

MR. SECRETS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CONFESSION OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

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Richard Rodriguez's works create troubling situations for many scholars. Though numerous critics see him as the penultimate Chicano writer, many others see his writing as only pandering to the elite. However, all politics and controversies aside, he is a writer whose ideas upon language and public confession have been revolutionary. Throughout the thesis, I argue that Rodriguez's ideas upon language and identity are applicable to the social media landscape that we reside in currently, especially the public confession. Also, I use deconstructionism, along with postmodern criticism, to illustrate the changing arc of Rodriguez's confession from his first autobiography to his final one. In his first memoir, Rodriguez remains in the closet upon his sexuality, and the reader only catches glimpses of the 'real' character inside his work. In the second memoir, the reader sees a better glimpse because of his coming out; yet, even in this regard, he does not do so wholly and still leaves his confession unfinished. By the third, he applies themes and problems seen in his first and second works to discuss our browning nature, and how we are all sinners and that we desire to confess our sins.

In my assessment of Rodriguez, I argue throughout all my chapters upon a measure of irreconcilability between the private world of the Hispanic immigrant family and the public sphere that they are forced to inhabit because of his citizenship and education. This irreconcilability creates a drastic limiting of identity for the author that Rodriguez is forced to navigate which creates his desire for confession.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Troubling Nature of Richard Rodriguez

Richard Rodriguez's works create troubling situations for many scholars. Though numerous critics see him as the penultimate Chicano writer, many others see his writing as only pandering to the elite. However, all politics and controversies aside, he is a writer whose ideas upon language and public confession have been revolutionary. Rodriguez argues in the opening line of *Hunger for Memory* that he has "taken Caliban's advice... [and has] stolen their books... [so that he] will have some run of this isle" (*Hunger for Memory* 1). The use of language and confession are discussed further in this introduction and throughout the thesis, but these are the quintessential themes and ideas that run throughout his entire works: that the newest form of confessional literature – contemporary social media – allows for public confession.

To first address the critics, we must first address the fact that the troubling nature of Rodriguez's works are created because of the idea that he is not a Calibanic figure, or a "member of the school of Caliban" (J. Saldívar 123) – meaning he is not a person who uses the hegemonic society's language against them. The phrase, the School of Caliban, suggests a group of engaged writers, scholars, and professors who work under a common political influence, a group whose different (or imagined) national communities and symbologies are linked by their ancestries to a common exposé of Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*. The phrase also "emblemizes not just the group's shared subaltern subject positions, but the 'schooling' that their enrollment in such an institution provides" (J. Saldívar 123). However, many scholars, such as Jose David Saldívar, disagree with the assessment that Rodriguez is a Calibanic writer because he was

educated in the Ivy League schools of America. Instead of viewing Rodriguez as a Calibanic figure, they see him as an author who represents an “ideology of racial superiority” (J. Saldívar 131) and is an agent of the elite.

Another reason some Chicano critics do not like Rodriguez, is because he is accepted by the hegemonic society/culture inside America. Instead of being seen as a fringe writer, Rodriguez is recognized by the mainstream, and the reading literary public has legitimized his work. In the words of Ramón Saldívar, “Rodriguez has become in the span of a few years’ time the voice of ‘Hispanic America’ as his many short articles on a variety of topics and in various publications... indicate” (R. Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialects of Difference* 155). These critics see Rodriguez as only pretending “to join Caliban’s school of cultural resistance” (R. Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialects of Difference* 155). Ramón Saldívar argues that “Rodriguez is not a Calibanic protagonist; rather, he has become, in Renato Rosaldo’s words, ‘an icon of collaboration with the English-only movement and the conservative right wing’” (R. Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialects of Difference* 155). While some critics read Rodriguez as a mouth-piece for the cultural elite, I believe that they are misreading him; he is not saying that Hispanic or other cultures need to be blended, but instead that this event is a natural phenomenon and it is not something that needs to be forced. We must recognize the fact that we are becoming one race in the globalizing world, and he is a voice that speaks towards this situation.

This is why Rodriguez is better known for his opposition to bilingual education and his support for a “monolingual public sphere than for his essays and journalism” (Lim 518). Rodriguez terms the minority he speaks of as “somebody who’s outside. Someone who does not stand at the podium and speak in a public voice. Someone who’s the alien among us. Someone

who lacks public confidence. Someone who lacks public identity” (Rodriguez, “Literature” 11). But this minority, Rodriguez argues, needs to find the elusive public voice in order for them to have a public identity. Rodriguez believes that everyone, even monolingual white Americans, have both a public and private identity. However Rodriguez feels that since his grade school years, he has been stripped of his original private identity because of the forced insertion of the public realm (the English language) into his private self (his Spanish language). Rodriguez goes further in explaining this troubling nature of identity:

[This] is not to say that we deny ourselves private life when we become public people, but it is to say that the burden of our lives become more the public than it does the private life... I live more of my day among strangers than I do among intimates. I live more of my day away from the home than close to it. I am with strangers or alone more often than I am with people I know by name. This is the middle class dilemma. (“Literature” 14)

Rodriguez is saying that living in the public sphere is exhausting and that while being in the private is comforting, we are no longer allowed to live in the private. We see this public versus private dichotomy happening throughout society, and the public identity is becoming the only recognizable sphere inside of life.

This acquisition of a public identity causes an internal cultural conflict inside Rodriguez, who cannot “quite resign himself to living without a private identity which he... associates with the actual use of Spanish, so that his progressive abandonment of such a language produces in him a sense of guilt for forgetting his native society” (De Gregorio 130). This sense of guilt produces a confessional piece of literature that allows for a private viewing of Rodriguez in the public.

The Postmodern Writer

In my research, I use deconstructionism, along with postmodern criticism, to illustrate the changing arc of Rodriguez's confession from his first autobiography to his final one. In his first memoir, Rodriguez remains in the closet upon his sexuality, and the reader only catches glimpses of the 'real' character inside his work. In the second memoir, the reader sees a better glimpse because of his coming out; yet, even in this regard, he does not do so wholly and still leaves his confession unfinished. By the third, he applies themes and problems seen in his first and second works to discuss our browning nature, and how we are all sinners and that we desire to confess our sins.

None of this could have taken place for Rodriguez if not for his usurpation of language and his joining of the School of Caliban. While not argued with the same terminology by such theorists as Jacques Derrida, many postmodern theorists examine the use of language inside of society and its power over a culture. Regarding language, Derrida argues that he does "not use the language of everyone, the language of knowledge, in order to bedeck [himself] or to establish [his] mastery," instead he does so "only in order to erase all the traits, neutralize all the codes" (Post Card 80) that are created and propagated by that society. This viewing of language is much the same as the School of Caliban. Rodriguez states, that "it is education that has altered my life" (*Hunger of Memory* 4), and language is a part of the education that he speaks of when discussing his schooling. For both critic and author, language creates power, and through language, the power to be heard by the hegemonic society.

Much postmodern writing and criticism is an attack on authority and reliability – "in philosophy, narrative, and the relationship of the arts to truth" (Butler 110), and these same

disputes upon authority are seen throughout Rodriguez's works which allow him to be tied to postmodernism. As John Gray, in *Enlightenment's Wake*, contends "the post-modern condition of plural and provisional perspectives, lacking any rational or transcendental ground or unifying worldview is our own, given to us as an historical fate, and it is idle to pretend otherwise" (qtd. in Butler 121). However, due to this condition, postmodern thought has done a great deal to point out and defend differences of identity within humanity, and to shine a light on fringe cultures inside society. Much has been written about these differences in Rodriguez's autobiographies, *Brown*, *Days of Obligation*, and *Hunger of Memory*.

Rodriguez's works are written against the background of contemporary American history and the global movement of change, and the experimental narratives of this writer "reflect the impacts of events in Our America" (R. Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialects of Difference* 155). But Rodriguez's idea of America is one of an ethnocentric, homophobic and racist society – concrete and intolerably continuing. Postmodernism actively engages against "the suppression of historical, political, material, and social" (Hutcheon 178) themes; regarding literature, it allows for new conversations upon older works, where themes might previously have gone unexamined. Postmodernists recognize "those previously silenced ex-centrics" (Hutcheon 179) that now can be engaged, where previously they went undiagnosed and unrecognized inside the hegemonic society.

