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Richard Rodríguez and the Art of Abstraction

By GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT

Perhaps because the testimonial impulse is especially strong in emergent literatures, the flowering of imaginative writing by U.S. Hispanics over the last fifteen or twenty years has included many notable memoirs and autobiographies. Indeed, it is hardly an overstatement to say that, up to now, the dominant genre of Latino literature has been one or another mode of self-writing—either straightforward memoirs like Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* (1971) or Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puertorican* (1993); fictional autobiographies like Edward Rivera’s *Family Installments* (1982) or Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1989); or hybrid combinations of prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction, like Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983) or Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Latin Deli* (1993).

But without a doubt the best-known and most controversial of all Latino autobiographies is Richard Rodríguez’s *Hunger of Memory* (1982). In the decade and a half since its publication, this small volume has become a fixture in course syllabi and ethnic anthologies. The object of many scathing attacks as well as much fulsome praise, Rodríguez’s book has been considered both a paralyzing exercise in self-hatred and an eloquent meditation on the risks and rewards of assimilation. And the author himself has been called everything from a chicano Uncle Tom to a hip William Wordsworth. When I teach this book, which I often do, I’m always struck by the vehemence of some reactions. A few years ago, the final paper of one student took the form of an extended letter, in Spanish, to Rodríguez. After upbraiding him for his abandonment of his mother tongue and his opposition to affirmative action, she ended with the following admonition: “Señor Rodríguez, quiero darle un consejo: get a life!”

What my student’s comment overlooks, of course, is that autobiography is a way of getting a life, an instrument for self-invention. As Paul de Man pointed out years ago, in autobiographical discourse the figure determines the referent as much as the referent determines the figure (920). Whatever we may think of Rodríguez’s views on bilingual education or affirmative action, they are not...

1. An example of the latter is Augenbraum and Stavans’s *Growing Up Latino*, a popular anthology of memoirs and stories.
2. For the range of reactions, see Bell, Candelaria, Donohue, Adler, Strouse, and Zweig.
what his book, as autobiography, is primarily about. The real drama of *Hunger of Memory* lies elsewhere, in the intricate and vexed compositional stance that underlies the book’s cultural politics. I would argue, moreover, that even if we are interested in Rodríguez’s views on topical issues, we still need to address the tacit conflicts and convictions from which they arise. Before we can fully understand his opposition to bilingual education, for example, we need to grasp the inner dynamic of his relationship with the Spanish language. What I should like to do, therefore, is take a step back from Rodríguez’s provocative opinions in order to focus on aspects of the text that are less visible but ultimately more determining.

Let me start with the following proposition: *Hunger of Memory* is the public confession of a man who does not believe in public confessions. Two of the enabling assumptions of autobiography are, first, that there is a gap between the inner and the outer self, between private experience and public expression; and, second, that it is not only possible but desirable to bridge that gap. Although Rodríguez buys into the first of these assumptions, he has grave reservations about the second. Early in the book he reminds us that from the time he was a child, he was taught otherwise—that it is wrong to give public expression to private experience. From the Baltimore catechism that he memorized in parochial school he learned that confession was a sacrament involving a secretive, oral transaction between priest and sinner. As the nuns in parochial school said, it’s only the Protestants who bare their souls in public. Catholics do otherwise. Add to this his own parents’ disapproval of the smallest acts of public disclosure, and the result is young Richard’s deeply-held belief that even the most innocuous bit of personal information is a secret. It is not surprising, thus, that when he is asked to write about his family by a fourth-grade teacher, he produces what he calls a “contrivance,” a “fictionalized account” (179) that bears little resemblance to his actual life. Nor is it surprising that, once again contravening a teacher’s instructions, he refuses to keep a diary.

