it we recognize each other among strangers, and we use it every time the real conditions of our being rise to our lips. To know it, to use it, to throw it in the air like a toy or to make it quiver like a sharp weapon, is a way of affirming that we are Mexican” (Paz 74). Thus, for Paz Mexican history is carried within the language specific to its culture, and he illustrates how its vocabularies contain cultural memory and awareness. He affirms this in writing that “in a world of chingones, of difficult relationships, ruled by violence and suspicion – a world in which no one opens out or surrenders himself” Mexicans remember the violence of European oppression within the very means of expression (Paz 79). For Paz the violence of the term “chingada” reveals the cultural structures that set the boundaries of expression, or otherwise function as the blueprints of interaction between and within Mexican identities.

As in response to Paz’s work in “The Sons of La Malinche,” Rodriguez explores the ever-continuing challenges of developing cultural awareness by locating so-called Indian (indigenous) identity within both Mexican and American frameworks of meaning. The masculine, orphaned identity, made distinct from feminine identity that Paz focuses on, is for

Rodriguez rather a tension between Indian and gringo cultures which we are to understand here as related yet different dimensions of identity. Rodriguez writes that “Indian memory has become the measure against which America gauges corrupting history” suggesting here that cultural awareness of a particular kind is always already at stake in the contest for writing histories, especially in the conflicts between oppressive, imperialist cultures like the U.S. and native populations throughout the Americas (Rodriguez 5). At the same time, Rodriguez plays with prevalent themes that supposedly constitute Indian-ness, Mexican-ness, and American-ness. For instance, Rodriguez writes that “I take it as an Indian achievement that I am alive, that I am Catholic, that I speak English, that I am an American. My life began, it did not end, in the sixteenth century” (Rodriguez 24). For Rodriguez, cultural memory therefore takes its roots in the tensions between seemingly contradictory frameworks for understanding identity, both in the language and in the metaphors that language conveys.

The cultural criticism that Paz and Rodriguez produce call into question our means of understanding history and narratives, suggesting each in their own way that culture is never entirely stable. Both thinkers argue that to tell histories truthfully and effectively, we must understand that identity can and should be explored artistically and through exploring the pressure points that lie between conflicting fragments of identity. Given this argument, it is all the more important to take into account how Paz writes that “the Mexican and his Mexicanism must be defined as separation and negation. And, at the same time, as a search, a desire to transcend this state of exile. In sum, as a vivid awareness of solitude, both historical and personal” (Paz 88). And it is all the more important to note how Rodriguez writes, to revisit a passage cited earlier, that “I assure you Mexico has an Indian point of view as well, a female point of view” (Rodriguez 22). The relationships between Richard Rodriguez’s essays and those

of Octavio Paz therefore reveal a way of thinking about cultural memory and awareness that is different from and is both informed by and in turn informs formal history. Indeed, Paz writes that this “history, which could not tell us anything about the nature of our feelings and conflicts, can now show us how that break came about and how we have attempted to transcend our solitude” (Paz 88). By investigating the power of language, in Mexican colloquial language and in the style of presentation of Rodriguez’s memoir-essays, Paz and Rodriguez effectively demonstrate how cultural memory is always already tied into its means of expression.

We must then take note of the manner in which Rodriguez portrays the narrative he constructs in the chapter “India” from *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. Here we speak of the truth-effects of narrative structures, in that by looking at how a narrative orients towards particular claims we can observe that narrative’s constitutive framework of meaning.

Throughout *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez successfully blends personal memoir with cultural analysis, taking it upon himself to describe the surrounding culture of the U.S. Southwest and of Mexico in terms of his lived experience. As discussed in earlier sections, this aspect of Rodriguez’s work marks it as something between literary registers and historical registers, lying perhaps in the overarching genre of literary nonfiction. In the chapter “India,” the first chapter of the book, Rodriguez unravels the twines of identity that he admits typically describe him, as of Indian ancestry, as Mexican, and as middle class, yet also somehow a part of the ‘gringo’ culture of the U.S. However, Rodriguez does far more than merely contrast these identifiers. Indeed, the power of the narrative is that he traces their origin and wonders publicly (through his published thoughts, through the gesture of narrative) about the boundaries that people draw around and between Indian-ness, American-ness, and Mexican-ness.

