Performing the Chicano (Homo)erotic in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*

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Richard Rodriguez’s essay style autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1981), narrates the story of a young Mexican American who finds success through education. However, this education comes at a cost, which is the alienation from his family and from his Mexican culture and identity. As Rodriguez retraces his nostalgic past in this intellectual coming of age narrative, he realizes that it is not solely the memory of his childhood for which he hungers, but also a connection with the present and a desire to live a more passionate life. The dilemma of his static existence is a motif that surfaces throughout the text and it is often symbolized by the pressure Rodriguez feels to make choices: He must choose between the intimacy of family life and the isolating ivory tower of education, between his private identity bound by family secrets and the public persona who dares to write of those secrets, and between the distinct polarities of working with his mind, but wanting to work with his body.

This last choice between intellect versus body represents a polarizing dichotomy that is the most divisive. Rodriguez, intellectually, is the scholarship boy who achieves enormous success through his studies. However, it is this desire for knowledge that leads him to a life of solitude, the culmination of which is symbolized by his study at the British Museum in London while working on his dissertation on British Renaissance literature. In contrast to his intellectual pride and success, physically, he is ashamed of his body, dark complexion, and Indian looks.

Rodriguez’s resentment towards his physical appearance transcends his perception of what society considers attractive. It is true that he is extremely self-conscious about his dark complexion and face that he describes as “severely cut to the line of ancient Indian ancestors [whose] profile suggests one of those beak-nosed Mayan sculptures” (Rodriguez 115). However, these feelings are not natural behaviors, but learned ones. Unfortunately, his physical insecurity is not always a direct result of society’s perspective, but more how Rodriguez’s own mother perceives color and darker shades of skin tones to be related to the poor and uneducated. Clearly, the young Rodriguez was affected by his mother’s negative opinion on the significance of being dark-skinned, especially when someone could control to what extent how dark one became. Rodriguez learns this at an early age when he would play outside in the sun during the summer and return darker than when he left. His mother would scold him upon entering the house, “You look like a negrito [...] You know how important looks are in this country. [...] You won’t be satisfied till you end up looking like los pobres who work in the fields, los braceros” (Rodriguez 113).

Through Rodriguez’s understanding of the power of color and class, the reader is able to infer that Rodriguez’s negative feelings towards his own appearance are not simply about physical confidence, something he lacks during much of his youth. As shall be explained, on a

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1 Some of *Hunger of Memory*’s other major themes include writing and authorship, Mexican Catholic culture, affirmative action and bilingual education, and the coming of age story. The vast differences in themes can be contributed to the fact that portions of this book were published earlier as separate essays.

2 *Negrito* is a diminutive term for Black person and *los pobres* refers to poor people.
deeper level, this learned behavior represents his social paralysis. This is evident when
Rodriguez reveals his desire to live a more passionate life by working more with his body and
less with his mind. The fact that Rodriguez places different values on work that is produced by
the mind and the body reveals much about his identity crisis. In essence, he is stating that all of
his education and reading have not taught him how to achieve a passionate life. Therefore, if the
mind does not lead to a passionate life, then the body must certainly do so. It is this search for
pleasure through the body and physical labor that underscores much of the narrative. To explain
the significance of the body and physical pleasure in Hunger of Memory and how it relates to
society, I will examine the connection between the individual body, the public working body,
performance, and the erotic.

The erotic can be a difficult space to define. It is easily evasive and a challenge to
categorize. Perhaps for this reason the erotic has too often been oversimplified and equated with
sexual desire. In Rodriguez’s narrative it is much more complex and layered. Likewise, the term
homoerotic suggests sexual desire, again creating a one-dimensional plane (qtd. in Novick 2).
However, as Leon Edel explains, the difference in the latter is that the expressed desire never
translates into physical fruition, a point that, as shall be seen, is relevant to Rodriguez’s erotic
experience (Novick 2).