But disclosures like these—disclosures about the author’s reluctance to disclose—do indicate how precarious an enterprise this autobiography really is. As Rodríguez repeatedly mentions, the lack of precedent for acts of revelation in his earlier life makes him a most unlikely candidate for autobiographer. No wonder, then, his life story paradoxically culminates in a chapter entitled “Mr. Secrets,” a nickname that he earns by refusing to talk to his mother about the memoir he is writing. Richard is secretive even about his intention to go public. Now it is certainly true that Rodríguez intends this moniker ironically. He tells us about his habits of privacy in order to impress upon us the vast differences between the taciturn boy that he was—“I kept so much, so often to myself” (51)—and the self-disclosing man that he has become. By publishing his autobiography, Mr. Secrets has become a tattletale—a metamorphosis with
important personal and cultural implications, for it not only breaks with his family’s code of secrecy, but also transgresses the Mexican ethic of reserve or *formalidad*: “Writing these pages,” he says, “I have not been able to forget that I am not being formal” (130). In a book full of memories, one of the most irrepressible ones seems to be the author’s lingering awareness that the act of recollection constitutes a betrayal of sorts. He cannot remember his childhood without at the same time remembering that he is violating his family’s trust. This guilt-ridden admission of *informalidad* seems to confirm that he is indeed engaged in revealing “what is most personal” (187). The fact that he was raised not to be *informal* only makes his public confession all the more impressive. As he puts it, “There was a time in my life when it would never have occurred to me to make a confession like this one” (109).

If we now turn to the book’s opening sentences, they do sound like a confession: “I have taken Caliban’s advice. I have stolen their books” (3). But this admission of having broken the seventh commandment is somewhat equivocal: the fact is that Richard doesn’t steal books, he borrows them from the Sacramento public library. That is to say, once we pause to reflect on these sentences, it becomes difficult to understand exactly what sin Rodríguez is confessing to. Not only is the admission of book theft suspect, but the invocation of Caliban in the very first sentence as if he were the author’s brutish muse does not square with the book’s tone and content. After all, Rodríguez does not feel enslaved but liberated by his assimilation into North American culture. Whereas Caliban curses Prospero, Rodríguez offers benedictions to the American way, and his finely-wrought and highly self-conscious prose is anything but calibanesque—an example not of *mal-decir* but of *bien-decir*. In addition, a few pages into the prologue Rodríguez himself will forsake Caliban by labelling his text “Ariel’s song,” an identification subtly reinforced in the title of the first chapter, “Aria.”

These equivocations tend to complicate the author’s confessional gestures, for they turn *Hunger of Memory* into something other than an informal act of self-disclosure. In actuality, this is an extraordinarily reticent autobiography—a book of revelations that often reads like a mystery story. Even at his most personal, even at his most confessional, even at his most repentant, Rodríguez is nothing if not *formal*, and it is no accident that variations of this word appear throughout the book. He asserts, for example, that the purpose of autobiography is “to form new versions of oneself” (190), and that the end of education is “radical self-reformation” (67). Form, formality, formation, reformation—these notions lie at the heart of *Hunger of Memory*.

Monstrous Caliban—the “freckled whelp” of Shakespeare’s play—could never be Rodríguez’s muse, for there is little here that could be termed mis-

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3. For other discussions of the reference to Caliban, see Saldívar (26-27) and Flores (86).
shapen or unformed. As Ramón Saldívar has pointed out, each of the six chapters is a set piece, a carefully-crafted tableau that organizes the different facets of the author’s life around a central theme (27). Thus, the chapter on his mixed race is called “Complexion”; the one on his faith is entitled “Credo”; and the one on his education, “Profession.” Rather than simply narrating his life experiences, Rodríguez distills them, defines them, reduces them to abstractions. This generalizing impulse extends even to the people in his life, not one of whom is identified by a proper name; instead, they are referred to according to their relationship with the author—“my brother,” “my sister,” “my editor,” “the person who knows me best.” Even his parents do not escape anonymity—not once does Rodríguez provide their given names. In fact, the only proper name in the whole book is the author’s—a situation that, if not unique in autobiographical writing, is certainly extraordinary.

_Hunger of Memory_ moves relentlessly from the individual to the general, from the concrete to the abstract—as the metaphorical hunger of the title already makes evident. Rather than giving narrative shape to his life, as is the case in most autobiographies, Rodríguez opts for a coherence based on the subordination of incident to theme, of content to concept. Instead of telling stories, he offers illustrations; and instead of dwelling on details, he jumps to conclusions. His overriding criterion is intelligibility, a thinker’s virtue, rather than narrative interest, the storyteller’s goal.

Rodríguez’s rationale for this approach is that since he is writing an account of his education, of his “self-reformation,” the book should reflect the outcome of this process. And in his eyes, the primary benefit of education is the ability to abstract from experience.

