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***Masks of Identity in Chicano Autobiography.
The Case of Richard Rodriguez¹***

Keywords: mask, autobiography, Mexican-American, identity, assimilation, borders, ethnicity.

Abstract: In his autobiographic trilogy, Richard Rodriguez displays several forms of self-definition which can be interpreted as masks of a developing personality in the Mexican-American borderlands. Often criticized for his lack of coherence and for not being able to define himself in the multicultural space of the United States, Richard Rodriguez reveals through his narrative the ethnic complexity of the Chicano community in the American Southwest, as well as the heterogeneity of the individual deprived of his language and cultural heritage. When the narrator, Richard, becomes aware of his social and racial condition, he begins a quest for identity on a metaphorical road to the Americas, whose meaning is located somewhere between the text and the reader.

The Chicano experience in the United States of America has embraced multiple facets, from the individual's full assimilation into the mainstream society to the partial or hyphenated integration and even to such extreme cases as insularity or the total rejection of the Anglo-American society. In 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the Mexican-American War, Mexico ceded a part of the territory north of the Rio Grande to the United States, and its inhabitants became Mexican-Americans.² Caught between two cultures, between two opposite worlds, segregated into barrios, and marginalized because of the language difficulties, they were soon relegated to the status of second-class citizens. In struggling for the retention of cultural integrity and a sense of unity, the Chicano communities in the American Southwest have produced a significant body of literary texts, as well as cultural theories, whose construction of meaning can be aesthetically situated at the intersection of the Anglo-American and Latin American cultural worlds.

My paper aims at analyzing Richard Rodriguez's autobiographic trilogy (*Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*) in an attempt to reveal the mechanisms of self-identification, as well as the manifold masks which the narrator adopts in order to gain access to an *American identity*.

According to Maykel Vekuyten, "questions of identity are viewed as the result of a continuing process of construction, choice, and negotiation."³ Identity is a

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² I will use the terms *Mexican-American* and *Chicano* interchangeably, although the former is neutral, and the latter points to an attitude of militancy and pride.

³ Maykel Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, Psychology Press, Taylor and Francis Group, Have and New York, 2005, p. 12.

cultural expression. In order to avoid ethnic discrimination in the United States, Mexican immigrants in the American Southwest are challenged by two difficult processes: *acculturation*, which involves the loss of traditional cultural traits and the acceptance of new ones, and *assimilation*, that is the social, economic, and political integration of a minority group into mainstream society. As Ramón Saldívar points out: “Positioned between cultures, living on borderlines, Chicanos and their narratives have assumed a unique borderland quality, reflecting in no uncertain terms the forms and styles of their folk-base origins.”¹ The cultural differences between the Mexican and U.S. worlds and the inability or unwillingness of Americans of Mexican descent to acculturate explain the intricate cultural identity that Chicano literature develops and its dialectical relationship to both of its original contexts, Mexico on the one hand, and the United States on the other hand. This cultural plight is also very noticeable in Richard Rodriguez’s works, which issued controversial reactions among Chicano and the Mexican communities. Often called “pocho” (traitor) or “coconut” (brown on the outside and white on the inside), Rodriguez attacked vigorously the bilingual education and the affirmative action programs for Americans of Mexican descent, outing his Mexican heritage and pledging allegiance to North American values.

Hunger of Memory, published in 1982, the first from a trilogy of autobiographic essays, traces the formation of young Richard, his development from a marginalized scholarship boy to a well-known public figure, an accomplished writer. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez displays the mask of a second generation immigrant, who manages to assimilate successfully in the American society and does not want to recover his ethnic origins: “Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnamable ancestors.”² The book is based on a firm division between public and private realms, following the evolution of Richard’s identity from the private space of Mexican family relations to the public, and presumably freer space, of the English-speaking world. Throughout his autobiographic trilogy, the narrator declares his descent from several ethnic legacies: Spanish, American, Indian, Mexican, and Mexican-American. In *Hunger of Memory*, he asserts that his story is “an American story,” but at certain points in *Days of Obligation* and *Brown*, he seems to contradict himself. In this way, his identity formation lies somewhere between the text and the reader or, as Eduardo de Gregorio pointed out, his self-expression “remains unfinished or on the borderlands.”³

Hunger of Memory opens with a passage which provides the reader with a strategy of interpretation: “I have taken Caliban’s advice. I have stolen their books.