Rodriguez considers his books to be a kind of "pastoral... written in the tradition of that high, courtly genre" (*Hunger of Memory* 4) and illuminates the inequalities in the world to try to get society to move past those prejudices and into a more peaceful place where class and race no longer matter. This idea of Rodriguez's is not a re-imagining of the past, but a hopeful viewing of the future, a movement beyond that of postmodernism, into a new setting. Regarding the

writings of self for the postmodernist, Derrida argues, “if one takes the notion of writing in its usually accepted sense – which above all does not mean an innocent, primitive, or natural sense – one indeed must see it as a means of communication” (“Signature” 311). However, this idea of Derrida’s written words allows for both an expansion of communication (but also a deconstruction of what writing can do) and a violence that becomes involved with creating words to fit into a particular context, which mandate a removal of parts from the whole. The reader sees this happening in Rodriguez’s limiting characterization of himself in his book. The concept of writing “exceeds and comprehends that of language” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 8), but writing can be diluted and transformed in ways that speech cannot. Writing allows for the “soul and the body” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 18) to be placed upon the page, in a diminished capacity, thus creating a viewing of the identity of the writer that was previously hidden. Rodriguez’s writing about identity creates a troubling situation in his books, because while the reader never receives a complete viewing of the author, at many points early in his first book, we only receive a fragmented identity that is almost hidden in its entirety.

Following the discourse of writing, “one must ask whether the word or signifier ‘communication’ communicates a determined content, an identifiable meaning, a describable value” (Derrida, “Signature” 309), or if it only conceals the author’s real intention and agenda. As Derrida argues, “a context is never absolutely determinable” (“Signature” 310), and for Rodriguez, his intentions as a writer can only be guessed at. However, intention can only be gauged after reading all of his writing; to view only one of his works limits the critic too much and does not allow for the fullest possible engagement.

Lastly, in the postmodern age in which Rodriguez writes, the critic must be aware that while Rodriguez plays with language and the old idea of the Victorian Age, what he truly is

doing is deconstructing ideas that have been passed down through culture and is showing their origins, so that they can be shown for what they are - ideas that no longer have a bearing on present day society. As Lyotard argues, “modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ or reality, together with the invention of other realities” (77); the shattering of reality and ideology help to reconstitute the present age. What Lyotard argues is that being aware of this shattering of beliefs allows for a discovery of the past and alternate, multiple realities for the present. Postmodernism permits the critic a reading of a historical artifact that allows for a new interpretation. Rodriguez places his writing in this area, putting himself next to Lyotard’s belief about the recognition of a lack of one ‘definitive’ reality, and placing hope in a shattering of old ideologies that will allow for new realities.

Chapters

In my second chapter, I argue that Rodriguez in his first memoir, *Hunger of Memory*, foreshadows the confessional nature of social media. His ideas of identity and public versus private language are forerunners to contemporary social media and their presence in our society. On top of this, his ideas about public confession denote the changing landscape of confessional literature. Rodriguez argues that “There are things so deeply personal that they can only be revealed to strangers” (*Hunger of Memory* 200). By using social media, we search for intimacy in the public realm. I use his ideas to express the confessional nature of social media.

In my third chapter, I argue that while Rodriguez creates a confessional piece of writing, in the end he doesn’t make the confession. Rodriguez alludes to his homosexuality, he drops hints about it, he writes around it in extremely intimate ways, and we’re intelligent enough to read between the lines, but he never comes out and says it. If Rodriguez’s memoirs are in fact

confessional literature, in the sense of Dennis Foster's definition – the author's writing is “a personal sense of sin, of alienation” (Foster 14) which creates literature that “has inescapable social, political, religious implications” (Foster 14) – then Rodriguez writes for the possibility of attaining atonement only through the elusive medium of his narrative. While confessional literature “provides a form for exploring the motives for narrative” (Foster 2), it is clear that in Rodriguez's works it is both a model for communication, and yet it is exploited by him because it provides room for evasion.

Chapter 4 argues that we are all brown, impure and that we are all sinners in the eyes of Richard Rodriguez. Throughout this chapter, I examine the ways in which not only confession, but our interpretation of confession, defines our culture and ourselves. I also argue that the theatrics of confession allow for the misinterpretation, or the motivation of the sin and forces us to continue listening to the confession to find the “truth.” Foster notes, “A confession is both a challenge and a temptation to a rational reader” (5). A person witnessing a confession must relieve the sin of the confessor and thus takes an active role in the transgression.

Conclusion

In my assessment of Rodriguez, I argue throughout all my chapters upon a measure of irreconcilability between the private world of the Hispanic immigrant family and the public sphere that they are forced to inhabit because of his citizenship and education. This irreconcilability creates a drastic limiting of identity for the author because of these two areas Rodriguez is forced to navigate and creates his desire for confession. As Paige Schilt argues about this dichotomy, there is a “necessity of loss in the transition from one... to another” (424) that cannot be reconciled.

Hunger of Memory, *Days of Obligation*, and *Brown* are “predicated upon a constant transgression of the screen door that divides private and public life” (Lawtoo 230). Such a split is already implicit in the autobiography’s very first line: “I have taken Caliban’s advice,” writes Rodriguez, “I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle” (*Hunger of Memory* 3), Rodriguez’s “reference to *The Tempest* allows him to play on the ambiguity upon which his own narrative and self are construed” (Lawtoo 233), and allows for the construction of an identity that becomes more fully understood as his memoirs progress.

If we, as the reader, perceive that Rodriguez is a postmodern writer, than Richard Rorty’s assessment is quite applicable to the points about identity that are examined throughout this thesis: a postmodern writer “is not in the business of supplying himself and his fellows... with a method, a platform, or a rationale. He is just doing the same thing that all [postmodern writers] do – attempting autonomy. He is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own” (qtd. in Butler 118). The generic trait of the postmodern writer is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves, because they are aware of the lack of any foundation inside the language that they have sowed. However, this lack of concreteness pertaining to language does not negate the need for an examination of the writer’s attempts for identification, and, in the case of Rodriguez, confession. As Rodriguez notes, “There are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers” (*Hunger of Memory* 200), and these revelations of self are found in books of his private self as seen in the public sphere.

CHAPTER 2

SETTING UP THE CONFESSION: SOCIAL MEDIA AND RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

There is a lot of talk about confession In *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Rodriguez writes about several different forms and types of confession. He compares public and private confession; he discusses confession in a religious context and he even contrasts the different ways in which Catholics and certain Protestants confess. Why then, is a book about “the history of my schooling” (*Hunger of Memory* 4) so concerned with confession? Rodriguez writes, “I have come to understand better why works of literature – while never intimate, never individually addressed to the reader – are so often among the most personal statements we hear in our lives” (*Hunger of Memory* 203). Rodriguez sets out to talk about his education, but by peeling back the layers, he makes deeply personal statements of his life. These personal statements become his confession, and he realizes that his confession can only take place in the public realm.

Rodriguez talks in length about public and private identity in *Hunger of Memory* and his two subsequent memoirs. Particularly in *Hunger of Memory*, he writes about public confession and the need for a public identity. Rodriguez discusses the different ways in which people confess publicly (in newspapers and on television in 1982, the year *Hunger of Memory* was published, were two of the very few avenues open for people to make their public confessions). He also writes about the need to have a public identity that is different from the private identity. I find these ideas fascinating, especially since this was over twenty years before the advent of current social media, which we treat as a public confessional, and as a way to create our

identities. All of Rodriguez's ideas are still applicable and relevant, but now these ideas can be applied in more innovative and dynamic ways than when the book was first published in 1982.

In this chapter, I argue that contemporary social media is the newest form of confessional literature, the newest place people utilize to make their confessions and to create identities. I talk about several types of social media – Facebook, Twitter, blogs and how television has evolved from Phil Donahue to the Kardashians. I also argue how these public realms are used to create new public identities.

One of the most profound statements in *Hunger of Memory* is when Rodriguez says, “There are things so deeply personal that they can only be revealed to strangers” (*Hunger of Memory* 200). Why is this? We will gladly talk to a psychologist we randomly picked on doctors.com for hours about the terrible job our mothers did raising us (and pay a pretty penny for the privilege), but we don't dare confront our mothers (at least not verbally) with our reasons about why we feel she is responsible for that nervous tick we developed in middle school. We harbor all kinds of secrets – secret fears, secret resentments, secret dreams and wishes – from all kinds of people and for all kinds of reasons, and over time, holding these in take a toll on us, emotionally and physically. We have things in our lives we need to talk about, we need to get out in the open, but so often, the only people we trust with that information are those we aren't emotionally tied to¹. Why is it that the most deeply personal part of our lives can't be shared with those closest to us? Because emotional ties create drama; a stranger will take our confession at face value, without bias or judgment, and they will often see the confession as their own.

¹ I once went on a verbal discourse to my hair stylist about things I've never told to my own nearest and dearest. I caught myself and began apologizing, saying I didn't know what prompted me to start telling her those things. She coolly responded with, “Hair dressers and bartenders are the keepers of the world's secrets.”

Contemporary social media as we know it began in the early part of the 2000s with sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook. The popularity of these sites grew when the public was able to create their own pages, upload images and write about anything they wished, with precious little editing from the site administrators². Then blogging happened. Sites like tumbler.com and blogspot.com sprouted up, giving anyone who wanted it a forum to write about anything they felt like writing about. Suddenly, everyone's an expert in something. Today there are hundreds of blogs where people write about cooking, about weight loss, about sex. They write about parenting, about the difficulties of being adjunct professors, about photography. And the most interesting thing about all this is that this is often where the real confession happens.

