### Moya, Paula M. L. “Intrepretation of Memory: The Assimilation of Richard Rodriguez.” Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles. Berkeley:  University of California Press,  2002. http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt8t1nd07c/

Over the course of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez figures his changing relationship to the Mexican American community as a protracted and poignant drama of painful loss and consequent gain. He is careful, though, to distinguish his narrative from a call for a culturally sensitive approach to educating Mexican American children.

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…. Once I learned public language [English], it would never again be easy for me to hear intimate family voices…. 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. (27–28)

Thus, rather than regretting the loss of the cultural connection he cherished as a child, Rodriguez figures his transition from ethnic identity to deracinated American identity in terms of a process of maturation: his “childhood started to end” when he learned to speak English. Social and political opportunity, he insists, are available only to those who, in the process of growing up, shed their ethnic identities: “Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in *gringo* society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality. The social and political advantages I enjoy as a man result from the day that I came to believe that my name, indeed, is*Rich-heard Road-ree-guess* ” (27). Rodriguez closes his book by refusing a “minority” identity altogether, suggesting that “minorities” are those people who are *culturally* disadvantaged. He presumes that as a highly educated person, he can no longer be considered a minority: “The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student” (147). On the surface, then, *Hunger of Memory* testifies to Rodriguez's successful, if difficult, assimilation into mainstream white American society.

Despite his proclamations, Rodriguez's book testifies to the contrary. His focus on culture at the crucial moment of claiming an American identity collapses the concept of race into the concept of culture and allows him to conveniently obscure the salience of the category of race in the formation of his identity. Yet even a cursory reading of *Hunger of Memory* reveals how central his awareness of himself as a racialized being is to his sense of self. Throughout his youth, Rodriguez equates dark skin with poverty, powerlessness, and disadvantage. Hyper-aware of the color of his skin, and terrified that as a result of his complexion he will become one of *los pobres*, Rodriguez devotes a considerable amount of energy to trying to escape what he perceives to be the inexorable and unenviable fate of dark-skinned people. With the encouragement of his mother, he spends his childhood staying out of the sun to avoid making his skin darker than it already is.

In one of the most compelling passages in the book, Rodriguez employs gothic associations to convey the disgust he feels for “the dark” part of himself. He prefaces the passage by telling his reader that he felt shame and sexual inferiority because of his dark complexion, and that he thought of himself as an ugly child.

One night when I was eleven or twelve years old, I locked myself in the bath-room and carefully regarded my reflection in the mirror over the sink. Without any pleasure I studied my skin. I turned on the faucet. (In my mind I heard the swirling voices of aunts, and even my mother's voice, whispering, whispering incessantly about lemon juice solutions and dark, *feo* children.) With a bar of soap, I fashioned a thick ball of lather. I began soaping my arms. I took my father's straight razor out of the medicine cabinet. Slowly, with steady deliberateness, I put the blade against my flesh, pressed it as close as I could without cutting, and moved it up and down across my skin to see if I could get out, somehow lessen, the dark. All I succeeded in doing, however, was in shaving my arms bare of their hair. For as I noted with disappointment, the dark would not come out. It remained. Trapped. Deep in the cells of my skin. (124–25)

Accompanied by background music (evoked through the alliteration of the letter “s” in an extended description of the “swirling voices of aunts… whispering, whispering incessantly”), Rodriguez's deliberately suspenseful step-by-step narration of the event positions the reader as an unwilling spectator to something possibly horrific. At this point in the book, the reader knows that Rodriguez does not like himself, knows that he has locked himself in the bathroom, and knows that he has removed his father's razor from the cabinet. Not until fully three-fourths of the way through the passage is the reader assured that Rodriguez's adolescent intent is not suicidal. The remaining fourth of the passage is devoted to Rodriguez's disappointed discovery that “the dark” is not alienable from himself. Nevertheless, Rodriguez continues to speak of it as if it were. His final statement, which is given dramatic emphasis by being split up into three separate phrases, emphasizes the distinction Rodriguez wishes to make between “the dark” and his “self.” “The dark” is referred to as “it,” as something separate from and alien to the “skin” that Rodriguez refers to as belonging to himself.

