

# Pieces of words: rodriguez's identity as a writer



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Richard Rodriguez attempts to write about learning to write in no unclear terms in his autobiography *Hunger for Memory*. Rodriguez constantly fluctuates between two extremes: the fear and dislike of writing due to its incredibly personal nature and the belief that writing is the most public form of expression. As he seeks to deal with his enormous uncertainty regarding his ideals of private and public, he attempts to do this through the lense of a writer. Rodriguez discusses the influence of his intimate Spanish-speaking home life on his literarily development through the process of his education. A constant juxtaposition of literature, home life, and his identity as a writer serve as pieces in a puzzle that Rodriguez tries desperately to put together. Though Rodriguez seeks desperately to discuss his personal and public life through the lense of his education, ultimately his baseline ambiguity regarding his most basic identity as a writer precludes a successfully clear description of any of the pieces of his life.

Rodriguez persistently insists that writing is the most isolated career path, as he must eloquently divulge what is most personal to him. Rodrigues asserts that he writes " of one life only", his own (6). He views writing as not only a deeply private ritual of looking at the colorful puzzle pieces of his life and choosing which pieces to write down, but also as a deeply individual experience. His recurring use of metawriting delves deeper into the personal aspect of writing as he constantly discovers more layers of himself and his language. Throughout his education, Rodriguez recalls the tendency of " written words" to make him feel " all alone", as though the work of fitting together an array of words was an inescapably involved task (64). Continuing this symbiotic trend of writing and loneliness, Rodriguez begins to find

comfort in the “ exclusive society, separated from others” of his fellow writers (75). His identity as a writer provides a piece of his life that is very different from the rest and that creates a more interesting and unique picture than any other part of his life. Even the literal act of writing he considers a “ lonely journey” (189). The puzzle of his identity must be completed without the aid of others as he pieces together the fragments of his identity- alone. Rodriguez repeatedly insists that writing is a very personal act, yet constantly discusses the inherently public nature of writing.

Just as often as he discusses his reclusive habit of writing, he simultaneously dreads the inherently public nature of his work as he faces great ambiguity regarding his own work. A young child that struggles to connect his personal and public life, writing “[determines] [his] public identity” (6). Writing provides Rodriguez only with extreme feelings of isolation yet it literally defines him in public. His own autobiography, what should be the most deeply personal work of his life, and yet he feels to him like “ the most public thing [he] has ever done” (191). As he writes his story, he discusses the physical and emotional process of writing, continuing his use of metawriting and sometimes metabasis. Ironically in fact, he least concerned with himself. He believes he is writing for the “ public reader” (191). His discussion of the audience seems to use metawriting to both isolate and connect himself to the outside world of his readers. He is focused on his own alienation while writing yet at the same time is even more focused outside of himself, on his audience. Rodriguez seems completely incapable of determining whether the work is for himself or for the reader as he describes the process of writing painfully. There is intense antithesis in the way that the written word is both

so terrifyingly desolate, the “ impersonality of the written word”, yet it is still the medium that Rodriguez uses to communicate his most deeply personal feelings (205). Only through writing can Rodriguez communicate his “ vast public identity”. Only through prolonged periods of intense loneliness can Rodriguez begin to feel understood. The irony that exists in Rodriguez's contradictory feelings toward writing determines the methods he uses to communicate his life- both public and personal.

Rodriguez's very identity as a writer is the definition of ambiguity and as he writes, this ambiguity relating to the act of writing only further spreads throughout all of his discussions. The conflicting feelings of Rodriguez toward what he is most basically -a writer- lead to his overwhelming lack of clear identity, resulting in his writing being made of “ words like jigsaw pieces” (197). Rodriguez's words, his language, the very things that make him a writer already irrevocably do not fit together. His metawriting further emphasizes his own confusion as he can not escape the circle of his identity. Rodriguez “ writes” and he is “ a writer” (1). Still, he sometimes feels unable to face the “ isolation writing requires” (189). Nevertheless, Rodriguez still finds solace in writing. This piece of him that remains so painful and contradictory still provides a place where he “ no longer needs to feel alone or eccentric” (203). He uses his identity as a writer to attempt to dole the “ sharp distinction between public and private life” (200). Rodriguez attempts to put the puzzle of his identity together in a more coherent way, with fewer jagged jigsaw edges and “ distinctions”, but ultimately by putting together his own puzzle he only further blows the lines. However, this ambiguity in his

opinions of his writing bleed through onto all of the other pieces of his identity and only further blur lines and increase overall ambiguity.

Words are the glue with which Rodriguez attempts to create a beautiful, unified picture of his identity. However, due to contradictory nature of his sentiments toward writing, by writing about writing (metawriting), he only further jumbles and confounds the puzzle pieces of his already confounding persona. As Rodriguez desperately attempts to form a coherent identity presented through a coherent autobiography, he ultimately only further confuses both and leaves his argument ineffective and ambiguous: writing fails to create a complete puzzle.