One of my personal favorite blogs is scarymommy.com. Its entire purpose is to dispel the myth that motherhood comes naturally. The best feature on this site is the Mommy Confessional. It is a place where real people (mostly moms) write down and confess their deepest secrets (mostly about parenting). It's fascinating to read. As a new mother, I often find myself nodding furiously, saying, "Yes! Me too! I sing the Shut Up song in soothing tones to my screaming baby too!" It feels so good to know I'm not alone. That I'm not the only one who sneaks in a glass of wine during naptime, and that there are scads of other women who wear maternity clothes well after their child hits their first birthday. And the best feeling is that we're all in the same boat – that none of us know what we're doing. But the real question is, if so many women feel this way, why do we have to go to online and make our confessions anonymously? Why don't we talk about these things at our play date groups, or with our mothers or our sisters or best friends who have kids?

² There is an entire blog titled STFU, Parents that is completely dedicated to the actual status updates and pictures of Facebook users that show and tell graphic depictions of the rather "messy" side of childbirth and parenting. The purpose of the blog is to discourage oversharing on social media sites.

Rodriguez writes, “From such an intimate one must sometimes escape to the company of strangers, to the liberation of the city, in order to form new versions of oneself” (*Hunger of Memory* 206). Here, Rodriguez is arguing that people seek out strangers because those who don’t know us lack the intimacy to judge us, and, even if they do admonish us, we don’t feel it as much among strangers than if we were judged by someone close to us. The irony in this is that telling secrets is itself a form of intimacy, and we actually create intimacy with the people we confess to. Desiring intimacy is a common need for us as humans. This need for intimacy is something Rodriguez is trying to gain with his readers through this piece of confessional literature. He writes, “I sat there and sensed for the very first time some possibility of fellowship between a reader and a writer, a communication, never *intimate* like that I heard spoken words at home convey, but one nonetheless *personal*” (*Hunger of Memory* 64). But a *personal* relationship goes hand in hand with the feeling of *intimacy*; there is connectivity between the two emotions, one just goes further into the spectrum of a relationship than the other, but there cannot be a sense of intimacy without first a sense of personal relationship. It is this continual search for Rodriguez that showcases a desire for a private self that all the while is open for the public to see.

Rodriguez says, “One can use *spoken* words to reveal one’s personal self to strangers. But *written* words heighten the feeling of privacy” (*Hunger of Memory* 204). Here, Rodriguez is saying that by writing out our confessions, we can have a sense of privacy we don’t have when we speak our confessions. This explains why we are so willing to blog about our lives. We still think of it as a diary, even though that diary is seen by hundreds, maybe thousands of people a day. We don’t actually get to *see* our audience, the way we would if we were to appear on television in a studio filled with people. Even talking to a newspaper reporter, knowing that our

secrets will be written and not projected onto satellites and then beamed back down to millions of flat screen TVs, but rather, quietly written on newsprint, where we can possibly pretend that no one will read it, maybe then we open up to that reporter and tell her everything about our terrible marriage.

When Rodriguez's father opened up the newspaper, and wondered how a woman could share the personal details of her failing marriage in such a public way (*Hunger of Memory* 200), what would he have thought about the things we share now? And the instant ways in which we share them? There isn't anyone to stop us anymore. No editors to make us sound more intelligent, less stupid; no one redirecting our writing, telling us less of this and more of that; not even a warning message flashing across our screens shouting, "Are you SURE you want to send this?" We make our confession, we press send, and then we justify our actions by acknowledging the fact that other people have said and done worse things.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez explains this phenomenon of being able to talk to the public about our personal lives. His argument is that we do it because we can do it. We blog because blogs exist, we tweet our daily schedules because we know how to use Twitter, and we send in postcards that are covered and smeared in our deepest, darkest secrets because there is an art movement out there called Postsecret.com. Rodriguez writes about how there is a certain confidence associated with writing about and confessing our lives:

Today I *can* address an anonymous reader. And this seems important to say. Somehow the inclination to write about my private life in public is related to the ability to do so. It is not enough to say that my mother and father do not want to write their autobiographies. It needs also to be said that they are unable to write to a public reader. They lack the skill. Though both of them can write in Spanish and English, they write in a hesitant

manner. Their syntax is uncertain. Their vocabulary limited. They write well enough to communicate “news” to relatives in letters. And they can handle written transactions in institutional America. But the man who sits in his chair so many hours, and the woman at the ironing board – “keeping busy because I don’t want to get old”- will never be able to believe that any description of their personal lives could be understood by a stranger far from home. (*Hunger of Memory* 205)

Here, Rodriguez argues that there is a certain style to writing to the public. That one requires, not necessarily a decent vocabulary, but the confidence that what one has to say is important. He is saying that since his parents don’t see their lives as important, as having meaning, then no else can see that either. And that’s true. It does take a certain narcissistic quality to be able to say, “People are interested in my life. People want to see pictures of my children and my vacations and read the fascinating insights I bring to politics.” When Friendster and MySpace first came out, I remember being fascinated by it. I was in awe of people putting their lives out in the open, out in the untested waters of cyberspace. It was extraordinary. But it was almost voyeuristic. And really, isn’t that what being a witness to a confession is? Isn’t that why we enjoy it? Dennis Foster writes, “Desire makes sense only if one can imagine that some other exists who already has the desirable thing, and who might therefore provide the desiring subject with what he needs” (9). We won’t watch something we don’t desire, if we don’t want to experience it or relive it³.

I think this is what is so appealing about confessional literature, in whatever form it takes. It is not only helpful for the confessor, but also for the reader. The reader identifies – yes! I do that too! I feel that too! Even when we are witnessing a “bad” confession - someone tells us

³ This idea is discussed further in Chapter 3.

something that makes us uncomfortable – we can still identify with it. It’s still about connecting with someone when we say, “At least we’re not *those* people. At least I don’t do *that*.” Reality TV - *Real Housewives*, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *The Kardashians* – these things we watch for the train wrecks. The arguing, the bickering adds drama to our lives. These people aren’t just airing their laundry publicly – they are flaunting qualities that are flat-out unlikeable. Why do they do this? And why do we watch it? They even have one-on-one camera time that is called, “The Confessional,” in which they talk about the other contestants/cast mates and their feelings about the show and whatever else they want to confess.

In thirty years, our species has evolved from detailing extramarital affairs on a talk show, to actually participating in them on television. And yet, we, the public, want more. There are more reality TV shows on the air now than there are traditional sitcoms, and more reality shows are added each year. It seems the public can’t get enough. And there are other public confessions on TV. Rodriguez talks about the Catholic confession. The ritual of confessing. He writes, “Not once in all the years of my Catholic schooling did I hear a classmate or teacher make a public confession. (‘Public’ confessions were whispered through darkness to the shadow of a priest sworn to secrecy)” (*Hunger of Memory* 103). The Catholic Church is very quiet in its worship, in its confession; it is very private, not at all public. He compares this to the loud and frenzied Christian evangelical worshipping he saw on television:

On Sunday afternoons, for a guilty few minutes, I’d watch an Oral Roberts prayer meeting on television. Members of the congregation made public confessions of sin, while people off camera shouted, ‘Hallelujah, sister! Hallelujah, brother, preach it!’ (*Hunger of Memory* 103)

Yes, even our church services get this treatment. Are we watching, sneaking in a few minutes, to learn how to improve our relationship with God? Or are we watching because we want to see the spectacle? And if a leader of one of these televangelical churches should fall from grace, where else but on television, not to a reporter, not to a journalist in a small, quiet office, but standing in front of thousands of souls and making sure that image gets pinged from the heavens back down to millions of living rooms on planet Earth, would he make public confessions of sin⁴?

Jeffery Louis Decker wrote in his review of *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, “Any consideration of Rodriguez must address the way in which he deploys the private/public opposition, a binary which structures nearly all his work” (“Mr. Secrets” 125). Indeed, Rodriguez is very careful to make the distinction between public and private identity very clear in all his memoirs. Decker also goes on to say, “Rodriguez privileges the public over the private, associating the former with American society, the latter with the immigrant home” (“Mr. Secrets” 125). Identity is wrapped up in our public lives. No one can really see us when we are all alone in our homes. No one can see what goes on in our lives behind the scenes, so in this sense, this is our private identity. And most of us do have a private identity that is different than the one we bring out to the public. It may even be our true selves. Even so, the identity that is public, the one we share with the world, does have great importance on our lives and shapes who we become. Rodriguez writes:

Here is my most real life. My book is necessarily political, in the conventional sense, for public issues – editorials and ballot stubs, petitions and placards, faceless formulations of greater and lesser minds – have bisected my life and changed its course. And, in some

⁴ The Christian televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart, made a very tearful, very public, and very famous confession of adultery. Indeed, the March 1988 issue of *People Magazine* covered the story, saying, “Swaggart’s televised confession last week was the most tortured public display of contrition in recent memory” (Kaufman 35).

broad sense, my writing is political because it concerns my movement away from the company of family into the city. This was my coming of age: I became a man by becoming a public man. (*Hunger of Memory* 5-6)

Here, Rodriguez is saying that the reason our public identities are important is because of the influence surrounding our public identities. The interesting thing here is that the influence comes from not just what we put out in the public, but it actually has more to do with how the public responds to what we put out there. Writing and sharing online offers a great place for just this thing to occur.

