Essay, Memoir, or Both At Once?

*Hunger of Memory* and the Problem of Nonfiction Hybrids

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Only when I finished reading *Hunger of Memory* did I wonder what it was. The story’s forward thrust, and the eloquence of Rodriguez’s complicated arguments had held me rapt, and questions of genre were far from my mind. But when I was done, I wanted to know, what had I just read? I was designing a syllabus for a class called “Introduction to Nonfiction” and intended to divide it into three sections: essay, memoir, and literary journalism. Most of the books I’d chosen fit neatly into one of the three*.* But *Hunger of Memory* did not. And something about it, the elusive nature of the prose, perhaps, or the text’s contradictory references to its own indeterminate genre, felt like a puzzle—one I was compelled to solve, and which seemed to hold a key to some mystery about how nonfiction genres work.

Below the eerily beautiful title, with its urgent physicality, the book’s more intellectual subtitle, *The Education of Richard Rodriguez,* undercuts the main title’s appeal to the body, andplaces the book alongside *The Education of Henry Adams* in the tradition of spiritual and intellectual autobiography. And above my edition’s title and subtitle, the words (shall we call them a supertitle?) *An Autobiography* hover. Early in the book, Rodriguez reports that an editor urged him to write a narrative: “You should write your book in stories—not as a series of essays. Let’s have more Grandma” (5). Rodriguez doesn’t tell us how he responded to the editor, or what he thinks of the familiar plea for “more Grandma”—more scene, more dramatized conflict, more self-disclosure. The next sentence addresses the reader: “But no. Here is my most real life” (5) and later: “This autobiography, moreover, is a book about language” (6).

In spite of the statements, both on the cover and in the text, that the book is Rodriguez’s autobiography, after its publication in 1982, *Hunger’s* chapters went on to become some of the most widely anthologized essays of our time. The first, “Aria,” appears in *The Best American Essays of the Century* as well as Phillip Lopate’s *The Art of the Personal Essay.* And before it was ever part of any book, the chapter was an essay in the Winter 1980 issue of *The American Scholar.*

Whatever genre it belongs to, the book—bold, beautiful, minority-written yet politically incorrect—made Rodriguez famous, and “Aria” has become one of those staples of college composition, the kind that spawns countless teachers’ guides, lesson plans, and “free college essays” for plagiarists. In the college-comp context, though, neither its original label, *essay*, nor its later one, *autobiography*, seem to have satisfied the producers of textbooks. This group brings the trend of their own decade to the work of reading, it appears, for they market the eighteen-page text as *memoir:* “Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood.” Rodriguez’s controversial positions on education and immigrant issues have generated one of the most heated debates in nonfiction history, and though much about his work has changed over the last thirty years, he continues to publicly criticize affirmative action and identity politics, and retains his position as the Mexican-American Chicanos love to hate.[[1]](#footnote-1) Once his second book, *Days of Obligation,* revealed his homosexuality, critics added what they perceived as the author’s long residence in the closet to their reasons for hating him.

That Rodriguez’s disclosures, however partial and incomplete, are all true; that he recounts only what he has truly done, thought, and experienced—that the events are not fictional—matters very much to current-day readers, but beyond the fiction-or-non question, matters of genre difference in nonfiction are commonly dismissed: “I suspect that genre, like gender, with which it shares a root, is mostly a collection of lies we have agreed to believe,” writes Eula Biss, whose *Notes from No Man’s Land: American Essays* I admire as much as I do *Hunger of Memory* (56). Invited by the *Seneca Review* to discuss the emergence of the lyric essay as a new genre, Biss writes, “A student asks me what a lyric essay is” but “all I can think is, *It doesn’t matter*” (59).