My need to think so much and so abstractly about my parents and our relationship was in itself an indication of my long education. My father and mother did not pass their time thinking about the cultural meanings of their experience. It was I who described their daily lives with airy ideas. And yet, positively: The ability to consider experience so abstractly allowed me to shape into desire what would otherwise have remained indefinite, meaningless longing. (72)

As I read this passage, the first thing that occurs to me is to ask what it means “to shape into desire.” Desire can be expressed, repressed, sublimated; it can attach to specific objects or float free. But how does one shape, that is, mold or _form_ something into desire? Common twentieth-century wisdom has it the other way around: we don’t shape our desires; our desires shape us—and mostly in ways that we don’t even realize. The notion of shaping desire verges on the solecistic, but not any more so than the title of the chapter where this passage occurs, “The Achievement of Desire.” It seems that when Rodríguez conjugates desire, the real-life grounding of the phenomenon gets lost in abstraction. He treats desire much as he treats hunger—as a figure, as a spiritual or intellectual entity only. Although he asserts at one point that he is engaged in “writing
graffiti” (187), the coarse, elemental scribblings that one finds in subways and
on bathroom walls have little to do with Hunger of Memory’s genteel formul-
tions. Perhaps Caliban could write graffiti, but I doubt that he would know how
to shape or achieve desire. In fact, by describing his abstractions as “airy ideas,”
Rodríguez once again allies himself with Ariel—a connection that in turn sug-
gests that the distinction between shaped desires and indefinite longings recov-
ers the opposition between tame Ariel and unruly Caliban.

In a fine recent essay, Paul John Eakin has called attention to the presence of
two voices in this book, one narrative and the other expository (117-37). For
Eakin, these two voices dramatize the split in Rodríguez’s authorial persona
between the essayist and the storyteller, and he rightly calls attention to the fact
that most of the chapters in the book were written originally as opinion pieces
for mainstream publications. What I would add to Eakin’s insight is that the
two voices are not just distinct but, to some extent, dissonant. Although
Rodríguez’s deftness makes their mingling seem harmonious, the truth of the
matter may be that the expository voice acts to silence or mute the narrative
voice. Rather than two voices merging in harmony, the book offers us an active
and a passive voice—the active voice of the essayist, and the passive voice of
the autobiographer. Rodríguez perhaps admits as much when he describes his
book as “essays impersonating an autobiography” (7). Although I will have
something to say later about the issue of impersonation, for now I want to high-
light Rodríguez’s opposition of essay and autobiography. Like the other fea-
tures we have discussed so far, the primacy of discursive over narrative prose in
Hunger of Memory makes this book a rather unusual exemplar of modern auto-
biography.

I would also suggest that the two voices that Eakin hears could well be, at
bottom, the shaped voice of desire and the indefinite voice of longing—Ariel’s
song and Caliban’s gabble. And what may be happening here is what often
happens elsewhere—desires displace longings; that is, conscious feelings and
experiences take the place of recalcitrant or repressed material. It is telling that
Rodríguez never relates an incident whose meaning he doesn’t understand. He
assures us that he is revealing “what is most personal”—and yet we all know
that what is most personal is often what is most puzzling. But there is little
room for doubt or puzzlement in Hunger of Memory. Every fragment of narra-

4. I am thinking of Prospero’s words to Caliban in Act I, scene 2, of The Tempest:
   When thou didst not—savage!—
   Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
   A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
   With words that made them known . . .
   To which Caliban makes his famous reply:
   You taught me language, and my profit on’t
   Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you,
   For learning me your language.
tive, every anecdote or story is firmly embedded within an expository context that determines its significance. Rodríguez gives his readers less a life than a vita—a conspectus of emblematic incidents and achievements carefully arranged by heading. As a result, we come to the end of the book without knowing very much about large areas of his life. Particularly in the later chapters, he devotes as much time to thinking about autobiography as he does to actually writing one. Rather than an emperor without clothes, Rodríguez is a well-dressed striptease artist, but one who insists on his nakedness so often that after a while we actually begin to believe him.

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HAVING COME THIS FAR, I would like now to pursue the issue of impersonation by turning my attention to a seemingly minor item in the book—a screen door that appears several times—but one that may open the way to a fuller understanding of Rodríguez’s vexed autobiographical stance.