Rodriguez, because of the removal of his family, attempts to create his own identity through his writing. While no man is an island, what Rodriguez hopes to accomplish is to take away the “nodal points” (Lyotard 15) where by separating himself, he creates a new Rodriguez. Yet language is too confining and limiting; one cannot make an entire being out of such constricting material. In writing, aspects of a person are left off the page. As Lyotard states, while a “self” does not amount to much, “no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before... a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits” (15). By removing these “nodal points,” which in this case is any connection to his family, Rodriguez removes himself from the fabric that helps to establish his stable identity, leaving instead a fabricated one that cannot be maintained through his writing. We see the same thing happening in social media today.

Being online gives us identity. It gives us a space to define ourselves. By writing a blog about photography, we become the experts. We give advice. We have a photography blog that people visit and read, therefore, we are photographers. We don’t even have to actually have any working knowledge of photography, we just have to act like we do. That’s another thing about

social media - it can give us multiple identities⁵. Derrida writes, “The concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language” (*Of Grammatology* 8), but writing can be diluted, transformed in ways that speech cannot, which is what makes having a public identity through social media, through *writing* so accessible, even desirable. The lives we live on Facebook, on Twitter and on Tumblr are what we choose to live and how the public reacts to them defines those lives. Going further, Rodriguez says that having a public identity is what makes us accepted in our culture. Speaking of his parents, Rodriguez says, “They lack a public identity. They remain profoundly alien” (*Hunger of Memory* 149). He is saying that because his parents don’t participate in having public identity, they will be never be accepted by society; they will forever remain the Other.

Rodriguez’s ideas about public confession and public identity, as he laid them out in *Hunger of Memory*, was really a precursor to the days we live in now. Our social media has given birth to a new form of confessional literature, and this new form, for all of its pros and cons, is inclusive – anyone can participate. And they do participate. We see virtual confessionals everywhere in Facebook status updates, and Twitter feeds. We witness confessions on blogs and still on television.

Even Rodriguez’s ideas about public identity were ahead of its time. Now with social media, the public reaction is immediate – we can see instantly the impact our confession had on the public through comments and discussions about it on other social media sites⁶. In mere moments, we can have our public identities acknowledged. Rodriguez’s father reads a

⁵ “Catfish” is a term used to describe a person who is a completely different person entirely online (on Facebook, a blog) than they are in real life. A catfish can portray themselves to be a different sex, a different age, a different profession and income level than they currently are in real life. It is interesting to note that since this is such a frequent occurrence, a term had to be invented for it.

⁶ Hash tags keep up with who is talking about what.

newspaper, and wonders how a woman can talk about intimate details of her life to strangers.

Rodriguez knew it was because she could obtain the intimacy from the public that she lacked in her private life, and because of the public's reaction to her confession, it would ultimately give her a new public identity.

CHAPTER 3

THE ANTI-CONFESSION: RICHARD RODRIQUEZ AND LATE VICTORIANS

In the last chapter, I discussed the desire we have as humans to confess, to share our lives with others and the need to do that publicly. Rodriguez was decades ahead of his time in discussing just how public our private lives were becoming and how hundreds of millions of people would actively participate in public confession. Indeed, confessional literature found a new genre in social media, and, as we saw in the previous chapter, anybody can participate. Gone are the days of needing a literary agent to get a memoir published (and, unfortunately, an editor to get rid of the garbage); they can be and are published on blogs every day and by all kinds of different people.

However, there are still some of us willing to hold back, to not share everything about our lives, to keep a part of us to ourselves. Sometimes we do this purposely; we make the conscious decision to not talk about some part of our lives. Sometimes we don't want to share, but under circumstances beyond our control, it's shared for us, so we have no choice but to talk about it openly. Still, at other times, we want to talk about it, we want to share it, we have a need to discuss it, but we simply don't. Maybe we aren't ready to talk about it; maybe we decide it will hurt others too much, or that speaking about it will hurt us in the end.

At the end of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez states that, "There are things so deeply personal that they can only be revealed to strangers" (*Hunger of Memory* 200), yet in his first book, Rodriguez makes only a partial confession, writing about his family and culture and education and the consequences of being the "scholarship boy" (*Hunger of Memory* 4), but he completely skips over his sexuality. Interestingly, what Rodriguez is doing in *Hunger of Memory* is setting the stage. He's giving us a grand tour of the confessional, and he reiterates to us how

our private lives are becoming public and our need to confess in the public sphere is something we all share (*Hunger of Memory* 206). However, in his second book, *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez alludes to his homosexuality, he drops hints about it, he writes of being surrounded by it in an extremely intimate way, and we're intelligent enough to read between the lines, as it were. But he never comes out and says it. He doesn't make the confession. Inside of *Days of Obligation*, there is the anti-confessional piece that is pinpointed in the chapter, "Late Victorians." Rodriguez attempts to give his confession, but he doesn't actually do it. In this chapter, I argue that Rodriguez's second memoir, *Days of Obligation*, particularly his chapter, "Late Victorians" is an anti-confession, meaning that though he confesses some things, he doesn't reveal all, creating an unfinished declaration of his secrets. I also argue that, among the many reasons for his holding back, the main reason he doesn't give his readers a full confession is because that, despite Rodriguez's claims to live his life in the public sphere, his parent's, especially his mother's, distrust of the public confession plays upon his decision to leave his confession unfinished.

A complaint I have heard about Rodriguez's writing is that he is obscure, conflicted. Elizabeth Ferszt writes, "Rodriguez is a sensitive soul hidden behind a prickly structure of purposeful confusion. Indeed, the wall of conundrum that Rodriguez builds around his *ethos* is likely more the work of defensive strategizing than of true ideological contradiction" (443). And this is true. Rodriguez does at times contradict his own writing, his own ideas in a way that feels he is purposefully trying to confuse his readers, to lead them astray. Derrida notes, "A context is never absolutely determinable" ("Signature" 310), meaning, we can never truly know anyone's agenda, anyone's motivation because our words are put into a context, which is always subject to interpretation. This is the limiting nature of language. The idea of written words by Derrida

becomes both an expansion of communication and also a deconstruction of what writing can do and the violence involved with creating words to fit into a particular context, creating meaning where there was none previously.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez writes of confessing and how the confession doesn't count if it isn't public (*Hunger of Memory* 203). Yet, nowhere in *Days of Obligation* does Rodriguez make a public confession about his homosexuality. Instead, he hides behind a veil of ambivalence – he talks about gay pride parades, but he doesn't talk about marching in one; he writes about friends who die of AIDS, but he never lets us in on specific relationships with them; he discusses AIDS activism, but only from his bedroom window, never from the street. He writes of homosexuality as something he has intimate knowledge of, but not as something he himself participates in. Rodriguez is merely a casual observer, a witness, seeing things from faraway, never up close and personal and certainly not dirtying his hands with it. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what side he is cheering on, what point he is rallying. He says he is writing a confessional piece of writing, but where is it? Where is his concrete confession?

But this is not a fair complaint. To do Rodriguez justice, we must first admit that we as a society, as humans, are terribly conflicted. Our Facebook newsfeeds are jammed with protests against our lessened privacy controls, yet, we continue to put it all out there – pictures, videos, stories – our lives laid bare to perfect strangers. And we do it by choice. We know that people are watching us, and we want them to. On an intellectual level, we know about stranger danger and about the ramifications of embarrassing overshare and about that picture our friend posted of us at that party and it may not bode well for us if an employer saw it. But we continue on. We don't cancel our Facebook accounts; we don't take down pictures or posts. And we will never stop. We will never stop talking, stop sharing, or stop posting pictures of ourselves in

compromising situations. Why is this? Because we have an innate drive to talk, to share, to give meaning to our existence. If the point of confession is to give meaning to our existence, then why doesn't Rodriguez come out with coming out? He gave us a setup in *Hunger of Memory*. George Newtown writes, "His story begins in *Hunger of Memory* with rehearsing, in a language of self-protective ambiguity, the painful reason for remaining closeted" (294). He created his public forum; he is poised to make his statement and his readers are listening, yet he doesn't make his confession. Why? Under what circumstances do we shun the confession, clam up during the discussion, give a small, "Nothing," when a concerned friend genuinely asks us what is bothering us? Derrida wrote, "What cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written" (*Post Card* 194). Writing gives us the power to say things that cannot physically be said. Yet, what if we cannot even tell it in writing because we are too ashamed to say the answer?