¹ Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1990, p. 25.

² Rodriguez, Richard, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Bantam Dell, New York, 1984, p. 2.

³ Eduardo Gregorio de, “Language and Male Identity Construction in the Cultural Borderlands: Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*,” in *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands*, ed. Jesús Benito and Ana María Manzanar, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2002, p. 134.

I will have some run on this isle.”¹ The allusion in this introductory paragraph is of course to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, one of his final plays. In *The Tempest*, Prospero finds himself exiled on a small, enchanted island by his usurping brother, Antonio, where he manages to survive together with his daughter, Miranda, Ariel, a spirit enslaved by Prospero, and Caliban, a man half-man half-monster, who desires only to defeat Prospero and regain his homeland. As a child of nature, Caliban shows civilized people what is unnatural in their domesticated lives. In this master – slave relationship, Caliban realizes that Prospero’s power comes from the force of his language and his books and that, in order to accede to his master’s strength, he needs to learn first how to read his books. If we extend this intertextual reference to Shakespeare’s play on a figurative level, we may infer that Caliban is an allegory for the marginal Mexican condition, and that Prospero stands for Anglo-America, which imposed itself against the former through the power of language, political power, education, race etc. Taking “Caliban’s advice,” Rodriguez shrewdly inserts himself into the U.S. society, although, in essence, he never forgets his Mexican ethnicity.

From the moment the Englishman invades Richard’s private world inside his home, he steps on a different path, one which will lead him to the status of the assimilated “middle-class American man.”² As a new American man, by the end of *Hunger of Memory*, he will feel completely estranged from his family. His English-only option seems to establish an insurmountable barrier between the Mexican and the Anglo-American worlds, and it allows the protagonist to regard himself as an American citizen, from an early stage in his life. Learning the language of *the Other* (in the postcolonial sense), Rodriguez disencumbers himself of the unfavorable social status which the Mexican and even the Chicano communities hold in the American Southwest. The access to education is inherently assimilating because it has offered him a public identity, which ethnicity has denied. However, this has not been achieved without certain impediments and a general feeling of pain in growing up among members of his ethnic group who were critical of his incipient assimilation. The cost of his transition implies both loss and gain. I quote Rodriguez at length here: “My awkward childhood does not prove the necessity of bilingual education. My story discloses instead an essential myth of childhood – inevitable pain. If I rehearse here the changes in my private life after my Americanization, it is finally to emphasize the public gain. The loss implies the gain: The house I returned to each afternoon was quiet. Intimate sounds no longer rushed to the door to greet me. (...) Once I learned public language, it would never again be easy for me to hear intimate family voices. More and more of my day was spent hearing words. But that may only be a way of saying that the day I raised my hand in class and spoke loudly to an entire roomful of faces, my childhood started to end.”³

As an American of Mexican descent, Rodriguez’s denial of his ethnicity and the full acceptance of Englishness can be easily motivated. He wants to be

¹ Richard Rodriguez, *op. cit.*, p.1.

² *Idem*, p. 7.

³ *Idem*, p. 27.

different; he wants to be one of *los gringos*, because he is ashamed of his parents' lack of education, and because he is embarrassed by the dark color of his skin, which betrays his origins, and alludes to the life of oppression and hard labor of *los braceros* (Mexican nationals who were licensed to work for farmers in the United States in the 1950's). Proclaiming himself a U.S. citizen, he does not even identify with the Chicano students, who make him nervous by their alliance to their parents' culture, and by believing that education has not changed their lives in any sense.