Problematicizing its popular physical connotation, Audrey Lorde explains that the erotic is
often confused, trivialized, equated with the psychotic, and made into a plasticized sensation
(54). In essence, the erotic is consistently misunderstood and deformed. Alternatively, Lorde
interprets the erotic from a multifaceted perspective endowed with a more positive approach with
the important purpose of creating the capacity for joy (57). In this vein, as Lorde explains, the
erotic allows one to experience a deep satisfaction within the rhythms of life. More importantly,
Lorde states that the first function of the erotic is to provide the power which comes from sharing
deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional,
psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for
understanding much of what is not shared between them, and it is this deep connection that
lessens the threat of their difference (Lorde 56).

Working with Lorde’s definition of the erotic I will analyze how Rodriguez seeks
pleasure through the rhythm of the physical gratification he finds in working with his body, and,
more importantly, how he shares this experience with the braceros, Mexican laborers, attempting
to lessen their (socio-cultural) differences. The shared experience with the braceros is of special
significance because by working with them Rodriguez is able to reconnect with his (constructed)
Mexican identity and culture. Thus by building this bridge between himself and the braceros
Rodriguez is able to (re)create a physical and emotional connection with a piece of himself with
which he has lost memory. For Rodriguez, this represents an erotic experience on different
levels.

3 The term “Braceros” refers to Mexican laborers who legally worked in the United States to relieve a labor shortage
during WWII as an agreement between both governments. The term is still used today, although less frequently, to
refer to Mexican immigrant workers in the U.S. The program officially ended in 1964.
Related to this erotic relationship Rodriguez creates with the *braceros* is his dilemma of feeling obligated to choose between competing social structures. With the *braceros* it is the division between his Mexican roots and the working class versus Americanization and upward mobility. However, Rodriguez’s dichotomous nature, although heavily involved with class and race, also deals with gender issues. By choosing to align himself with one gender identity over the other is analogous to equating the erotic exclusively with sex. For this reason, Rodriguez’s social and cultural identity can be defined as queer for being a position that questions the ideologies of social construction and posits the dialogue into a deeper realm of contestation involving much more than just sex. Even Rodriguez, before fully exploring his emotions, is susceptible to such a train of thought. Rodriguez recognizes early in his life that due to his interest in language, education, and literature—interests that he connotes with femininity—he has favored his feminine characteristics over his masculine traits. Rodriguez even states that “education was making [him] effeminate,” which leads him to analyze his gender identity and his separation from his masculine identity: “I knew that I had violated the ideal of the *macho* by becoming such a dedicated student of language and literature. *Machismo* was a word never exactly defined by persons who used it. (It was best described by the ‘proper’ behavior of men.)” (Rodriguez 127-28).

In *Hunger of Memory* it is Mexican men who define *macho* behavior through their actions. According to Rodriguez, to be a *macho* man, one must possess the three F’s: *feo, fuerte,* and *formal.* *Feo* in the context of *machismo* does not mean ugly, but to have rugged good looks. *Fuerte* here does not refer to physical strength, but to have inner strength and character. *Formal,* perhaps the most important character ideal, means to be steady, responsible, a good provider, constant, and a man of high seriousness. However, being *formal* does not necessarily mean that a man is quiet, but he should neither be overly talkative. Rodriguez at home is quiet, which helps him appear *formal* to those who know him privately, but in the public sphere at school he is definitely not *formal* to which he admits: “But outside the house – my God! – I talked. Particularly in class or alone with my teachers, I chattered” (Rodriguez 129). Because Rodriguez knows that he is not being *formal* due to his fascination with language and that “there was something unmanly about [his] attachment to literature,” he must find a way to strike a balance regarding his gender identity and become more *macho* (Rodriguez 129). The impossible task, however, would be to deny his love for language and literature, which in masculine terms, both Mexican and Anglo, is almost always connected to femininity.