We may be Lady Gaga in our living rooms with a hairbrush, but we wouldn't dare sign our names to a karaoke sign up sheet at the local bar. Why is this? It's because we are afraid of what people will say about our performance. It opens us up to criticism, to bullies. *Hunger of Memory* was published in 1982. At the time of its writing, homosexuality was still very much a "fringe" lifestyle. A terrifying new disease with a 100% death arrived in US hospitals primarily among young gay men, and the befuddled medical community named it GRID⁷. This derailed the gay pride movement of the 1970s of which Rodriguez wrote in *Days of Obligation*, "On a Sunday, in summer, ten years ago, private lives were becoming public" (Rodriguez 26). So much for warm, lazy, carefree days. Gays had a new agenda: activism. Gay pride made way for gay rights. No one had time to publicly come out; they were busy trying to get the public, the medical and scientific communities to take them and their situation seriously.

⁷ Gay-Related Immune Deficiency was changed to AIDS a year later.

Days of Obligation was published a full decade later, in 1992, and unfortunately, the state of gay relations in this country had not improved much. While the gay movement was receiving attention, homosexuality still hid in the shadows in many parts of the country and in smaller cities and suburbs, it certainly didn't flaunt itself in the daylight. To make matters worse, the AIDS epidemic was still in full swing. Ten years later, the public was still quite ignorant about AIDS and HIV, and the gay community was bearing the brunt of its anger. Because of this, many gay celebrities and public figures were still hiding their sexuality, and in some cases, the public only found out after an AIDS diagnosis. American singer, Freddie Mercury, and the American actors, Anthony Perkins and Robert Reed (who was known for playing Mike Brady on *The Brady Bunch*) all died of AIDS related complications within a year of each other; their sexuality had been, up to that point, unknown to the public. To come out at that time still meant alienation. It meant being unfairly held responsible for an epidemic. To face those harshest critics took great courage. To be openly gay in the late 1980s, early 1990s, was, difficult to say the least. Even today, in the 21st century, we still see public figures and celebrities who don't come out until they (or their publicists) can't stop the rumors⁸.

Dennis Foster tells us, "Confession may provide a form for exploring the motives for narrative. It seems clearly to be based on a model of communication, and yet it has been exploited by writers because it provides room for evasion" (2). If Foster is telling us that Rodriguez's entire purpose for writing a confession is to simply avoid the topic of his sexuality, then it is quite possible that Rodriguez is actually using the confession model to deflect instead

⁸ The most recent coming out has been fiercely private American actress, Jodie Foster. She made her public confession while accepting a Golden Globe for lifetime achievement in 2013. Most people already knew the status of her sexuality, but it was the first time she said it in public. Yet, her confession was not an actual confession. She, too, did not officially "come out," and so gave an anti-confession. A year earlier, American journalist Anderson Cooper publicly announced his sexuality, after years of deflecting questions about his personal life and speculation from the press.

of highlight. But why would he want to deflect? It is not his sexuality that Rodriguez is ashamed of, although it is becoming increasingly more difficult to remember what it was like for a person to be gay before gay went mainstream. His mother had a history of chastising him for airing family affairs publicly (*Hunger of Memory* 192). And his father told him he didn't understand why a woman would want to discuss details of her private life in a newspaper article (*Hunger of Memory* 200). Part of it could be that it isn't his sexuality Rodriguez is ashamed of – it's the confession itself. Rodriguez is conflicted, not necessarily by his own ideas, but by how his confession will affect others. And a confession always affects others.

Part of confessing is the relief of burden. "Get it off your chest," says the detective to the suspect. We genuinely believe that the act of telling someone else will have a physical effect on us; it will make us lighter, make us happier. But in many circumstances, we are simply transferring the burden of a secret onto another person. We confess infidelity to spouses, not out of loyalty, but out of a completely selfish desire to lift guilt. Unfortunately, the cuckolded spouse is forced to deal with the aftermath of the confession and all consequential actions are now on their shoulders – do they stay and forgive or punish and leave? The adulterer neatly removes themselves from the situation and simply surrenders the fate of the marriage. Foster writes:

A confession is both a challenge and a temptation to a rational reader....The confessing sinner is thus both penitent and tempter. Confessors, through the reenactment of sin, sins again, even to the point of drawing the listener into interpretations that inevitably have their own strayings. (5-17)

This is saying that by telling their sins, the sinner both burdens another with their confession and also allows them to take part in their sinful activities⁹. That by confessing, we give others our sins, and allow them to take part in our activities.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez speaks quite candidly about his family. His mother certainly wasn't perfect. She once carelessly chastised him for his looks at a public swimming pool, and he carried the feelings of ugliness with him throughout his lifetime (*Hunger of Memory* 133). But his parents were quiet people, private people. About his mother, he writes, "'Write about something else in the future. Our family life is private.' And besides: 'Why do you need to tell the *gringos* about how "divided" you feel from the family?'" (*Hunger of Memory* 189). To his mother, the *gringos* symbolize the public and she doesn't understand that it is in the public that Rodriguez feels intimate enough with to confess to.

Of those matters too jaggedly personal to reveal to intimates, my parents will never speak. And that seems to me an extraordinary oppression. The unspoken may well up within my mother and cause her to sigh. But beyond that, nothing is heard. There is no one she can address. Words never form. Silence remains to repress them. She remains quiet. My father in his chair remains quiet. (*Hunger of Memory* 201)

Here we have two fiercely private people. They value privacy and intimacy, and they would never dream of telling anyone outside their tiny circle the private details of their lives. It is easy to see why they can't imagine why their son (and possibly the rest of their children; certainly their grandchildren) would want to talk about the private, intimate details of their lives with strangers. The interesting part is that their children and grandchildren are most likely telling

⁹ This idea is further expanded in Chapter 4.

more about their lives to the public, than they are to the parents (grandparents). Rodriguez's problem is that his confession requires an audience.

And these private people are quite aware of the success of their son's public voice. As Rodriguez notes, his writing is very public and his mother lets him know it:

The loneliness I have felt many mornings, however, has not made me forget that I am engaged in a highly public activity. I sit here in silence writing this small volume of words, and it seems to me the most public thing I ever have done. My mother's letter has served to remind me: I am making my personal life public. Probably I will never try to explain my motives to my mother and father. My mother's question will go unanswered to her face. Like everything else on these pages, my reasons for writing will be revealed instead to public readers I expect never to meet. (*Hunger of Memory* 191)

Here, Rodriguez knows that his words are written for the public, but will be read in private. He knows his words will have impact on his mother through intertextuality. Another, perhaps a neighbor or a woman at the library, will share his secrets with her. His public language will insert itself into his mother's private sphere and she will carry his confession.

We have a desire to be seen, to be noticed, but once we become aware that we are being watched, we tend to reel our performance in, just a bit. Derrida argues, "The mere presence of a spectator, then, is a violation" (*Of Grammatology* 113). The spectator violates us because they hold our performance, our writings, our confessions, in their hands, and they have the power to tell us we are wrong, we are stupid, that our confession makes us a bad person. No one wants to be told they are a bad person, even if they feel they are. To have our worst fears confirmed, to be told that we are disgusting, that we've disgraced ourselves and those we love, is for many of us

our worst fear. For Rodriguez to come out completely in 1992 and tell America's corn fed Heartland and invite all of them to hear his confession would have been doing the impossible.

One of the most poignant (and telling) scenes in *Hunger of Memory* happens near the end of the book, when his when his mother casually asks Rodriguez what he's been up to during one of his visits home. "What's new with you?" My mother looks up from her ironing to ask me. (In recent years she has taken to calling me Mr. Secrets, because I tell her so little about my work in San Francisco – the book she must suspect I am writing.) "Nothing much," I respond" (*Hunger of Memory* 202). So why does someone nicknamed Mr. Secrets set out to write a confessional piece of literature in the first place? Because he is searching for identity, and the best place to find it is to create it in the public.