Towards the end of *Hunger of Memory*, all the elements of his family's Mexican culture are either denied or forgotten, and the narrator replaces family closeness with public recognition. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* follows a different pattern, with a special emphasis on ethnicity. In this second book, the reader is puzzled to find out that Richard's assimilation, though celebrated in *Hunger of Memory*, occurred only at a surface level, and that the narrator exhibits another mask, that of a *hyphenated identity*, turned more to the Mexican side of the hyphen. If in the previous book Richard was the son of socially disadvantaged Mexican immigrants trying to pursue the American dream, in *Days of Obligation* he is telling his story from the Mexican point of view: "I will present this life in reverse. After all, the journey my parents took from Mexico to America was a journey from an ancient culture to a youthful one – backward in time. In their path I similarly move, if only to honor their passage to California (...)." ¹ In this way, Rodriguez adopts the position of a third generation American, one who wishes to recover his origins, to look back into the past. In his search for identity, the narrator explores Mexico's tormented colonial past and his racial construction as a *mestizo*, "clotted with Indian, thinned by Spanish spume." ²

As Mexicans, his parents and his ancestors took their national identity from the Indians and the language from the Spanish colonizers. In postcolonial Mexico, the Indian race has managed to survive and this is reflected in the complexity of his face: "I used to stare at the Indian in the mirror. The wide nostrils, the thick lips. (...) Such a long face – such a long nose – sculpted by indifferent, blunt thumbs, and of such common clay." ³ In Rodriguez's view, the Indian stands for a reunion of peoples, he has become the portal through which the European civilization has entered the Americas. The Mexican-Indian or *mestizo* heritage occupies a peculiar place in the house of memory. It is a palimpsest of the origins of the *Mexican-American self* and of what has been left behind, it presents a mythical vision of the past and it accounts for the alteration of identities.

At this stage of his autobiography, Richard Rodriguez's identity is molded in a mental *borderland* space, configured by a certain degree of Mexicanness and Americanness. Monika Kaup observes a set of differences that account for the hyphenated Chicano identity: "tragic Mexico vs. optimist America, Mexico the biological mother vs. America the adoptive mother, Mexico the original home vs.

¹ Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, Penguin Group, Inc., New York, 1992, pp. xvii-xviii.

² *Idem*, p. 2.

³ *Idem*, p. 1.

America the foreign exile, Mexico the community of blood ancestry vs. America the future community of choice, Mexico as Other vs. America as Self.”¹ In the light of these cultural dichotomies, Rodriguez affirms his Mexicanness, but simultaneously justifies his “malinchismo,” that is the so-called “betrayal” of the Mexican community and the preference for American values.

Days of Obligation has some parts which turn it into a counter-hegemonic narrative, showing the Mexicans’ plight in the American Southwest and the struggle for *cultural survival* in the borderlands. Highlighting the fact that “Like wandering Jews, Mexicans had no true home but the tabernacle of memory,”² Rodriguez empathetically associates himself with the narrative of his people and of his family: the Mexican farm workers in California who were forced to commute in search of labor, his father who was accused of having committed an act of betrayal when applying for American citizenship, the personification of Mexico as a “mad mother” who offers nothing but violence and insecurity to her offsprings, but instead labels them “pachucos” and accuses her children of fleeing the *house of memory*. On the other hand, in the American melting pot, the Mexican immigrant finds freedom, confidence, an ideology of individualism, but also a lack of a plural sense of identity, an estrangement from his parents and from his own memory of himself.