A comparative example from Chicano letters that demonstrates the above point on literature and femininity is John Rechy’s novel *City of Night* (1963). The nameless protagonist in this narrative is a young man who displays an intellectual curiosity by reading literature, who is also undertaking an apprenticeship of sorts as a gay hustler. However, according to Juan Bruce-Novoa, the nameless protagonist in *City of Night* must learn to repress his intellectual and literary curiosity if he is to become successful in his new found profession. In fact, one of his

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4 John Rechy is a first generation Mexican American who grew up in El Paso, Texas. He is not often connected with Chicano letters since much of his work deals with homosexual themes and gay hustling, and consequently his work was not read as part of the early Chicano experience. Homosexual themes in Chicano literature were still not widely accepted even after Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory* was published some twenty years later.
first lessons about gay hustling is to “play it dumb” (Rechy 26). The narrator-protagonist quickly learns that this principle holds true:

And I learned too that to hustle the streets you had to play it almost-illiterate. [...] But I was to learn it graphically from a man I had met on Times Square. As he sat in his apartment studying me, I leafed through a novel by Colette. The man rose, visibly angered. “Do you read books?” he asked me sharply. “Yes,” I answered. “Then I’m sorry, I don’t want you anymore,” he said; “really masculine men don’t read!” Hurriedly, his sexfantasy evaporated, he gave me a few bucks. Minutes later I saw him again on Times Square talking to another young man…” (sic) (Rechy 36-37)

Other male suitors in the narrative also reinforce that homosexual fantasies deal only in part with physical desire; they also establish intellectual expectations, or the lack thereof. This is evident when on another occasion, despite knowing that the protagonist will come off as an intellectual and turn off his potential suitor, he corrects his client when he confuses T.E. with D.H. Lawrence. The client’s response and loss of interest supports his assumption when he replies, “Oh, dear me [...] how frightful—an Intellectual! You should have kept your mouth closed young man. My oh my—oh!—the mind of an old man and the body of a young boy. Dear, dear me! [...] I prefer them very young and very, very dumb, dear” (Rechy 229-30). After this rite of passage en route to becoming a successful sex hustler and considering the preference for young and dumb by homosexual Johns, the protagonist learns how to role-play so that he can make his money. This point is supported by Juan Bruce-Novoa, who explains that “within the narrative the protagonist’s persona is that of the non-intellectual, sexual being, a body with a severely limited mind. He must erase all signs of difference that distinguish him from the average hustler on the street if he is to successfully perform to the expectations of his audience” (Bruce-Novoa 21).

Bruce-Novoa keenly observes two important points here. First, that Rechy’s protagonist must erase all signs of difference between himself and the other street hustlers. These differences must be minimized, but not so that Rechy’s character can make money to support himself, which is important in and of itself, but rather so that he can meet the expectations of his audience. What is not completely clear here is if the audience of which Bruce-Novoa speaks is the protagonist’s clients who expect a certain performance, the other hustlers on the street who undoubtedly know who the competition is, or the reader who also brings to the narrative his/her own experiences and expectations. This open interpretation by Bruce-Novoa allows the reading to become richer as it opens up the possibilities of how we interpret Lorde’s definition of the erotic as the basis for the understanding between people who share deeply any pursuit creating a profound connection that lessens the threat of the differences between them.

In this sense, the erotic that develops in City of Night can be seen as a queer erotic. This does not refer to a strict interpretation of homosexual behavior. It is not straight versus gay. Sex is only one component of several that make this erotic. The more profound connection is how these people lessen the threat of their difference by finding common ground. In essence, that which makes people more like one another is bound to forge stronger relationships across sexual, gender, race, and class boundaries.
Bruce Novoa’s second observation in regards to Rechy’s protagonist is that what he does is akin to performance. He must perform to fit the expectations of what his clients want, a purely sexualized body that is detached from intellectual equality. In other words, these men desire and seek out a space where they can live out their homosexual fantasies without having to admit to a homosexual lifestyle. It is not partnership they seek, but to exercise their power over an ostracized openly gay group with whom they can play out gay activity privately, but are not required to live a gay lifestyle publicly.