It is no secret that psychologists have high rates of depression¹⁰. Being the keeper of so many secrets taxes the soul. But these are the same people who champion "talking it out." They tell us that holding in our feelings is dangerous and that we need to deal with our problems head-on. Rodriguez desperately wants to do this. He created this space in which he could confess his heart out. But he knew there would be a price. And that price would be paid by his family. And in the end, he couldn't do it. He could not burden her with his public secret. He couldn't let his father know that he knew why people talked about their lives in a newspaper article. It wasn't about Rodriguez, or his readers. In the end, it was about not encumbering his family. Rodriguez tells us about his parents, "I was very much the son of parents who regarded the most innocuous piece of information about the family to be secret. Although I had, by that time, grown easy in public, I felt that my family life was strictly private, not to be revealed to unfamiliar ears or eyes" (*Hunger of Memory* 194). Rodriguez has a strong background of keeping secrets. Clearly, his

¹⁰ An article in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* states that therapists, "...have significant rates of distress and impairment" (O'Connor 345).

family's fierce need to protect their privacy rubbed off on him in some way. Even though he says he's "grown easy in the public," there are still some issues Rodriguez can't quite reconcile to the public. A major part of staying closeted is keeping the family life private.

In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez states, "To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets within secrets. In no other place are those secrets more closely guarded than with the family home. The grammar of the gay city borrows metaphors from the nineteenth-century house. 'Coming out of the closet' is predicated upon family laundry, dirty linens, skeletons" (*Days of Obligation* 30). Notice how Rodriguez carefully chooses not to use the word, "I" in that sentence. He doesn't say, "Growing up homosexual, I had to live with secrets." Instead, his language is generalized; he's speaking of homosexuality in broad terms, and he very craftily removes himself from the very situation he speaks so intimately of. Rodriguez fully believes that to make a public statement about his sexuality is essentially airing the dirty laundry his mother told him to keep in the home. He is clearly not afraid to write about things his mother disapproves of – his family life, his home, his parents. Rodriguez may have let out a secret or two in his life, but to publicly declare his sexuality with his family in the audience, his parents as spectators, his mother waiting to hear what he has to say, Rodriguez has no choice but to pull back and not make his confession.

To tell or not to tell. Do we keep a secret, and risk hurting ourselves or do we confess and risk hurting others? This is the conflict that plagues Rodriguez. This is why he seems to contradict himself when he says he's writing a piece of confession, but then falls short of actually confessing. As stated earlier, "a context is never absolutely determinable" (Derrida, "Signature" 310). Intentions can only be guessed at, regarding Rodriguez's lack of confession. Yet what we do see is a man about to take the final step off the cliff, to plummet into the

unknown, but then stepping back. Like the child who is trying to tell a mother they broke her vase and talks about everything but the broken vase, Rodriguez is unable to talk about the thing that he set the stage to talk about, in the way he wanted to talk about it. But it's there. His sexuality is there among his gay pride parades and his Painted Ladies and his friends that he lost in the early days of AIDS. It doesn't take much to see the shards of glass on the floor, but like that child, Rodriguez simply cannot tell his confession.

CHAPTER 4

SINS OF OUR FATHERS: WHY WE NEED TO CONFESS

Brown: The Last Discovery of America, is the final book in Richard Rodriguez's memoir trilogy. *Brown* is different and almost strange in the way that it is less a literary work and more a social commentary on race in contemporary American society. I say it is almost strange because it almost doesn't fit in with Rodriguez's first two books. In *Hunger of Memory* and *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez writes about education and culture, respectively, and he talks about these issues in a very personal, private way. *Brown*, however, takes on the public and society as a whole. I say it almost doesn't fit because even though it is a very different work, and the themes are, in fact, very different, what happens in the final book is that the evolution of his ideas come down to a very important, very central idea in *Brown* – that we are all brown, we are all impure, and we are all in need of confession. In the first few pages of his book, Rodriguez writes, "I am dirty, all right. In Latin America, what makes me brown is that I am made of the conquistador and the Indian. My brown is a reminder of conflict. And of reconciliation" (*Brown* xii). This is a precursor to his point that no one has pure blood – or a pure culture, or a pure heritage – and that the people who now make up the human race are the product of wars, invasions and *immorality*. It is because of this immorality, this impurity, that we are compelled to confess and to hear the confessions of others. *Brown*, by Rodriguez's definition, means we have sin in our blood, and it is because of this sin that Rodriguez argues for our desire of confession. *Brown* is no longer only about Rodriguez's confession; instead, it is about everyone's confession, everyone's impurity.

In the last chapter, I looked at how *Days of Obligation* was an anti-confession. Here, I examine how in *Brown*, Rodriguez argues that we all have guilt due to the fact that we're impure

and because of this, we have a desire to confess. In this chapter, I argue that Rodriguez states that our society is a mixture of cultures, languages and ideas that had origins in immorality (which makes us sinners), and because of this, we become unwilling confessors and witnesses to confession by the very nature of our being tarnished. I argue that hearing and interpreting confession tells us about our culture and ourselves. And I argue that by hearing and interpreting confession, we become part of another's sin.

Throughout *Brown*, Rodriguez talks about how our society has an obsession with labels – he's black; she's white; he's educated; he's working-class; she's Hispanic; they're Asian. We're also very careful to use the "correct" label¹¹. We have a compulsion to keep things separate (fifty years after the end of segregation), to keep them unblended and pure. Rodriguez writes about how the books in our libraries are categorized by the color and/or sexual orientation of the author. He writes:

There is no shelf for bitterness. No shelf for redemption. The professor of Romance languages at Dresden, a convert to Protestantism, was tortured by the Nazis as a Jew — only that — a Jew. His book, published sixty years after the events it recounts, is shelved in my neighborhood bookstore as "Judaica." There is no shelf for irony. (*Brown* 11-12)

The bookstore is a microcosm for our society. We give the same treatment to people as we do to our books. We label them. We separate them by color, not by their experiences, not by their stories. We keep them unblended, segregated, pure.

Rodriguez writes *Brown* in response to this. He creates the term, "brown" to say we need to ditch the ridiculous labels and accept the fact that nothing, including our blood, is pure.

¹¹ For the record, "white" and "black" are not the "correct" labels. Neither is "Hispanic", but the only way to describe a person as "Latino" or "Chicano" or "Cuban" or "Guatemalan" would be to flat out ask them what their heritage is, and even that is not necessarily a correct thing to do. We create uncomfortable situations and social anxieties because of our profound need to label people.

For Rodriguez, brown is literally the color of impurity. It's the color we get when we mix up all the colors in our 64-count Crayola Crayon box. But it's more than race, and it doesn't necessarily have to do with the color of our skins. It's the coming together of ideas and cultures and beliefs. This is an exciting concept because it means our stories, not our skin, not our blood, is what matters. And it fuses us together. We no longer have to be alone on the shelves; we're free to mingle with books in other sections. Rodriguez argues that, "brown marks a reunion of peoples, an end to ancient wanderings. Rival cultures and creeds conspire with Spring to create children of a beauty, perhaps of a harmony, previously unknown. Or long forgotten" (*Brown xi*). When we do mix and mingle with other cultures and societies, we create new ideas and meaning. Ideologies are shed; this is a frightening thought and could very well be one of the reasons our society insists on keeping its labels: so that we can define and describe ourselves in comparison to others. In fact, Rodriguez writes:

...the terrorist and the skinhead dream in solitude of purity and of the straight line because they fear a future that does not isolate them. In a brown future, the most dangerous actor might likely be the cosmopolite conversant in alternate currents, literatures, computer programs. The cosmopolite may come to hate his brownness, his facility, his distinction, his mixture; the cosmopolite may yearn for a thorough religion, ideology, or tribe. (*Brown xi*)

Rodriguez is pointing out that there will be those who rally for separateness, who will see mingling as a bad thing because of a desire for their own unadulterated ideas and meanings and who, because of that, becomes a threat to our brown society.

It's no surprise that Rodriguez would address this idea so boldly. Isabel Durán describes, Rodriguez as:

...neither black nor white; neither man nor woman sexually; neither Mexican nor American ethnically, so he defines himself as brown, and places at the core of the book his idea that 'the future is brown' (*B* 35) since Hispanics are browning America that traditionally has chosen to describe itself as black-and-white (*B* xii). (Durán, "The Personal Essay as Autobiography: A Gender and Genre Approach" 59)

Only a person as conflicted as Rodriguez could see the immediate benefit of the removing of our precious labels, and could even imagine a future without them. Rodriguez states, "I write about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America" (*Brown* xi). In order for our society to make the shift from black-and-white to brown, we have to start talking about race. We label like crazy, but we don't talk about the labels. Perhaps it's because we are afraid of acknowledging the fact that we are already brown, we are already impure, and that our labels are meaningless.

So if we are impure, if we are brown, if our ideas (and other parts) have been mingling with other ideas (and other parts) for centuries, then we have to accept the fact that we are tainted, tarnished. And that, maybe, we were never meant to be pure. Rodriguez writes, "God so loved the world that the Word became incarnate, condescended to mortal clay. God became brown. True God and true man" (*Brown* 207). Here, Rodriguez argues that we were already brown when Jesus cast off his heavenly white robe to get muddy with the mortals. Even God wanted to be brown. But I think this is the problem: if we are tainted, tarnished, then we must sense it and we must sense that we are dissatisfied by the constraints, the borders, and the shelves society creates for us. Rodriguez notes:

We feel surrounded, that's the thing. Our borders do not hold. National borders do not hold. Ethnic borders. Religious borders. Aesthetic borders, certainly. Sexual borders.