In a sense, Biss is right—genre doesn’t need to be on a writer’s mind as she creates her work, for Aristotle’s age, when distinct rules governed the production of epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, and the like, is long gone. Thinking about genre simply as systems of classification, or as a rule book of how one should write, makes it irrelevant indeed. But once my puzzlement about *Hunger of Memory* got me reading some theory—books like Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*, Beebee’s *Ideology of Genre,* Frow’s *Genre (The New Critical Idiom)*—I was able to think beyond Aristotle’s rules of production, and beyond the bookstore-shelving model, and instead see genre as a mechanism by which patterns of action, values, and norms are produced, perpetuated, or overturned. I will demonstrate, here, how that theory can be useful for a working writer, for a writer, that is, who seeks to understand how the books that are her models accomplish their cultural work.

To begin with, I’d like to establish that while some schools of thought construe genre as determined solely by a work’s formal features, my current study is based on the premise of a wider understanding of what makes up genre. Assumptions, themes, “situation of address,” or the rhetorical stance of the speaking voice—all matter to genre distinctions just as much as features of form. It’s also crucial, for my thinking about *Hunger of Memory,* to keep in mind that genre reciprocally influences cultural norms. The culture’s most fundamental notions—of coming of age, of how subjectivity and consciousness work, what type of person is a villain and what punishment they deserve, how experiences accrue and generate a sense of self—are all inherent to and perpetuated by generic forms. The protagonist of a *bildungsroman,* for example,always works to achieve a coherent selfhood integrated into society, and hence, certain assumptions about the self and about society are inherent to the genre: society is a good place, into which one would desire to be integrated; there is such a thing as a “true self.” Articulated thus, it becomes clear that contemporary memoir clearly reproduces the assumptions of the *bildungsroman*. In her 2012 memoir, *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness*,Susannah Cahalan writes in the first person only about the moments when she was not affected by the disease-induced madness; the time when an autoimmune disorder made her behave “madly,” she needed at first to write in the third person because she felt that the person behaving in ways inconsistent with her own character was not her.

That a culture’s norms, values, and epistemologies are reinforced and perpetuated through genres is a well-documented truth, but less attention has been paid to what, in *Feminisms and the Self,* Morwenna Griffiths shows to be a writer’s power to employ genre as a means of subverting conventions of oppression and inequality. For example, by conforming to—but then subverting—the conventions of standard autobiography, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* undermines patriarchal narratives and destabilizes gender binaries (Johnston).

That Rodriguez calls *Hunger,* at one point, “essays impersonating autobiography” (6) suggests that *Hunger* has more in common with *Orlando’s* tale of impersonation and gender subversion than is obvious at first. At the very least, it is (at least in part) via the mechanism of genre that both books accomplish their cultural work. In order to determine just what that cultural work is, we must investigate the book’s indeterminate genre, keeping in mind that to apply the metaphor of hybridity (a word Rodriguez doesn’t use) is to dismiss the problem instead of solving it. In “Against ‘Hybridity,’” Martina Allen observes that hybridity relies on static notions of genre, and I furthermore suggest that readings that rely on such static notions of genre—on an ideological understanding of genre—are responsible for the kind of interpretations that evinced animosity and vitriol from Rodriguez’s early reviewers.

Indeed, since as far back as 1975, when Philippe Lejeune’s “Autobiographical Pact” defined autobiography as, "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality," critics have wrestled with the problem of predicating the definition of autobiography solely on aspects of form. The notion of a “retrospective account” has been interpreted to mean chronological narration, and early critics cited the absence of narrative momentum typical of memoir as one of *Hunger’s* failures. While essays frequently recount events in narrative form, they may also be purely meditative—reflections about the world. Also, while length seems to be a candidate that distinguishes a memoir, a little research indicates that this is only in common parlance; the word memoir frequently denotes works of prose just as short as a typical essay (*Granta* and *The Hudson Review* are among several literary journals that distinguish the short memoirs from the essays they publish).[[2]](#footnote-2)

In declaring that autobiography involves “stressing [the writer’s] individual life and especially the history of his personality,” Lejeune is referring not to a formal feature but to “thematic structure” in Frow’s terms—a difference in focus, which determines, in turn, what the work accomplishes (Frow’s “rhetorical function”). Most critics agree that an essay is *about an idea*, or *about the world,* while memoir is *about the self*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Autobiography is thus understood as a quest for self-discovery, for addressing questions of selfhood, subjectivity, and identity—it is *about the self* *looking inward*. Conversely, the essay is a mode in which the *self looks out* and puzzles over the world.