In the pages that follow this passage, the reader learns that when Rodriguez's attempt to “get out, somehow lessen, the dark” fails, his solution is to “[grow] divorced from [his] body” and become “insecure, overweight, listless” (124–25). As an adolescent, Rodriguez denies himself a “sensational life” explaining that “I was too ashamed of my body. I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body” (126).[**[16](javascript://)**] Eventually, however, Rodriguez moves to resolve his dilemma in a manner that is less personally restrictive. Because he cannot change the color of his skin, and because denying himself “desired sensation” is not a viable long-term option for him, he decides that dark skin no longer means what he had assumed it to mean all along (131). Over time, he divests “the dark” of the negative associations he had previously attributed to it. Subsequently, he concludes, “My complexion becomes a mark of my leisure…. my complexion assumes its significance from the context of my life. My skin, in itself, means nothing” (137).

Although he appears to have solved his dilemma when he reinterprets the significance of his skin color, Rodriguez cannot overcome his terror of being identified with the underclass. Despite his apparent liberation from his obsession with dark skin, he still needs a way to differentiate himself from the poverty, powerlessness, and disadvantage represented by *los pobres* —those poor, pitiful laborers to whom his dark skin has linked him. Thus, he responds to this need by psychologically projecting out all the negative associations he had previously attributed to “the dark” onto what he depicts as the unindividuated and profoundly disenfranchised collective consciousness of *los pobres.*

Their silence stays with me now…. They lack a public identity. They remain profoundly alien. Persons apart. People lacking a union obviously, people without grounds…. Their silence stays with me. I have taken these many words to describe its impact. Only: the quiet. Something uncanny about it. Its compliance. Vulnerability. Pathos. As I heard their truck rumbling away, I shuddered, my face mirrored with sweat. I had finally come face to face with *los pobres*. (*Hunger* 138–39)

Thus, when “the dark” trapped deep within the cells of Rodriguez's own skin ceases to be the frightening alien entity with the power to brand him as one of the despised, *los pobres* emerge as the “uncanny” and “profoundly alien” presence within the United States borders whose collective “silence” threatens the certainty and security of Rodriguez's “American” identity.

Besides providing an evisceratingly honest account of the phenomenon of internalized racism, Rodriguez's case presents a dramatic illustration of what can happen when a person grows up within “an impoverished ‘social context of choice’ ” (Moses 1). According to the educational theorist Michele Moses, a good life in a just and democratic society will be characterized by a significant capacity for self-determination. By this she means that members of that society will be able to make choices about who they want to become in relation to their historical, cultural, and social contexts without being constrained by unjust societal limits. The problem with current American society, Moses suggests, is that historically entrenched structures of oppression present some people, but not others, with severely constrained social contexts of choice. Because the collective identities of African Americans and Chicana/os, for example, are more frequently denigrated than affirmed in the United States, people who are identified with these groups frequently find themselves in social contexts of choice that do not provide the kinds of personal and cultural structures that support a wide range of options for them. As long as this is the case, some African Americans and Chicana/os will feel that they must reject their home cultures and identities in order to improve their life chances. This situation can contribute to their making what Moses calls “costly” choices—that is, choices that require them to deny or distort their identities (7). Moses points out that insofar as they are unable to develop and maintain self-conceptions that incorporate significant aspects of their personal pasts, people who deny or distort their identities are often left with much-diminished capacities for self-determination. They are forced, as Rodriguez was, to reject their families and cultures of origin in a futile attempt to determine meaningfully the way their lives will go. The solution, Moses avers, will involve some state-sponsored efforts (i.e., multicultural education) to affirm a wider variety of cultures and identities as socially worthy.