Allergenic borders. We live in the ‘Age of Diversity,’ in a city of diversity... so we see what we do not necessarily choose to see: People listening according to internal weathers.

We hear what we do not want to hear: Confessions we refuse to absolve. (*Brown* 213)

Because we live within the constraints of man-made borders, we end up hearing and seeing things we never intended. We hear others’ discontent, and eventually, it becomes our discontent. We can’t forgive a confession that is our own; we cannot give ourselves absolution; we cannot be our own confessor nor can we forgive ourselves. All of these roles can only be played by another.

We confess and witness confession by the very nature of our being tarnished. We are tarnished because our brown origins were most likely the result of immoral behavior. How many white Americans proudly profess to some First American heritage? Of those who do, how many stop to think how that Cherokee or Sioux or Comanche blood came about? As much as Disney wants us to believe otherwise, a good long look at history tells us that Pocahontas didn’t exactly willingly go to Captain Smith¹². An entire bloodline is now tainted with her unwillingness. That is why we are impure. That is the sin we need to confess.

The good news is that this impurity of sin serves to connect us. It even makes us righteous. In an article Rodriguez wrote, he said, “I had always assumed saints are tainted, as most of us are tainted. Graham Greene taught me that holiness must dwell in a tarnished temple. (There is no other kind)” (“Atheism” 300). Rodriguez believes that our impurity itself makes us godly, makes us qualified to hear and make confessions. If God is brown, then certainly our tarnished, even corrupt, bodies and souls can understand that confession is an occasion for explanation; that confession represents the most accurate cross section of our culture.

¹² According to legend, Pocahontas was held captive for a year by the British until John Rolfe promised her freedom for marriage. She went to England as Rebecca Rolfe.

In Chapter 2, I talked about reality TV being a new form of confessional literature. The number of people willing to allow a camera crew into their lives and broadcast their most private moments to the entire world grows each year. We have programs following people: dating; getting married; raising an army of children. The title character, Alana “Honey Boo Boo” Thompson in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, an off-shoot of the tantrum-filled *Toddlers and Tiaras*, was featured among *Barbara Walters’s 10 Most Fascinating People of 2012*. We’ve always been interested in confessional literature, so it’s no surprise that this form of confession (which satisfies our decreasing attention spans) is so wildly popular. Rodriguez writes, “What most matters is the soliloquy” (*Brown* 61). The soliloquy, the thing that matters most, is that which we don’t see out in the open – our fears, our motivations, our confessions. These TV shows are really the soliloquy – the confessional - of our culture, of our times.

Rodriguez says, “The soliloquy is an occasion for explanation. For putting one’s case before oneself in private (privacy is represented by direct address to the audience). Theatrical soliloquy achieves what private deliberation attempts, what prayer attempts, yearns for but can never seem to accomplish in life” (*Brown* 61-62). What draws us to tune into these TV shows week after week is we enjoy watching the confession. Reality TV, even blogging and other forms of social media provide a very good basis for the soliloquy. Soliloquies are theatrical, dramatic. They are the vehicle used to get into one’s most private thoughts, motivations, confessions. Confessional literature in all forms – even in, and I say especially in, social media - is really the soliloquy of our culture.

What I find so interesting about this idea, and why I believe this to be true is because reality TV and social media give us a chance to not only act as witness to another’s

confession, but to interpret it, as well. It is these two things that define not only the confessor, but also ourselves. Dennis Foster writes:

Confession is not an incidental narrative form within these institutions: it is a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture, where they step beyond reiteration of the stories and into interpretation. It represents an attempt to understand the terms and the limits by which the people are defined, both as they listen to the confessions of others and as they recount their own transgressions. (7)

Foster is saying that confession is the conversation of a culture. We don't just listen to a confession - we become active participants by interpreting a confession, and it's the interpretation that defines us. The thing about *Honey Boo Boo* is that it involves a blended family of a lower socioeconomic status. Some people interpret the family (and their confession) as an exploitation of the lower class. Others interpret the confession as amounting to nothing more than being a loving family. The only difference lies in the values and beliefs of the interpreter. Foster goes on to say, "The importance of confession, and of the language of fault in general, lies in its power to interpret" (16). We make sense of our culture through our interpretations of confessions of those around us, for better or for worse.

Rodriguez argues that our confessions mirror our society, and that it has always been this way. He notes that a "confession is constructed as we are constructed. The confessional box prefigures the American I" (*Brown* 205). Not only do our confessions tell us about our culture, but we are the product, by witnessing and, more importantly, interpreting, of confessions.

As I've discussed previously, confession can be theatrical; it is something of a performance, and we get to participate in the performance by acting as interpreters. A result of hearing and interpreting confession, as participants, is that we become part of the sin. The

reason we become part of the sin is because the only way we can interpret the confession is by mentally experiencing it. Foster says, “A confession is both a challenge and a temptation to a rational reader” (5). When we witness a confession, we see the sin as something we can relate to. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be able to take part in it, so this relation must take place. So if we relate to it, we are tempted by it. Foster goes on to say:

The confessing sinner is thus both penitent and tempter. Confession, through the reenactment of sin, sins again, even to the point of drawing the listener into interpretations that inevitably have their own strayings. To become involved with a confession is to experience oneself the alienation motivating the speaker, and thereby to be thrust onto confession’s long detour back to a primal state of innocence. (17)

Here, Foster reiterates the idea that witnessing and interpreting a confession makes us part of the sin. He says that in confessing, we relive the sin and in witnessing the confession, we are drawn into false interpretations of the confession by the confessor. While we use our own value and belief system to interpret confession, we are also subject to the reproduction of power, desire and guilt the confessor lays upon us (Foster 7); by our ability to relive the sin, we become a part of it.

In *Brown*, Rodriguez talks about our Puritanical distrust of theatrical performances. If confession is theatrics, then we, as a culture, are participating in all theatre stands for – creativity, interpretation and desire. He writes:

Theater was a rival to Creation, to the business of earning money and raising children and watering the lawn. Our parents warned us against ‘big ideas.’ Big ideas were not good for us. The theater would give us big ideas that were inaccessible to us in our real lives. (*Brown* 49-50)

The fear, then, is that theater will take away our wholesome ideologies and replace them with questions and experiences. This is what happens when we witness confession – we might see, or experience, something entirely new and different. Rodriguez goes on to say, “I only mean to suggest we live in a nation whose every other impulse is theatrical, but whose every other impulse is to insist upon ‘authenticity’” (*Brown* 67). Our culture is basically as conflicted as Rodriguez. We love the theater and performance and we can’t get enough of confession, but we also want those things to be “real.” Reality TV, as we all know, isn’t exactly “real.” We very much like to believe it is, and we pretend it is, but we know that storylines are planted, and situations are provoked by producers who get paid to make sure we keep watching.

Confession is also theatrical in nature. It often has the characteristics of drama and fantasy. We are drawn into the realm of make-believe because it is there that we find other worlds, other ideas. Foster writes:

The issue is not persuasion, for there is no urging of a position; it is seduction. Obligated to understand, the listener abandons his position as one who knows and consents to listen, and thereby he enters as one who knows and consents to listen, and thereby he enters the evasive discourse of the narrator, tracing a path that inevitably misses the encounter with truth. (4)

When we witness a confession, we are often lured by not only the confession, but by the confessor’s account of the transgression. And sometimes we are so persuaded by the confessor that our interpretations are wrong and we subject ourselves, willingly, to a false interpretation. So, not only do we incorrectly interpret, but then we are compelled to come back to the confession to get it right, and understand their motivation. By trying to understand their motivation, we take part in the sin, and relive it with them.

Rodriguez believes we are a culture obsessed with labels. He says that we like to keep our books, and our people, separated into neat categories and that we invent whole terminology for those groups we want to lump into one box. However, our belief in our purity, our unblendedness is comical in the fact that we have been mixing together since the beginning of time and there is nothing pure about any part of us or our culture. Rodriguez writes, “Brown is time” (*Brown* xii); given enough time, everything becomes impure.

It is through this impurity that we are able to participate in the theatrics of confession. We participate by interpreting the confession by putting our values and beliefs into the act of witnessing. Foster writes, “Each confession appears to contain an as yet unexpressed truth to be discovered by interpretation” (11). We, the readers, as the listener, give meaning to the confession that didn’t exist prior to our witnessing. Foster goes on to say:

It is denial that transforms the dialogue of confession into a genuine struggle for power.