Much more recently than Lejeune, in the 2011 edition of the influential college textbook *Fourth Genre*, Michael Steinberg (who also edits the journal *Fourth Genre*) expresses this distinction in his “working definitions” for the three subgenres he considers part of nonfiction (the fourth genre):

* **Essay**—an author’s engagement in prose with a subject or an experience; it becomes a personal essay when the author’s own individual, idiosyncratic self, worldview, or experiences is essential to the writing. The “plot” of the personal essay is the arc of the writer’s thinking.
* **Memoir**—a record of and reflection upon past events that the author experienced or witnessed… Tends to express how the writer’s past history has helped shape his or her present self (e.g., Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Silent Dancing”).

Philip Lopate’s effort to distinguish essay from memoir is a little more detailed. He writes:

the personal essayist is not necessarily out to win the audience’s unqualified love but to present the complex portrait of a human being. This spectacle is offered up in sections, which makes autobiographies and personal essays, for all their overlapping aspects, fundamentally different. A memoirist is entitled to move in a linear direction, accruing extra points of psychological or social shading from initial setups, like a novelist, the deeper he or she moves in the narrative. (xxix)

Lopate is arguing that the piecemeal rendering of the essayist’s self-portrayal, as opposed to the “total-person” portrait built via linear narration of life events by the memoirist, constitutes a fundamental difference. The language of “accruing” psychological depth, and the telling comparison to the novel, suggest that the memoir and the essay are repositories of different aspects of our culture, that they are arenas for the renegotiation of different things. It also suggests that a reader’s sense of the work’s thematic structure—what the work seems to be most about—is culturally contingent on values prevalent in the reader’s culture. Instead of stopping here, though, at the insight that genre refers to a dialectical relationship between what is in the text and the cultural context in which it is read, I would like to pursue the specific way memoir and essay have been distinguished by recent critics, in order to shed light on the specific way that dialectical relationship between text and culture operates in the case of *Hunger of Memory.*

One of the most prolific and insightful scholars of the essay, G. Douglas Atkins, insists that ideas are the “very life blood” of the essay, “at once the occasion, the driving force, the subject matter directly, and the center of attention” (31). The essay’s “inciting incident” is more frequently a question than an event, an itching or nagging on the part of the writer. Adrienne Rich’s “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” is about who she has become, her whole life and person, yet her opening sentence supports the reading implied by the subtitle, “an essay on Jewish identity”: “For about fifteen minutes I have been sitting chin in hand in front of the typewriter, staring at the snow. Trying to be honest with myself, trying to figure out why writing this seems to me so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame.” She sums it up: “I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew” (641). Although thinking about her Jewish identity might seem like the moment where memoir begins, the emphasis on her particular moment of writing (Frow’s “situation of address”) is a trope of the essay—she is ready to engage in a battle of ideas, ready to face ambivalence.