Since Rodríguez offers his life as a “parable” about the consequences—good and bad—of leaving home, references to the house where he grew up frame his story. If the first chapter opens by evoking the day he first left his home to go to elementary school, the last chapter concludes by showing the grown-up Rodríguez leaving the house again after a Christmas dinner. Between these two scenes, the house is evoked several times, and almost every time the screen door is also mentioned. Discussing the separation between his home and society, Rodríguez states: “Outside the house was public society; inside the house was private. Just opening or closing the screen door behind me was an important experience” (16-17). This is how he describes beginning elementary school: “Until I was six years old I remained in a magical realm of sound. I didn’t need to remember that realm because it was present to me. But then the screen door shut behind me as I left home for school” (39). The memory of the door accompanies him even into the British Museum, where he finds himself many years later doing research for his dissertation on Renaissance English literature. Hearing some Spanish academics whispering to each other, he has a flashback: “Their sounds seemed ghostly voices recalling my life. Yearning became preoccupation then. Boyhood memories beckoned, flooded my mind. (Laughing intimate voices. Bounding up the front steps of the porch. A sudden embrace inside the door.)” (71).

Whatever this door may have looked like in reality, in his recollections Rodríguez imagines it as a protective barrier—opaque rather than transparent, occlusive rather than permeable. If his childhood home is a world apart, a Spanish-language fortress, that door is the bulwark that keeps intruders at bay. These symbolic associations become all the more evident once we note the contrast with one other door in the book. Referring to his boyhood friendships with non-
Mexican kids on his block, Rodríguez writes, "In those years I was exposed to the sliding-glass-door informality of middle-class California family life. Ringing the doorbell of a friend’s house, I would hear someone inside yell out, ‘Come on in, Richie; door’s not locked’" (179). Unlike the screen door, which isolates, this door connects. If the screen door is a buffer, the sliding glass door is a bridge. If one keeps out, the other welcomes in; if one encloses, the other exposes (note how the passage begins: “In those years I was exposed…”). Clearly the idea is that in the typical middle-class household—and let’s not forget that Rodríguez thinks of his life as a “middle-class pastoral”—the transition from inside to outside, from private to public, from the family circle to the social sphere, is gradual rather than abrupt. Instead of two separate worlds, there is one continuous, uniform space.

For this reason, the unexpected recurrence in this passage of the key notion of informality is entirely apt. If we take Rodríguez at his word, the story of his education can be summarized as the evolution from working-class Mexican formality to middle-class American informality, an evolution that he images as the replacement of a screen door with a sliding glass door. Moreover, since Catholic confession takes place behind a screen—often a screen with a sliding cover—the image of the sliding glass door also implies a departure from the confessional model. Speaking to a non-Hispanic audience a couple of years after the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodríguez depicted his life as a move “out of my own house and over to yours” (“An American Writer” 4). The architectural imagery in the book certainly bears out this assertion.

The stumbling block here, however, is that this implicit identification of *Hunger of Memory* with glass rather than screen, with openness rather than enclosure, once again runs counter to our experience of the book. It is hard to see how this autobiography could be read as a literary manifestation of “sliding-glass-door informality”—even the language of this phrase, with its string of modifiers linked together by hyphens, clashes with the book’s usual diction. Every writer has his or her favorite punctuation marks, and Rodríguez’s is clearly the period. Cobbling together short, clipped phrases, he composes by placing bits of text next to each other and cordonning them off with periods. This is the description of his grandmother: “Eccentric woman. Soft. Hard” (36). Much like the chapters of the book, each of these sentence fragments gives the impression of being a discrete, free-standing unit—a cameo or miniature whose connection to the material that precedes or follows remains unstated.

Since Rodríguez has asserted that “autobiography is the genre of the discontinuous life” (“An American Writer” 8), it is not surprising that he should write discontinuous, paratactic prose. The style is the man—or at least the mannerism. And there is much in this book that speaks of discontinuity—between past and present, between Spanish and English, between parents and children, be-
between the culture of the hearth and the culture of the city. My point, however, is that the book’s dominant idiom is far removed from the agglutinative impetus of a phrase like “sliding-glass-door informality,” where everything connects, semantically and typographically. This is true also of the second half of the sentence, with its reference to “middle-class California family life,” another agglutinative phrase. But constructions like these are actually quite rare in *Hunger of Memory*. Instead of a life on the hyphen, Rodríguez offers us a portrait in pieces, a mosaic of self-contained, fragmentary poses.