Significantly, Moses and the neoconservative minorities I am critiquing here share the same long-term ideal. They are all in favor of a life characterized by a robust self-determination unconstrained by unjust societal limits—as am I. Moses differs from the neoconservative minorities, however, in her acknowledgment of the structural forces (economic, racial, and cultural) that shape people's choices. Moreover, like the post-positivist realist, she has a dialectical conception of social identity. This is in sharp contrast to Rodriguez, who tends to understand identity in purely idealist terms. If, as a boy, he imputed too much significance to the color of his skin, as a young adult, Rodriguez attributes too little. He assumes that social identity is entirely a matter of “mind”; that subjective consciousness is the most determinative feature of any person or group. He explains, “I was not one of *los pobres*. What made me different from them was an attitude of mind, my imagination of myself” (*Hunger* 138). On the basis of this same idealism, Rodriguez concludes that he is no longer a member of a “minority” group. By using the term “minority” to refer to “poorly schooled, disadvantaged Americans,” and by emphasizing the advantages of his own education, Rodriguez attempts to elide the issue of race in order to escape what he perceives as the stigma of being “minority”: “I was not—in a *cultural* sense—a minority, an alien from public life. (Not like *los pobres* I had encountered during my recent laboring summer.) The truth was summarized in the sense of irony I'd feel at hearing myself called a minority student: The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student” (*Hunger* 147). Rodriguez's account of his identity formation thus attempts to deny the fact that, when used in a United States social context, the term “minority” generally refers to specifiable*racial* groups.[[**17**](javascript://)] Instead, he attempts to change (and then contain) the meaning of the term by redefining it solely in terms of *culture*.

It became easy… to forget that those whose lives are shaped by poverty and poor education (cultural minorities) are least able to defend themselves against social oppression. (*Hunger* 149–50)

[Academics] should have acknowledged (the truth) that higher education is out of the reach of minorities—poorly schooled, disadvantaged Americans” (*Hunger* 153).

In effect, Rodriguez decides that by *changing his mind*, he can change his identity—and the social world to which his identity refers. He thus ignores the dialectical, referential, and *social* nature of identity, and demonstrates his unwillingness to acknowledge the political, economic, and epistemic consequences of his social location—of which race is one fundamental aspect. Ironically, Rodriguez's idealist assumptions about identity echo the idealist assumptions of the postmodernist identity theorists I criticized in chapters one and two. I am thinking specifically of Donna Haraway, who suggests that people are related, “not by blood but by choice” (“Cyborgs” 196). As demonstrated in those chapters, theorists like Haraway also attempt to sever the links between identity and social categories such as race or gender.

Ultimately, and despite his best efforts, Rodriguez cannot convince the world around him that he is not a “minority.” Ever since the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, it has become increasingly evident to his critics as well as to Rodriguez himself that his assimilation into white American society was not as successful as he had claimed it to be.[**[19](javascript://)**] Tellingly, those intellectuals who have given Rodriguez the most sustained attention— the literary critics who have written and published papers about his work—have consistently refuted his efforts to refuse a minority identity. They note, instead, his tendency to misinterpret his own social situation. Lawrence Hogue points out that “*Hunger of Memory* shows unconsciously a Richard Rodriguez who has always been marginal to the experience of the middle class, white, American male because he is a person of color” (58). Alfredo Villanueva-Collado takes Rodriguez to task for holding the “unfounded belief that language, by itself, can achieve assimilation for individuals who are linguistically or racially different” (79). And Antonio Marquez reminds us that Rodriguez's theme is typically that of a “minority” in the United States.

Indeed, Rodriguez's life is not unique. He is not the first to suffer the child-hood trauma of inferiority. He is not the first to be torn between conflicting cultural values. He is not the first to embrace assimilation and to take the avenue of higher education toward an academic career, and consequently to be uprooted and alienated from his family and cultural roots. And he is certainly not the first to be stamped as a *vendido* for separating himself from his heritage and assuming the trappings of the Anglo bourgeoisie…. In brief, he has taken a common experience and given it the shape of literary art through the autobiographical form. (132)

Like so many other literary critics who treat Rodriguez's work, Marquez situates *Hunger of Memory* firmly within the tradition of Chicana/o literature—in spite of Rodriguez's protestations and claims to exceptionalism.[[**20**](javascript://)] So, while Rodriguez might wish to consider himself representative of a deracinated middle-class American man—or at least *not*representative of the “typical Hispanic-American life”—his autobiographical narrative unconsciously portrays a recognizably minority experience (*Hunger* 7).