Because the essayist’s typical “situation of address” involves little biographical revelation, the drama is not that of a self forming or wrestling with the world, but of a *drama of ideas*, of rivaling propositions jockeying for attention, for a place in the resolution at which the essayist arrives.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rival, contradictory ideas have been the source of the essay’s drama since its beginnings—whether you locate them in Montaigne’s essays or Plato’s dialogues, to which Montaigne so frequently refers. In *Textual Friendship: The Essay as Impossible Encounter from Plato and Montaigne to Levinas and Derrida,* Kuisma Korhonen argues that the essayist is perpetually imagining an epistolary or face-to-face interlocutor, who challenges the writer to rethink and recast the ideas set forth. Montaigne, of course, started writing his *essais* after the death of Étienne de La Boétie, the friend with whom he loved to converse. Korhonen employs the metaphor of “textual friendship” for what makes the essay distinct from the article. While the article anticipates objections and rebuts them as if speaking to an adversary, the essay, as though addressing a friend, lets its vulnerabilities—its contradictions—show. Instead of persuasive rhetoric’s metaphors of contests and jousting, the essay is described using metaphors of play, of sauntering and rambling. Two parties can benefit from a game, but from a fight, no more than one. Hazlitt wrote of Montaigne that he didn’t conceal “juggling tricks” or make “labored attempts at proving himself always in the right, and everybody else in the wrong.” Instead, Montaigne offers his thoughts in all the candidness of their contradictions, and hopes that they will find a reader whose friendly disposition will engage with them, and make of them something more.[[5]](#footnote-5) Like many of Rodriguez’s harsher critics, Raymund A. Paredes uses the contradictions in the text to prove that in his “seemingly innocuous” style (294), the author “refuses to engage critically the surrounding culture” so that “*Hunger of Memory* is full of contradictions and garbled polemics” (295). I think the critics would find Rodriguez less “distressing” (Paredes 286) if they were to understand his flamboyant, playful, self-contradicting style as essayistic rather than as a refusal to conform to the memoirist’s more sincere, confessional mode.

Because the essay’s drama is a contest of ideas rather than a self wrestling to become whole and integrated into its world, *time* in the essay is what erases old, provisional ideas (and the essays that bear them); time is what will bring along new ideas, new issues of the same periodical, new voices, new guises of the same writer (Elia dies, but Charles Lamb keeps writing). In any discussion of the essay, Montaigne’s choice of the word *essai* to indicate a *trial,* a *weighing*, an *attempt* gets an obligatory nod—but that etymology tells us more than we often acknowledge. The *attempt* implies provisionality, precariousness with respect to time, the possibility of failure and a second attempt, and so the *essay* is distinguished from the article, which prepares itself more strategically for its task, formulating its thesis beforehand and stating it up front. For the article intends not to *attempt* but to *accomplish*, to convey information and to achieve persuasion. Adorno writes, “the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction,” and the story of Rodriguez’s (mis)readings shows that anyone who expects such a “construction” will arrive at impoverished readings of essayistic work.

In opposition to the provisional nature of the essay, subject to erasure by time, in memoir, time is what allows the narrated events to have their impact, and the work of memoir—the realizations about the self that happen as a result of recollection of and reflection on the self’s history—grows more feasible with time. As definitions such as Lejeune’s indicate, in traditional memoir and autobiography, time builds, time accrues; time is imagined as a linear progression that has culminated, has produced the self under investigation. The tradition of essayists using a made-up persona (The Idler, Isaac Bickerstaff, Mr. Spectator, Aristides) with no life history to account for their character serves as a counterpoint to this. The difference in how each genre relates to time are integral to the assumptions about the world and subjectivity that are inherent in a given genre.

Autobiography imagines the self as whole—though most works acknowledge that subjectivity is fragmentary, the discourse around the self’s fragmentation belies the lingering ideal of coherence and unity of self. In 1956, Georges Gusdorf defined the work of autobiography as “reconstructing the unity of a life across time.” By the 1980s, scholars of autobiography took for granted that such “unity of a life” is unattainable, but continued to focus on how autobiographers such as Henry Adams *resist* the self’s fragmentation. I think contemporary memoir continues this tradition of struggling toward a wholeness of self, fighting against fragmentation, “coming to terms” with aspects of the self (character traits, family history) that are, when the narrative begins, unacknowledged, unassimilated into the story of self. The narrative is a symbolic act that performs the work (rhetorical function) of resolving a contradiction in society (I’m drawing on Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* here). The way I understand it, the memoir today performs the work of resolving the problem of feeling that parts of one’s “self” don’t fit into the social order, or into the whole, healthy person one would like to be. Mary Antin’s *Promised Land,* Mark Doty’s *Firebird,* and Sue William Silverman’s *Love Sick* achieve this function,whereas *Hunger of Memory* operates in tension with this expectation of resolution or transcendence*.* Autobiography shares this function with the tradition of the spiritual autobiography or conversion narrative,[[6]](#footnote-6) from which many think the present-day memoir arises. Though memoirists no longer meet God, the “conversion” of a secular autobiographer is her integration into the world, reconciling herself with the norms appropriate to her gender and class—or challenging them. Henry Adams’s *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) and Patricia Hampl’s *A Romantic Education* (1981) are examples with which *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* is in obvious conversation. However, to take too much stock in the similarities, and measure *Hunger of Memory*’s success according to how well it matches the accomplishments of such apparent predecessors, is to impose restrictions on what we can make of the book. The writing itself offers many reasons to believe that expecting *Hunger of Memory* to line up with our expectations of memoir is unsound. For example, we’ve established that autobiography is always about the self, whereas Rodriguez unsettles this when he claims, “This autobiography, moreover, is a book about language” (6). That shouldn’t be possible; and that the book purports to do it is an undeniable indication that the work is rewriting the genre, or at least contesting what were theretofore the limits of what a memoir could do.