Because we want to see ourselves as autonomous beings constituted independently of the words we speak, we fail to recognize the limits of our ability to control or possess our own language. To a great extent, our statements contain us, not we them. (13)

It is our interpretations of confession, not the confession itself that defines our culture, defines us. Our interpretations are formed by our values and beliefs, which then creates boundaries within our society. So while no (normal) person would desire to hear the confession of a molester, we may enjoy hearing about a fling between two co-workers. This is a very unifying thing to know we are all impure, that we are all sinners, that we are all open to wrong interpretations and false ideas. That we share a weakness for confessional literature, for Perez Hilton and trash TV. Rodriguez notes that, “the future is brown, is my thesis; is as brown as the

tarnished past” (*Brown* 35). If time and conflict and reconciliation are all brown, then the future can’t be anything except brown.

While some may believe that being tarnished is a bad thing, Rodriguez makes the case for seeing impurity as a unifying factor in society. The idea of sharing in the confession allows for the sharing of burden and guilt and it sees us coming together in the end through our understanding that we all sin, and are all sinners. But in this idea, we are also repenters.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE JUSTIFICATION FOR MY ARGUMENT

I have argued throughout this thesis that Rodriguez's writings are all created by a fragmentation of identity, which planted the seed for his eventual need for confession. Because of this, Rodriguez created a trilogy of memoirs as a desire to tell his sins and create an intimacy with the reader. All of this illuminates to the reader the fragmentation of self in his work. Yet, to truly understand him (as much as a reader can understand their subject inside of a piece of writing, or life for that matter), all three memoirs must be read jointly, because each reveal different aspects and nuances in the character that remained hidden in earlier writings. There once was a common belief that all the autobiographer must do to create their writing was to copy themselves onto the page, that no invention or artistic creation was necessary. This idea is obviously false; "just remember to write," the argument went; this nonsensical view, of course, has been proved totally wrong" (Durán, "Latino Autobiography" 91). The autobiographer is a creative artist, and the limitations of language, the slipperiness of memory, the difficulties of comprehending and recreating experience all become the very *subjects* of autobiography.

Rodriguez, like the novelist, tries to recapture time, "shape the shapeless, narrate an engaging story, try to transform an inner image into a picture-mirror of others, reconcile the particular and the universal, the idiosyncratic with the shared communal values, the historically verifiable with the imaginative" (Durán 91). Because of all of these facets that create the subject of the story, I feel justified in analyzing his works through a lens that is usually trained upon literature in my deconstruction of his ideas of language, desire for intimacy, and of all our sins inside of his memoir confessional.

“My book is necessarily political,” (*Hunger of Memory* 1) Richard Rodriguez states in the first chapter of his first autobiography. Indeed, the subjects of race, of labels and of seeking a public identity are all political in nature. Confession is political too in that it speaks about how we define our culture and ourselves. The politics of brown, of impurity are addressed as something of foreshadowing of our future.

Recently in an article on Chicano autobiography, Ramon Saldívar comments that “in relying upon the pastoral form,” (“Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography” 28) Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory* constructs an unvarying vision of public life, while “the purely private side of the individual is huge, abstract, schematized, and tends to produce archetypal images” (“Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography” 28). Ramòn Saldívar suggests that the “pastoral constructs an exclusive relationship between private (intimate, authentic) and public (mediated) selves, one which forecloses an understanding that ‘the “private” is always already a familial institution and a linguistic network that form a person’ (29)” (qtd. in Schilt 425). The private self that confesses in the public allows for an expansion of one’s understanding of identity and how to construct identities that are made of all multiple facets of a person. There are no universal truths and no set identities, only aspects of certain identities seen by others or recognized in one’s self. To try to classify a person by a few pieces of history or genetic make-up trivializes what makes us human: our individuality.

This uncertainty and pursuit for expression created the confessional writings that have been examined in this thesis. Still, Rodriguez foreshadows the changing dynamic of language and its use in such things as present day social media, which show that we all want a more public voice, and to be heard even while in the privacy of our homes.

Rodriguez's narrative moves through a lonely coming out in "Late Victorians," an essay in *Days of Obligation*. And evolves years later, "in 'Peter's Avocado' in *Brown*, into the ongoing darkness of fragmented identity" (Newtown 294) that remains unresolved in the end. Throughout the writings, there is a tense "ontological [questioning] of self-presence, of Being" (Foster 10) for Rodriguez. In this paradox of conception of individuality versus plurality of identity, when an individual becomes separated from its source (the origin of its identity), fragmentation is the resulting conclusion. These ideas, too, have been examined throughout this thesis in his confession. The examinations of Rodriguez's identity create a "cultural legacy of binary analysis... that , in turn, led to a period of 'identity politics' characterized by a problematic quest for cultural 'authority'" (Powell 2), which forces the reader to reconstruct an identity in the midst of a "*multiplicity of cultures*" (Powell 5). In the academic environment, where there are no centers or margins (no absolute truths, only approximations) Rodriguez himself tells a confession for recognition and self-identification.

When Rodriguez states, "I have come to understand better why works of literature – while never intimate, never individually addressed to the reader – are so often among the most personal statements we hear in our lives" (*Hunger of Memory* 203), he speaks to this same desire for intimacy that has been removed in his early childhood. I have argued throughout that his writings are a desire to recapture this intimacy, and while they fail on a personal level, his writings do create a sense of intimacy between the subject and the reader. This intimacy, while not personal, allows for intimate statements to be confessed and processed by the public in private. This confession brings the reader into the fold with Rodriguez, and creates a personal relationship between the subject (Rodriguez) and the publicly private sphere.

In his memoirs, Rodriguez has violated the norms of the genre and defied conventional authority in creating his work. Rodriguez's writing is comprehensible only as an extravagant act of sin and written confession. While Rodriguez, like other confessional writers, goes on to "describe deeds of lust and betrayal or, like Socrates, recount searches for the perfect good, but neither sin nor truth are presented in their narratives" (Foster 3); instead, we are forced to become part of his narrative (and also share his sin) to understand the man, and try to recognize him. The knowledge transmitted by these narratives are not limited to the functions of enunciation; Lyotard might describe best the language games that Rodriguez uses, when he states, that communication "determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play... to be the object of a narrative" (21). Thus the language acts are not only performed by the author, but also by the reader. "What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond" (Lyotard 21), and allow for a connection and partial recognition of Rodriguez. But these language games also permit Rodriguez's opaqueness to the reader's recognition, creating their inability to see truly both his sins and himself.

Rodriguez completes in 'Late Victorians' the pattern of hints and hedging that he began in *Hunger of Memory*, where "he appeared to confirm little about his sexuality apart from ruefulness over his brother's blond girlfriends" (Newtown 295). However, once we re-introduce, in retrospect, his hidden multiple identities into the text, particularly his sexual orientation, "each chapter in *Hunger of Memory* plays riffs on gay themes" (Newtown 295) and allows for new facets of understanding that earlier laid hidden in plain sight. Rodriguez camouflages "his discussion of transgressions and guilt in *Hunger of Memory* as reflections on private family life and public literacy. In hindsight, these subjects mask an agonized internal dialogue about

whether to permit public access to his sexual secrets” (Newtown 295) and to illuminate upon hidden identities. I have attempted to view facets of Rodriguez’s identity through his confession, and have placed the emphasis upon his writing at this mode for entry. Yet, at the end of this thesis, I have only been able to view and critique certain aspects of the hidden Rodriguez, allowing me to say this about him: Rodriguez is neither: black nor white; sexually man nor woman; culturally Mexican nor American. As Isabel Duràn pointed out earlier, Rodriguez defines himself as brown in a black-and-white America (“The Personal Essay” 59). Yet, this browning of himself only allows for a limited understanding of him. In his assessment of America, Rodriguez fragments the binary description of the American pastiche, and sets in its place an understanding that cannot be comprehended in its totality. This is how Rodriguez functions, by taking aspects of things as culture, education, history and placing them at new angles that allow for examination but not complete understanding.¹³ The one other thing that I can say about Rodriguez is that though I have read his books, studied his art and come to conclusions about him; yet, he still remains hidden to me, and the limited ability of recognition that usually takes place inside a narrative has only hindered a ‘true’ viewing of him.¹⁴

Throughout this thesis, I argued for the need to recognize subtlety, and to search for answers to unknown questions. Rodriguez is a conundrum as his own subject matter, because he himself is a fragmentation of identities that at times are irreconcilable. I have tried to reconcile aspects of these identities, but in the end, it must be stated that many of the questions that I

¹³ “But in the place of a nostalgic, pastoral identity, he offers not a vision of specific and creative cultural mixture, but an understanding of certain cherished Mexican values as universal. The Mexican (and Mexican American) subject is worldly, receptive, mobile – not limited by ties to blood, land, or specific histories” (Schilt 426).

¹⁴ Though I do know that this true viewing of him is impossible; a person can never be wholly put on a page, language is too limiting in that regard.

started out with remain unanswered, because much like our sins, they remain inarticulate, for there is no understandable answer that can be given.

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