Moreover, Rodriguez's unsuccessful attempts, in *Hunger of Memory*, to escape the socially constructed meaning of his skin color testify both to his failure to understand the salience of race in American society and his unwillingness to acknowledge the consequences of his social location.[[**21**](javascript://)] Unlike lighter skinned Mexican Americans who might be able to “pass” as white, Rodriguez is indelibly marked as nonwhite by his physiognomy and the color of his skin. By arguing that Rodriguez is mistaken in his refusal to acknowledge the consequences of his social location, I am not suggesting that he needs to recognize “who he really is,” or that his identity was determined at birth. In fact, I am deeply sympathetic to the young Rodriguez's desire to escape a racializing gaze that sees people of color as lesser (if not less than) human beings. However, no amount of wishful thinking will effectively change either entrenched social institutions or the dialectical character of identity. Because racialized thinking is deeply interwoven into the fabric of our society, our racial designation affects our countless daily social, political, and economic interactions with others. Moreover, because identity is dialectical, our racial designation is not a purely personal affair; just because Rodriguez thinks of himself as different from *“los pobres”* does not mean that others will not assign him and them to the same racial group. To the extent that Rodriguez refuses to recognize this consequence, he is simply blinding himself to the racial dynamics that affect his psychic and material well-being without finding an effective way to insulate himself from their very real effects.

The reception of both his autobiography and his later writings testify to other Americans’ continued willingness to assign racial significance to Rodriguez's physiognomy and skin color. In the final analysis, Rodriguez exists not as a deracinated individual living within the boundaries of his imagined universe (or even within the covers of his carefully wrought autobiography), but as an embodied human being whose identity has been, and continues to be, constituted in and through social interaction. Rodriguez's skillful use of literary devices to transmute the meaning of words and identities within the covers of a book proves insufficient when he loses control of the medium. At a 1995 speech he gave at a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Dallas, Rodriguez recalled that Bill Moyers once asked him in an interview, “Do you consider yourself as Hispanic or American?” Aside from the fact that the question supposes a false dichotomy (a dichotomy Rodriguez himself reinscribes in *Hunger of Memory*), Moyers's question demonstrates that Rodriguez ultimately fails in his attempt to escape a racializing gaze. Moyers's question is intelligible only if we understand that Moyers sees Rodriguez as someone who is *not* fully “American,” as someone who has *not* been successfully deracinated. Rodriguez's sarcastic response—that he is Chinese because he lives in an Asian section of San Francisco—evades the central issue (who counts as “American”?) and reveals his inability to maintain his idealist convictions about identity in the face of social interaction.

So, despite Rodriguez's assertion that he is “no longer a minority,” his books are usually shelved in the Chicana/o literature section of college bookstores; in contradiction to his claim to have successfully assumed a mainstream American identity, talk show hosts and TV journalists still consider Rodriguez to be a suitable representative of Hispanics in the United States; and, in the face of his self-professed cultural alienation, Rodriguez continues to write about, speak about, and *speak for* people of Mexican origin in the United States and Mexico. For all his early attempts to disavow his connection to Mexicans and other Latina/os, Richard Rodriguez is yet considered to be a member of a racial minority group.

A close examination of Rodriguez's writings demonstrates that he has indeed undergone cultural change. He is not the same person he was as a young boy; he has become more “American.” He has not, however, been successfully deracinated. Not only does Rodriguez continue to be recognized by others as a member of a racial minority group, but his writings reveal that his own thinking has been deeply shaped by the social phenomenon of race. Indeed, one of the most notable features of neoconservative minorities is how race conscious they reveal themselves to be. Thus, a critical evaluation of the underlying claims of neoconservative minority identities will reveal that race profoundly influences who they are, what they believe, and how they are regarded by others (including those who make the economic and social policy decisions that affect our daily lives). Despite the fact that race lacks a biological basis, it remains a causally significant feature of our social world.

The continuing salience of race, even to those who deny its social significance, demonstrates why a postmodernist approach—which either undermines the reality of those categories constitutive of identity (of which race is one) or undertheorizes the relationship between social location and identity—will be inadequate to our contemporary political moment. In the next section, I return to the postpositivist realist theory of identity in order to propose it as an alternative to both neoconservative and postmodernist conceptions of identity. Only with a more complex and sophisticated understanding of identity such as that provided by a postpositivist realist theory of identity can progressive social thinkers respond to the real challenges posed by the existence of cultural and other kinds of difference.