It is worth considering the possibilities opened up by reading *Hunger* as a collection of essays. To justify such a reading, one might argue that in spite of the book’s adherence to chronology, and in spite of its focus on who Richard has become (“Here is the life of a middle class man” [5]), we don’t actually get much emotional or psychological detail about that journey. The information Rodriguez gives of himself is sparse and lacking in interiority—it is chiefly what he *thinks*. Raymund A. Paredes considers this a failure: “Rodriguez’s evocation of his ethnic childhood is extremely superficial” (285). Reading *Hunger* as an essay collection renders this not a problem but a function of genre—the revelation is the thinking, and what is revealed of the writer’s old self is revealed the way Charles Lamb (or Elia) and E. B. White did—all the events are true, and they happened to the same person, but little effort is made to prove the coherence of that individual’s selfhood. In an interview more than twenty years after *Hunger* was published, Rodriguez explains, “I don't think the gay man who now lives in San Francisco in this apartment wrote [*Hunger of Memory*]; I don't think I'm the author of that book. That boy was exactly his own author; that voice created itself” (188).

In fact, the “sections” mentioned by Lopate and the corresponding “glimpses” described by Atkins are exactly what Rodriguez offers, and always in the service of the *idea* that unites the book—education, and the separation from family that such an education demands. Every vignette gives way to exposition and reflection on the problem of being an immigrant in search of power and freedom. The book is divided into discreet parts, all of which function as essays do, revolving around an idea, and although they loosely follow the chronology of Rodriguez’s life, the large time gaps, which the reader is implicitly invited to fill, go by without comment.

Without comment, too, goes the book’s most glaring contradiction: that even as he makes his case for abandoning the private self and becoming public, becoming an American, the book dwells on Rodriguez’s childhood, maintains its investment in his Mexican identity even as he ostensibly renounces it. In “Dissonant Voices in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One,*” Nidesh Lawtoo interrogates the constant tension between the Richard American/public identity and the Mexican/private Ricardo identity, noting that the latter functions as a return of the repressed private self. Lawtoo understands the conflict between what is said and what is implied as the text’s *aporia*: Rodriguez’s “portrayal of sexuality as profoundly private and individuated is the very narrative…undergirding (and thus rendering problematic) his critique of racial identity as a public and collective affair” (57).

When a text is held together by a great unspoken—and the last chapter’s title “Mr. Secrets” should be remembered here—and when that unspoken seems to underpin and drive and overshadow and trouble every word of the text in spite of being silenced, muffled, repressed, then the book cannot be about anything as much as it is about the silenced thing. Repression gives it primacy, danger. *Hunger,* according to this thinking, is a collection of essays about an idea, about an anguish, about the anguish of what he cannot say—what the book is never able to say—what Rodriguez has never been allowed to say—it is about *the idea* that because in Mexico there is no language to say *homosexual,* Rodriguez was forced to choose between being Mexican—that is, being part of his family—and being American—loving men.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This truth is present at every turn—in the twists and turns of Rodriguez’s rhetorical patterns. Here, for example, as soon as he asserts the importance of disconnection, he undercuts his own assertion with doubt: “The scholarship boy…cannot afford to admire his parents (How could he and still pursue such a contrary life? He permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education)” (51). The arguments in favor of relinquishing ties to the parents begin to read more like a theatrical performance, more like an attempt to *pass* for someone he has not really managed to become. The reason, which he cannot speak, is that for as long as he resists assimilation, he will have to abide by the logic of his Mexican family, which is a context with no language for gay men, a context in which he cannot say *I love him*.