The most palpable formal property of the chapter lies most obviously in the transitions between sections, which are sometimes brief, sometimes sequential, and sometimes jarring. It would seem that the style of presentation in the essay reveals Rodriguez's underlying intent, which is to speak to the manifold, disparate, and yet also related categories and sub-categories of Indian, American, and Mexican cultures. Furthermore, an appeal of involving gendered terms in the essay is that Rodriguez then imbues cultural mythologies of sex, sexuality, and gender into the mix of subjects in the chapter. The result is that the essay becomes a microcosm of cultural terms, ideas, and assumptions all meeting within one narrative that registers in both historical and literary modes of expression. The narrative, in effect, becomes truly reminiscent of the entangled-ness yet striking beauty of culture as lived experience. The narrative can only really speak to the matters at stake in its claim by infusing its language with provocative, if not culturally relevant, terms and their histories.

The blending of related historical diasporas, Indian as well as European, in a literary fashion thereby enacts the fascinating power of Rodriguez's narrative to participate in both literary and historical discourses. Schilt affirms this by writing that "Rodriguez is able to champion both a universal cultural tradition and a specifically Mexican sense of history because the values that he associates with Mexico actually transcend national boundaries" (Schilt 433). In this way, then, we can discuss the aesthetic appeal of the chapter while also attending to the historical grounded of the epistemological challenge of narrative representation, which demands rootedness in verifiably historical conditions. "India" therefore speaks to Rodriguez's understanding of *mestizaje*, and in a way thereby also invokes a kind of mixed-enculturation between history and literature.

Cultural Genealogy as a Means of Narration

In the chapter titled “The Latin American Novel” from *Days of Obligation* Richard Rodriguez constructs a striking history of Latin American culture by means of performing a genealogy of Catholicism and the novel. As with many of his other essays in the text “The Latin American Novel” is about more than the subjects at hand as they are presented. The chapter is as much about the form and literary space of the novel as it is about the influence of Catholicism and the particulars of a Catholic upbringing for a burgeoning young mind. Though the chapter includes several sections that are distinctly cordoned off and presented sequentially, the narrative selections inform the moments where Rodriguez discusses the genealogy of the novel as a European invention that in turn became a Latin American device.

Here Rodriguez demonstrates how the histories of what we know from experiences of our own lives and the histories of what we claim to know from our experiences of a general cultural narrative are at once folded into one another.

These distinctions between the individual and the public histories are contained within the other through their expressions, for we utter culture in speaking the language of our surroundings, yet we can never escape the limits of our own experience. Rodriguez’s essay points out that indeed the personal becomes the public and the political by demonstrating how cultural histories influence personal sensibilities and how then, given the means of production and the appropriate method of presentation, the personal experience then projects into general cultural awareness. The essay “The Latin American Novel” establishes a narrative whose boundaries are more than literary, more than historical yet lie somewhere in between, expertly

mirroring the state of the world in its always fluid transitions. In this way the essay performs a profound awareness of modern life and its constitution.

Part of the artistry of Rodriguez's essays lie in how he manages to discuss something by writing about something else. Rather than a means of distraction, the foundation of "The Latin American Novel" in particular makes use of personal examples of cultural experience to speak about how massive shifts in culture manifest in specific instances. For the essay seems to hold this question as a central point of meditation: how else are we to trace a history if not by looking around us at the world in which we find ourselves? This is clear when Rodriguez describes an interaction with a priest of the Catholic faith who claims that "in Latin America you are Catholic by breathing the air" (Rodriguez 177). Within the space of the essay, which is more than a bare history pretending to objective fact, Rodriguez successfully immerses the reader in the words of the priest, invoking a genealogy of the Catholic faith and its regard for Protestant splintering of the Christian community.

We are given a privileged look into the world that manifests out of the History which constitutes the cultural project of Western spirituality. While most histories and historians take pride in the formal, scientific distance between narrator and the story they tell of cultures, Rodriguez instead welcomes personal narrative into the world of the genealogy, and he thereby fixes our attention as readers on the examples he describes which we are to take as always already carried within the overarching History of the Latin American Novel and the Catholic faith as European imports into Latin American contexts.

Rodriguez blends the historical description of the novel with his own experiences of Catholic religion, and the cultures which contain it, to so great a degree that at times we cannot parse out whether he is discussing the novel as an art form or he is describing his own

circumstances. Near the beginning of the essay he writes that Mexico City has become “the literary capital of the Latin Americas” as “the largest city on earth” (Rodriguez 179). Following this Rodriguez describes how “a new voice, separated from pastoral memory, finds itself alone, among strangers, with an eccentric story to tell – of misfortune, of blunder and blindest luck” (Rodriguez 180). Is this the voice of the novel as a means of expression?