In the end, therefore, his autobiography is more screen than glass. Ironically perhaps, the book is composed in the image and likeness of the house and the family and the culture that the author has supposedly outgrown. In this sense, Rodríguez never leaves his parents’ house. As Tomás Rivera once suggested, there are moments when this book reads like an extended postscript to Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). What Paz did for the pachuco, the zoot-suited teenager of the barrio, Rodríguez does for the pocho, the assimilated teenager from the suburbs. In spite of the author’s claims to the contrary, I find *Hunger of Memory* a profoundly Mexican performance, at least according to the portrayal of mexicanidad in Paz’s classic book. It is in the context of *El laberinto de la soledad* that Rodríguez’s characterization of his book as “essays impersonating an autobiography” becomes especially meaningful, as does his self-description as a “great mimic” (67). *Hunger of Memory* may well be an elegant impersonation, an example of mimicry or simulación, one more máscara mexicana, to allude to one of the best-known chapters in *El laberinto de la soledad*. Paz writes, “el mexicano se me aparece como un ser que se encierra y se preserva: máscara el rostro y máscara la sonrisa .... Entre la realidad y su persona establece una muralla, no por invisible menos infranqueable” (26) [“the Mexican seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile. . . . He builds a wall of indifference and remoteness, a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible” (29)]. These sentences might also describe the author of *Hunger of Memory*, who may be much less of a pocho than he thinks. One man’s muralla is another man’s screen door.

Of course, the question now is: if *Hunger of Memory* turns out to be a wall of words, an artfully reticulated screen, what is it that lies behind it? The short answer to the question is that we don’t know, but it is probable that one half of the answer has to do with sexuality, and the other half has to do with language. Although I don’t intend to enter here into a discussion of *Hunger of Memory*’s treatment of sexuality, it is worth remarking that Rodríguez’s near-total silence about any romantic or sexual involvements in his life cannot be without signifi-

5. For some brief but suggestive comments on the relation between the two books, see Rivera (10).
cance. Limiting himself to a couple of brief, ambiguous references to his “sexual anxieties” (130), Rodríguez writes as if issues of sex or gender had played no part in making him the man he has become. Yet one suspects that his reticence on this score may reflect not that there is little to be said, but that perhaps there is too much. Indeed, part of the problem with *Hunger of Memory*, one of the reasons why it is such a disconcerting book, may be that Rodríguez attributes to culture conflicts and insecurities that have rather—or also—to do with gender.

On the role of language in his life, Rodríguez seems rather more forthcoming, to the point of asserting that “language has been the great subject of my life” (7). But here again the abstractness of the formulation tends to divert attention from the material facts. When Rodríguez makes this assertion, the singular subject masks the plural reality of his experience, and particularly the fact that, until he was six years old, he spoke only Spanish. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the great subject of his life is not language in the abstract but the clash or interference between specific languages—Spanish and English. Nonetheless, the mask is the message: what lies behind the screen door is what always did lie behind the screen door—the Spanish language, those “ghostly voices” that he hears even in so improbable a setting as the reading room of the British Museum (the paradox of hearing voices in a “reading” room was probably not lost on Rodríguez). Although the number of actual Spanish words in *Hunger of Memory* is very small, the book as a whole is haunted by Spanish—not by words exactly, not by a language in the usual sense of the term, but by something less studied and more amorphous, something like a far cry.