I think that as we hear a lot of clamor about policies, politics—outside things—and hear not a word about desire, we are invited to endure, to experience, the silencing of Rodriguez himself—of the homosexual who loves his family and loves the place from which he comes even though that place, that family, is one that will never listen to the words Rodriguez will one day most want to say, “*I love him.*” Rodriguez provides on the literal level an argument available to strangers, but below the surface, another meaning awaits—invites—the mind of a friend, a reader who can see behind his political arguments and can apprehend (is willing to bear) what is impossible to say.

Lawtoo explains that missing this aporiaand its power is what gives rise to the short-sighted readings of critics such as Raymund A. Paredes and Petra Fachinger, who both accuse Rodriguez of essentialism and of what Frantz Fanon calls “mimicry,” and believe the writer lacks awareness of the problematic nature of his actions and arguments. By taking the arguments at face value and missing the undercurrents moving directly against them, such critics end up with a reading whose simplistic nature leads to the very same essentialism they complain of in *Hunger*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Lawtoo says such critics “read in sociological and political terms” (225).

Similarly, Randy Rodriguez in “Richard Rodriguez Reconsidered: Queering the Sissy (Ethnic) Subject” demonstrates that Rodriguez’s critics are motivated by modernist, progressive, nationalist “epistemologies of enlightenment” and for this reason, they demand of *Hunger of Memory* “linearity of thought, synthesis of dualisms, explanation of contradictions, progressive accumulation of knowledge” (398). According to Randy Rodriguez’s reading of *Hunger’s* critics, Richard Rodriguez receives blame for failing to exhibit the “rational, objective, resistant, integrated, consciousness of a properly historically and ideologically conscious agent” (399). The critic demonstrates that the power of *Hunger of Memory* lies in the way the writer embodies the very effeminate yearning for the seductive yearning that readers loathe in themselves: “his flirting with us, his sexual teasing, his erotic confessions can be viewed as important sources for his hostile rejection” (405). Randy Rodriguez argues, ultimately, that critics were distressed by the way the book refuses to align with their political positions, that Richard Rodriguez is determined to “challenge the rugged, masculine honesty and simple exposition desired by his critics” (400). These crucial observations about *Hunger’s* style are associated, in Randy Rodriguez’s article, more with who Richard is and less with the essay as a genre, which is what I would like to pursue.

Like Randy Rodriguez, Paul John Eakin offers a strong analysis of *Hunger of Memory,* which relies more on Rodriguez’s psychology than on the book’s genre. Eakin astutely finds that, “lurking at the heart of the book is a lyric counterplot,”one which, moreover, seeks to “undo the story of entry into selfhood” (200). The “story of entry into selfhood” is plainly the convention of autobiography, and for this reason Eakin names it a “strikingly anti-autobiographical” and “antiself” impulse. To make sense of the “anti-autobiographical impulse,” Eakin resorts to the author’s personal psychology, which he pathologizes in order to account for what he sees as a textual anomaly.

We think of *Hunger of Memory* as an aberrant memoir only when we take as an initial premise of our reading the notion that the book is a memoir. What appears at first to be an anomaly or the result of a particular (pathological) psychology is, in fact, perfectly acceptable in an essay. The self-contradicting speaker who resists resolutions and courts ambivalance and aporiaare the conventions of the essay. Perhaps we should take Eula Biss’s claim that genre “doesn’t matter” to mean that we must not allow assumptions about a work’s genre to dictate how we read.