Rodriguez asserts that Americanization always implies a loss. Built originally by the Puritan pilgrims as a land of promise opposed to the idea of Europe, the U.S.A. has become in time a land of diversity. American history lies in the immigrant experience. “In time, Americans came to recognize themselves in the immigrant – suitcase in hand, foreign speaking, bewildered by the city. The figure of the immigrant became, like the American cowboy, a figure of loneliness, and we trusted that figure as descriptive of Protestant American experience.”³ But the United States has acquired, for Rodriguez, another meaning. It has become the land where he could manifest his veiled sexuality freely, without the family constraints, or the traditional prejudices one has experienced in Mexico. In *Hunger of Memory*, a subsidiary plot of Richard’s developing homosexuality is silenced and hidden behind the mask of a name he calls “Mr. Secrets.” But in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez abandons the tone of an allegory of the successful child of poor immigrants and reinvents himself as a Mexican child and as an American estranged from the house of his parents.

In the chapter entitled *Late Victorians*, Rodriguez reveals his homosexuality through an architectural metaphor which he develops to describe the Victorian houses the gay community inhabits in its Castro district in San Francisco. Old buildings are a symbol of the weight of the past upon the living, a means of raising the question of how to demolish the old places that obstruct the path to future happiness. Victorian houses are cold, imposing, feared, but also venerated. “They are associated in our imaginations with the Gothic – with shadowy and cobwebby

¹ Monika Kaup, *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2001, p. 116.

² Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation*, p. 48.

³ *Idem*, p. 165.

gimcrack, long corridors. The 19th century was remarkable for escalating optimism even as it excavated the backstairs, the descending architecture of nightmare – Freud’s labor and Engels’s.”¹ The opposition between old and new houses symbolically marks the contrast between Mexico and the United States, the North-South polarity between a “country of tragedy” and a “country of comedy.”² Monika Kaup furthermore suggests: “Mexican immigration into the US thus appears as a journey from ancestral houses to dwellings designed for the needs of the present and future. The past is discarded to make way for the building of new cities and to realize the ideals of a more perfect society.”³ Like homosexuality and ethnicity, *identity* proves to be for Rodriguez a house that he constantly builds and re-builds, not the house where he was born.

In 2002, Rodriguez published *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Award. The last book of his autobiographic trilogy represents a more pragmatic approach to the troubling question of race and identity, with the dream of a common language and culture. Here the narrator puts on a different mask, a totalizing one, as the previous troubles in defining himself coalesce into a new form of self-definition. He coined the phrase “the browning of America” to describe an increase in the mixing of cultural, racial and ethnic identities in the United States in the past century. The phrase is commonly applied to the current demographic shift towards a higher proportion of minorities in the great “melting pot.” Rodriguez suggests that America means more than black and white and describes the brown color figuratively as “a color produced by careless desire,” the symbol of the “complete freedom of substance and narrative,” forming at “the border of contradiction” and extolling “impurity.”⁴ America has never been only black and white. From the first day the European settlers came and the African slaves were brought to the continent, they met in America a complicating third race: the Indian. Rodriguez wishes to undermine race and to usher in the idea of a brown, impure, indistinct America.

Brown contains in the first chapter, *The Triad of Alexis de Tocqueville*, a little ditty which the author inserted in order to demonstrate the racial segregation in the United States. Thus, he recalls the day at school, when one of his friends, Buddy, whispered to his ear: “If you’re white, you’re all right; / If you’re brown, stick around; / If you’re black, stand back.”⁵ Yet apparently simple, this ditty reveals the invisibility, neutrality or irrelevance of the mestizo people in the mainstream society. Like in most Chicano writings, the plot revolves around the conflicts associated with the affirmation of cultural integrity within a hegemonic white American society. Moreover, the writer postulates the idea that assimilation created a curious *hybridity* whereby Americanized minorities appear culturally

¹ Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation*, p. 31.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Monika Kaup, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴ Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, Penguin Group Inc., New York, 2002, p. xi.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 4.

invisible: “I felt myself as coming from a caramelized planet, an upside-down planet, pineapple-cratered. Though I was born here, I came from the other side of the looking glass, as did Alice, though not alone like Alice.”¹