He complicates this perplexing question by concluding the paragraph in italics, writing in a special voice “the reader will scarcely credit how I find myself here” (Rodriguez 180). As readers we are caught in a moment of confusion, for how are we to understand what we are reading? Whose history is being told here? Whose narrative has become the very means of expression? Rodriguez sustains some of this confusion by including selections throughout the chapter of letters and asides in italics, detailing his childhood interpretations of the world in front of him. Sometimes the letters are anonymous, sometimes they are not, and as Rodriguez says, sometimes they go unanswered, either by the original recipient or by Rodriguez himself whose narration occasionally refrains from noticing the epistolary asides or from giving them context.

The effect of this blending of narrative and history introduces an aesthetic which concerns itself primarily with describing the most robust impressions of a genealogy. Though grounding the essay with the subject of its title, Rodriguez writes such flexibility into the piece that the chapter could easily be read in many different ways as a personal account of friendship, as a testimony to childhood realities, or as a history of the Catholic faith and its principle interests today. What I mean to suggest here is that this means of narration allows us as readers to imagine the tremendous shifts in cultural transitions as they manifest in personal circumstances. Indeed, Rodriguez goes on to impart a literary flavor to the essay in question by illustrating his personal experiences of the histories that always already contain our many

cultures in the global community. The literary thereby constitutes the historical, and “The Latin American Novel” dances between the lines of memoir and historical critique. The personal becomes the public, and as cultures meet Rodriguez narrates their synthesis through genealogy.

Conclusion

Inevitably, every literary strategy reveals a political influence, or has political repercussions for the ways in which it uses language. As a writer who identifies his work as primarily, indeed almost exclusively autobiographical, Rodriguez claims that his work is a conversation between the private selves of the reader and the author. He affirms this in an interview with Spencer Herrera from *World Literature Today*, saying that “every line, every paragraph, every page becomes the writer’s revelation of himself to the reader, through a description of the other” (Herrera 19). As such, the work of Richard Rodriguez offers a poignant illustration of cultural criticism that traverses the boundaries of historical narrative, memoir, testimony, and philosophical essay.

While we can describe his work under all these terms, so too can we say that his texts carry a literary affect which imbues the essays with a tactile power to connect with the reader. Rodriguez’s work most certainly speaks to the real and the immediate concerns of contemporary life in the American Southwest, however many of the essays impart an historical tone that invokes the past to bear upon the present. The effect that this has on the texts is that the essays then become clued into general discourses of historical transition and diaspora between indigenous and European cultures.

By weaving together notes and passages on themes such as the Latin American novel, the concept of 'India' and indigenous life in North America, and the divide and subsequent bridge between Catholic and Protestant worlds, Rodriguez positions himself as a kind of guidepost for cultural miscegenation, between past and present, between the United States and Mexico, between the public and the private, and between literature and history. Yet these essays are expressly marked as much more than merely historical criticism, for the narratives that Rodriguez includes in the text *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* are compelling stories of his own experiences, as well as speculative literary comment on these ideas.

The literature that we share, the narratives that reach out from one experience into another, thereby make clear that the cultural memory that we develop in these stories is always already caught up in our cultural inheritance, and in fact these narratives prove to be the foundation for how we understand ourselves. As Ernesto Laclau argues in the essay "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity," "if democracy is possible, it is because the universal does not have any necessary body, any necessary content" (Laclau 90). By positioning himself simultaneously as a point of difference and a point of similarity between the cultures of Mexico, America, and indigenous heritage, Rodriguez claims that our identities are more fluid and available for reinterpretation than we generally take into account. What remains to be determined, however, is just how fluid identity is, especially ethnic and national identities, and Rodriguez and his critics clash over exactly this issue throughout *Days* and its following reviews.

We therefore find in the work of Richard Rodriguez an important opportunity to consider these questions. The literary voice of Richard Rodriguez traverses the boundaries of the

disciplines of literature and history, for his work attends to cultural realities while imagining new horizons for the limits of knowing oneself amidst a public which beckons, in a history that bears ever on the present. With this in mind, we can realize and appreciate that we are called into the world by literature, to join in the public gesture of community, and hence we are implicated in the literary act of a narrative that dreams of becoming life, that is itself a representation of life.

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