For a model of genre that could accommodate tropes of the essay operating within a memoir without resorting to the particularities of the memoirist’s psychology, I turn again to a study of Virginia Woolf’s innovative fiction. Randi Saloman’s *Virginia Woolf’s Essayism* identifies an “essayistic mode” that, at the end of the nineteenth century, “became operative within, or infiltrated, the literary novel, and helped produce the high modern novel” (2). Saloman borrows the term *essayism* from philosopher Robert Musil, and defines it as a writer’s willingness to allow conflicting ideas—contradictory possible truths—to coexist in tension, so that the text cedes to the reader the power to choose among them. Saloman articulates the essay’s operation within a narrative:

the essay's value comes finally from its capacity to thrive in a liminal space, one located just outside or on the cusps of various intersecting identities. It is the moments in which a person passes from self to self and is caught in the spaces that the essayist seeks to capture. (405)

This cusp of various intersecting identities, like the passing from (public, American) self to (private, Mexican) self applies perfectly to Rodriguez, and explains the part of his project that is least understood: Given that Catholicism does not recognize differences in sexual orientation in the way the word “queer” connotes, to be the “queer Catholic Indian Spaniard” that Rodriguez claims to be, he must carve out a liminal space, a new space, to inhabit, and he does it through essayism.

In an earlier essay on essayism(which merits more attention than it has had), Robert Atwan (series editor of *Best American Essays* since 1985) similarly explains that the essay must be seen “as a genre operating within the genres” and that essayism operates as “resistance to the aesthetic satisfactions of narrative” (12). Atwan’s appeal to genre rather than Rodriguez’s individual psychology thus makes possible a larger claim: that it is an act of “resistance”to something Atwan calls “the satisfactions of narrative” when the essayistic mode is operative within an autobiography. Hence—recalling the earlier discussion of genre as repositories of values, morals, epistemologies, and notions of selfhood and of power—the operation of essayism within an autobiography performs the cultural work of renegotiating what it means to come of age, to get an education, to become a man, and tell the story—to say, “Here is the life of a middle class man” (Rodriguez 6).

Once we see subversion of genre conventions as integral to Rodriguez’s project, we will start to see that strains of essayism abound in the text. For instance, he claims the book is “a kind of pastoral,” but one told not from the point of view of the upper class envying the rustic, leading him to this odd formulation: “The middle class rather is tempted by the pastoral impulse to deny its difference from the lower class—even to attempt cheap imitations of lower-class life” (5). He claims to want to resist this “temptation,” but it’s unclear whether he succeeds. In this and many other instances, Rodriguez, Like Woolf, surrenders total authorial control—relinquishes what Randy Rodriguez aptly calls “rugged, masculine honesty and simple [i.e., direct] exposition”—and allows the text to work against itself, conceding, via the force of implicit signs, that assimilation was no triumph: “I remember what was so grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained” (5). To discount the effect of essayism (the anti-autobiographical counternarrative) can make a reader miss the ironic stance implicit in Rodriguez’s mock-triumphant tone. And, it should be clear by now, that to miss the irony is also to miss the anguished silence—the compulsion to say exactly the opposite of one’s deepest truth—is to miss the book’s greatest, most poignant, source of power.

Reading *Hunger* *of Memory* as an autobiography animated by essayism not only frees us from pathologizing Rodriguez’s personal psychology, but also from the problematic metaphor of the hybrid, which imagines genres as static categories, and links the accomplishments of “queering the ethnic subject” to the nonfiction genres that such queering achieves. If instead we think about genre as a system of differences, we can see that every new text influences how others—especially its structural “neighbors” or generic kin—will be read. I am suggesting, here, an analogy between genre and Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of language as a system of differences, in which a word is slightly redefined each time it is reused and, as a consequence, so are the meanings of neighboring words whose meanings are determined in opposition to that word.

From this perspective, the problem I am investigating must not be framed simply as the fact that *Hunger of Memory* is read as memoir by some and as an essay collection by others. Rather, the problem is located at a deeper level, in an ideological understanding of genre that fails to imagine *every* text as necessarily partaking of multiple genres. *Hunger’s* multiple generic labels create a problem only when our norm is the generically pure, distinct text. In this system, the “hybrid” is an exception, in the sense that a hybrid is a mixing of two static, reified, stable categories with fixed or fixable boundaries. If we see genre as a system of differences, then it becomes clear that what we connote with the word *hybridity* is true, to varying degrees, of all texts—not just the outliers—and the notion of hybrids as exceptional does not exist.