In the 1960’s, in their nationalist search for identity, Chicanos began to gather, reunite their ideas around the concept of mythical Aztlán, which embodied issues like unity and liberation, destroyed when Hernán Cortés conquered Mexico, and dreamed of in the decades following the U.S. – Mexican War (1848). The critic Jose Vasconcelos coined the phrase “la raza cosmica” (the cosmic race), and defined the Chicano as a mestizo subject composed of a variety of mixed blood types, referring not only to the interracial process, but also extended to matters of class and social position.² Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about “the new mestiza,” a half-breed mixed race that moves outside the prescribed racial parameters of nationalist ideologies. In her study, *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa defined the Mexican-American border as “una herida abierta (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds,” these two worlds “merging to form a third country – a border culture.”³ The new mestiza undergoes a struggle of *conflicting identities*, caused by a cultural collision and by finding herself “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures.”⁴ Struggling with her personal difficulty of identification as a mestiza Caucasian Spanish, and Mexican Indian, the critic suggests that the mestiza has a *plural personality* or different levels of subjectivity (woman, cultural critic, Indian, feminist etc.) which allow her to tolerate the contradictions that characterize the formation of the Mexican-American self.

Along with Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa, Rodriguez articulates in *Brown* a borderland space where he constructs his identity, resonating deeply with the postcolonial interstitial “third space of enunciation,” defined by Homi Bhabha as something recognizable, an “in-between space,” providing “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”⁵ In this way, Rodriguez assumes the identity of “the third man,”⁶ a hypostasis he frequently qualifies as “brown.” *The third man*, the man of two races, undergoes a transfiguration that burns away painful memories and enables him to become or to imagine himself free. This third mask which the narrator displays is one that enables him to make his way out of the melting pot and to detach himself from the previous categorizations.

¹ *Idem*, p. 5.

² *Apud* Elizabeth Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature: The Politics of Identity*, Routledge, Canada, 2006, p. 70.

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 1987, p. 3.

⁴ *Idem*, p.78.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 2.

⁶ Richard Rodriguez, *Brown*, p. 125.

Throughout his autobiographic trilogy, Rodriguez's construction of identity is wrapped in ambiguity, as he has difficulty in defining himself from a racial, national, or ethnic viewpoint. G. Thomas Couser accused him of inconsistency and labeled his writing as "a heresy," lying in "its expression of dissatisfaction with a society so tolerant of diversity that it not only accepts but celebrates ethnic distinctions and idiosyncrasy."¹ However, if we take for granted Rodriguez's allusion to Shakespeare's character, Caliban, from the beginning of *Hunger of Memory*, we may infer that he has remained a partially Americanized Mexican, a minority individual, vulnerable to racial prejudices and forced to live in the hyphen.

From this point of view, the rest of Rodriguez's autobiographic writing becomes, to a certain extent, fictionalized and unreliable, or, in Genaro Padilla's term, a form of "cultural masking."² On the other hand, if we take into account that in a postmodern world, identities are never unified, but fragmented and fractured, being continuously subjected to change, we can interpret Rodriguez's exhibition of multiple *masks of identity* as stages in the development of his personality. Like Proteus, he appears in the text as a shape-shifter of all sorts who inhabits distinct spaces in different moments of his life: California, San Francisco, Mexico, Aztlán, and, finally, the ideological "third space," which is neither black nor white, but "queer, Catholic, Indian, Spaniard."³ Moreover, the narrator himself allusively acknowledges, at the end of his autobiographic journey, that his ego is a confluence of simultaneous identities: "*Of every hue and caste am I.*"⁴

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¹ Thomas G. Couser, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, p. 222.

² Genaro Padilla, "The Recovery of Nineteenth Century Chicano Autobiography," in *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature of the United States*, ed. Genevieve Fabre, Arte Publico Press, Houston, 1988.

³ Richard Rodriguez, *Brown*, p. 35.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 230.

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