In fact, Rodríguez treats Spanish less as a language than a euphoric, logoclastic phonation. He remembers: “Family language: my family’s sounds. Voices singing and sighing, rising, straining, then surging, teeming with pleasure that burst syllables into fragments of laughter” (17). For Rodríguez, Spanish is both more and less than a language. It is more than a language because it serves as the channel for deep emotional bonding; but it is less than a language because this channel cannot be used for routine verbal communication. This is why Rodríguez takes the rather bizarre position that Spanish cannot be the language of public discourse—the reason is not because it’s Spanish, but because in his mind Spanish is not really a language. This is also why, when he recalls childhood conversations, he generally lapses into a musical vocabulary. Speaking of his banter with his siblings, he says, “A word like *si* would become, in several notes, able to convey added measures of feelings” (18). The fact that in Spanish *si* is the name of a note on the musical scale only underscores the collapse or “bursting” of words into sounds, of language into music. This is how Rodríguez describes

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6. Issues of sexuality are somewhat more visible in Rodríguez’s second book, *Days of Obligation* (1992), particularly in the chapter entitled “Late Victorians,” which can be read as Rodríguez’s characteristically reticent version of a coming-out piece.
his father's arrival from work in the evenings: "I remember many nights when my father would come back from work, and I'd hear him call out to my mother in Spanish, sounding relieved. In Spanish he'd sound light and free notes he could never manage in English" (18). Typically, Richard's father doesn't speak words, he sounds notes. Indeed, in this resonant home even the lock on the screen door has a "clicking tongue" (17). Later in the book, when Rodríguez describes the Latin liturgy as "blank envelopes of sound" (98), this phrase could also be applied to his conception of Spanish.

Since the opposite of wordless sounds is soundless words, and since the paradigm of a silent language is writing, Rodríguez's view of language cannot be divorced from the primacy he gives the written over the spoken word. The distinction between Spanish and English folds into the contrast between speech and writing: words first, English only. But by setting things up in this manner Rodríguez snares himself in contradiction. Like a man who tries to hear by making himself deaf, he chooses a medium for recollection that ensures that he will not be able to capture some of his most indispensable memories. But maybe the truth is that he cultivates deafness because he knows that he cannot hear. When he confesses that learning English was his "original sin" (30), the acknowledged guilt may mask unacknowledged embarrassment. Behind or beneath the learned references to Shakespeare and Wordsworth, behind or beneath the poise and polish of the self-conscious stylist, someone babbles, balbucea—could it be that Richard is really Caliban after all?

If writing is always a way of dressing wounds, the hurt that Rodríguez dresses and redresses is a wound of language. His English prose is a silent screen, a strategy of simulación that works to keep the inside in, as it were, to mute the pangs of a certain kind of inarticulateness, of what we might call the ¿ay! inside the aria. One of the most crucial components of our self-image is the idea we have of ourselves as language users. Thus, one of the most disabling forms of self-doubt arises from our knowledge or belief that we cannot speak our native language well enough. When Rodríguez gets a summer job that requires him to speak in Spanish with some Mexican coworkers, he confesses: "As I started to speak, I was afraid with my old fear that I would be unable to pronounce the Spanish words" (135). I have witnessed this fear many times in students of Hispanic background. I have seen how they squirm and look away when they think you expect them to speak as if Spanish were their native language. I have often squirmed and looked away myself, feeling that no matter how good my Spanish may be, that it is just not good enough, not what it should be. For people like us, every single one of our English sentences takes the place of the Spanish sentence that we weren't able to write. And if we handle English more

7. For a sensitive—and sensible—discussion of Rodríguez's comments on Spanish, see Romero (89-100).
or less well, it is because we want to write such clean, clear English prose that no one will miss the Spanish that it replaces.

This is another way of saying that one of the largest appetites in *Hunger of Memory* is a craving for Spanish—one of those “indefinite and meaningless longings” that Rodríguez tries to transcend. And the longing is indefinite and meaningless because it is not a desire for definitions or meanings—those one can have in any language—but a nostalgia for sounds, for bursting syllables, for the untranslatable notes that he heard and uttered as a child. While discussing his passion for music, Rodríguez states: “At one moment the song simply ‘says’ something. At another moment the voice stretches out the words—the heart cannot contain!—and the voice moves toward pure sound” (38). Like a song, *Hunger of Memory* says a lot of things, but it also contains—and fails to contain—the far cry of Spanish vocables, the ¡ay! inside the aria. Rodríguez responds to the loss of Spanish sounds by taking refuge in English words—which is why the original title of the book was simply “Toward Words” (Eakin 129). And yet I find his autobiography valuable and moving not only because of his way with words but also because of the muffled music that one hears in the silences between periods—an unsatisfied and perhaps insatiable hunger that his heart cannot quite contain.

**Works Cited**