The way what Robert Atwan and Randi Saloman call *essayism* can be operative within novels, memoir, works of criticism, and other genres is one articulation of this more nuanced way of understanding that individual texts participate in multiple genres at once. It is through this mechanism of bringing into the genre of memoir the strains of essayism that Rodriguez creates a space for the not yet available cultural concept of the “queer Catholic Indian Spaniard.” It is his complex engagement with memoir and essay, writing “essays impersonating autobiography” that gives Rodriguez the freedom to make—however subtly, and to many readers unintelligibly—his poignant argument regarding the suffering of a sexuality that cannot speak plainly, but through the essay’s equivocation, makes itself plain.

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1. Martinez, Ruben. "My Argument with Richard Rodriguez: Or, a Defense of the Mexican-American Chicanos Love to Hate." *LA Weekly* Oct. 1992: 18-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his 2007 *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, Thomas Larsen writes, “It’s true that critics have conflated autobiography and memoir throughout our literary history. But what we need to do is sharpen their growing distinction” (17). In 2011, G. Thomas Couser comments in *Memoir: An Introduction* that autobiography and memoir are still widely used as though “synonymous and interchangeable” (18). An investigation of how these terms are used is needed, but it is beyond the scope of this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Leigh Gilmore: "As a genre, autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts as seemingly diverse as the Christian confession, the scandalous memoirs of the rogue, and the coming-out story in order to achieve as proximate a relation as possible to what constitutes truth in that discourse" (3). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In a keynote speech for Dignity USA in 2009, Rodriguez grafts the discourse of personal narrative onto the discourse on the essay, and calls the essay the “biography of an idea.” One has an idea in one moment, he suggests, but as the idea is allowed to develop, it will change and struggle for coherence in spite of the endlessly elusive nature of such unity just as autobiography dramatizes the struggle to achieve a unified, coherent self-identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” advocates for a use of the essay as a vehicle for criticism because it can equivocate, hold in tension contradictory ideas and, again, like the conversations between Socrates and his disciples, engage a negative dialectic. Gigante’s *The Great Age of The English Essay* and Stuckey-French’s *The American Essay in the American Century* offer in-depth discussions of how the current-day essay was shaped by the moment in history when the periodical essay—which imitated conversation—reached its heyday. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Daniel B. Shea’s “The Prehistory of American Autobiography,” Madeline Ruth Walker’s *The Trouble with Sauling Around: Conversion in Ethnic American Autobiography*, and Daniel Mendelsohn’s "But Enough About Me: What Does the Popularity of Memoirs Tell Us about Ourselves?" The captivity narrative, an important genre to colonial America, is also considered a kind of conversion narrative, and exhibits similarities to current memoir in that the self is captured by the Other, but the narrative performs the desired resolution in the return of the captive—the captives are always returned, and so the genre generates a sense of security in the culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I too, became American when I was faced with this same choice, which doesn’t feel like any kind of choice but like the facing of two impossibilities, like an encounter with the limits of saying. Like *Hunger of Memory,* my creative work so far is always about this and always refuses to say it. My interest throughout this examination in the limits of saying is ultimately motivated by this, by the way that for me the only true way to talk about sexuality and the way a culture silences that sexuality is by demonstrating where it lies beyond the limits of the sayable. I mention this because it relates to this decision of genre, of what it means to be “about” an idea or about the self—I think that we read texts as being “about” whatever it is we need the text to be about. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. C.F. Rodriguez’s 1999 interview: “I think that it is reductionist to say that it is necessarily a homosexual chapter, or indeed that these experiences, like the longing for the sense of a secret, are homosexual experiences. Had I established homosexuality in this book I would have turned the book sociologically into more than I wanted… To think of it as a Chicano homosexual book would be…reductionist.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)