

Parenthetical pillars:
the subtleties of
phrasing and identity
in 'hunger of memo...



Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical *Hunger for Memory* outlines his intellectual development from early childhood to adulthood. As the title suggests, Rodriguez recounts and reflects upon the various memories of importance to this development. He simultaneously addresses political topics — arguing against bilingual education and affirmative action — while establishing the story of his own identity as a complex architecture connecting his Mexican-American background to his class to his religion to his body to his profession as a writer. He does this all while switching between either side of various fenestrations separating his public and private lives. Though he discusses each of these pillars distinctly, he complicates his identity and paradoxically constructs an anomalous architecture of a mutable self through intentionally inconsistent argumentation and observable changes in his own language. Ultimately, his identity as a hyper-Americanized Mexican-American forms the most important cornerstone in his confounded self; his uses of parenthetical phrases throughout discussions of other aspects of his identity act as windows between his public and private lives and as solipsistic expressions of the part of himself he can only convey through his writing.

Rodriguez's descriptions of his early childhood contain parenthetical phrases reflective of the nascence of the clash between his public and private lives, stemming from his earliest conceptualizations of language. Describing his private home life, he keeps them mostly short, using several single words in parentheses, amplifying their preceding modified element. He remembers that he would “hear [his] mother call out. . . in Spanish (words)” (16), ironically calling attention to— rather than de-emphasizing— the idea of “

words”, thus beginning to show their importance to his development.

Already he begins to intermix his early education with notions of his private racial identity, their relationship contributing also to his affinity for language. Yet, at the same time, he employs the nature of parenthetical punctuation to separate the two, distinctly referring to his first language, “ Spanish”, and to “ words”, or language in general, as separate entities. Similarly he layers the public and private components of his identity when he writes that “ inside the house [he] would resume (assume) [his] place in the family” (16). In this case his parenthetical “ assume” redefines “ resume”, creating an uncertainty regarding the nature of his home life; the parenthesis are a window into the interior private life of his home, yet he must “ assume” this private identity. Thus he defines his private life in terms of his public audience, whom he is inextricably aware of.

Evolving from brief expressions of his private life among his public struggles, Rodriguez’s parenthetical phrases turn into solipsistic expressions of his own struggle to discover his identity but maintain an emphasis on the role that his own writing and understanding of language played in that struggle.

Discussing his use of the English language as a child, he “ couldn’t believe that the English language was [his] to use,” expanding in parentheses that “[he] did not want to believe it” (18). This contrast between this disbelief and absence of desire to believe reflects the solipsistic struggle to convey his sense of identity as a variable structure. Adding layers to his writing and to his identity, often redefining his own statements to confound public and private, his syntax parallels his constantly changing identity. But alternating with these seemingly decisive redefinitions, Rodriguez uses parentheses to

pose equally broad questions about his own self. To these questions he often grants a greater degree of syntactic autonomy, as they exist independent of any non-parenthetical sentence. It is with these questions that he digs even deeper the foundation on which the structure of his identity stands; they create a layer beyond public and private as he asks himself— “ Did I somehow suspect. . .” (19)— speaking to some hyper-personalized self which he can only express by creating such an extra, language-based layer. The opposite uses of parentheses he employs— both as means to define and to broaden — further complicate the architectural subtleties of his identity, and support his underlying political argument against the idea of a generic, static identity based solely-upon race or background, but still inextricable from them.

While he establishes these patterns in his use of parentheticals— typically using them to access more deeply personal, and private, aspects of himself — his uses them in a drastically different way when he discusses his religious identity. In this sense they initially have a neutral and rather technical function in his language; he uses them to provide information about possibly esoteric knowledge of Catholicism. He clarifies the nature of “ the unforgivable sin (against the holy ghost)” (88); distinguishes “ the dangers of mixed marriage (between a Catholic and a non-Catholic)” (83). These phrases, however, evolve into a pattern of public expression, sometimes literally assuming the voice of a person from Rodriguez’s public life. In switching to using parentheticals to stand for the intensely public— as opposed to the intensely private —aspects of his identity, as he switches from discussing the “ Aria” of his development to his religious background

and awakening, Rodriguez further illustrates the complexity of his identity as a collection of related but evolving pieces. However, even as he does this, he allows his identity as a writer to influence both public and private, referring still to “the sounds” of the words spoken by the nuns at church. Yet at the same time as he bridges the gap between his public lives, his use of parentheticals continues to divide them—rather than including the information without parentheses, he isolates them with punctuation in order to argue for the importance of their separation without losing the dynamic relationship they have with one another.

Rodriguez’s self-construction of his identity is unquestionably intentionally convoluted. He establishes patterns in language to reflect ideas of his public and private lives only to change said patterns entirely in ways that can only be intended to draw attention to the points of variation. His parenthetical phrases act as much more than ways to emphasize or separate certain pieces of information, but rather as ports through which he reveals the nature of his hyper-personal inner self or his hyper-public observations. As a common device throughout his discussions the various aspects of his identity, the phrases he chooses to put in parentheses act as pillars cornering them, connection them like rooms in a home. Through his frequent flips in meaning he successfully constructs a detailed architectural identity, unable to be understood only by a single room — race, religion, class, language— but perfectly complex under closer examination of all elements together.