This double standard of participating in homosexual activity while at the same time rejecting a gay identity has changed much in Anglo American and European cultures since the narrative timeframe of City of Night. Homosexual men in the U.S. are now much more apt to openly embrace a gay lifestyle than during the 1950s and 60s. However, the same cannot always be said for gay communities in parts of Latin America where this double standard still exists. This rings true for Chicanos like Rechy and Rodriguez as well, who were raised to some extent as part of the larger Latin American community, because, according to Tomás Almaguer, “there is no cultural equivalent to the modern ‘gay man’ in the Mexican/Latin-American sexual system” (255). In such a relationship in which there is a lack of egalitarianism, it is helpful to examine the gender roles and how they influence the power paradigm between different social groups, which as shall be explained bears significance in the Chicano narratives presented here.

In the Latino homosexual relationship, which includes, in part, the Chicano population, it is not uncommon to find a certain level of inequality, particularly if one of the men does not consider himself gay, which, as strange as it might seem, is actually common in Latin American culture. For example, in such relationships in Mexico and Brazil it is well known that the man who penetrates is referred to as the activo, the active one, and the man who receives is the pasivo, the passive one (Almaguer 257). It is also common in many Latin American homosexual relationships in which roles are more fixed that these roles do not change much, particularly in more discreet relationships. What is also noteworthy in Latin American culture is that not only can the activo not perceive himself as gay since he is not penetrated, but often times society does not either. In this light, we can see this particular type of Latin American homosexual relationship as highlighting the sexual aim—“the act one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexually activity is directed—and gives only secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex” (Almaguer 257). Essentially, in these particular instances it is all reduced to the sexual role one is expected to play, or for the purposes of Rechy and Rodriguez, perform.

In City of Night the Johns who solicit homosexual activity are not just in it for the sex, but also for the role-playing and performance that they expect from the young hustler, who is at once actor and captive audience. But when he refuses to play his part in the charade of thinly veiling the gender and class roles, the performance abruptly ends and reality quickly sets in. In City of Night the repercussions for ceasing the performance seem temporary, at least until the

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5 This of course ranges from country to country and even city to city. In some large metropolitan cities such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires the gay community benefits from a more open and accepting society.
protagonist can move on to the next client. But gender role-playing can have deeper meaning when it begins to restrict one from pursuing a lifestyle that the person feels inhibited from living.

In this sense, Rodriguez in Hunger of Memory enacts a similar strategy involving gender role playing as he confronts his desire to be more masculine. As Rodriguez states, masculinity, or what he calls *machismo*, is not so much defined by words as it is described by actions and perceived by looks. In other words, *machismo* is performance. Aside from his father, the only other men who perform this *machismo* are the *braceros*, a group he silently envies, and seemingly desires.

Rodriguez on the surface is physically indistinguishable from the *braceros*. Although Rodriguez resembles them physically, he knows that he is also very different because he does not live the same active, physical lives as they do, and more importantly, he does not act and feel like a man who can work shirtless in the sun. Rodriguez may have the looks of a *macho* man due to his dark complexion, a trait that he shares with the *braceros*, but as an intellectual, he certainly lacks the ability to perform like one. That is until one day “Desire uncoiled within [him]” when he is offered a summer construction job to do “real work” (Rodriguez 131). Willing to perform like a *macho*, Rodriguez, upon arriving at the construction site, “takes off [his] shirt to the sun. And at last grasp desired sensation. No longer afraid. [He can] At last become like a *bracero*” (Rodriguez 131). Rodriguez quickly becomes physically invigorated by his work:

I labored with excitement that first morning – and all the days after. [. . .] There was too much physical pleasure in the labor. Especially early in the day, I would be most alert to the sensations of movement and straining. [...] My arms, tightened by sleep, would gradually loosen; after only several minutes, sweat would gather in beads on my forehead and then – a short while later – I would feel my chest silky with sweat in the breeze. [. . .] Even later in the day, my enthusiasm for primitive sensation would survive the heat and the dust and the insects pricking my back. I would strain wildly for the sensation as the day came to a close. At three-thirty, quitting time, I would stand upright and slowly let my head fall back, luxuriating in the feeling of tightness relieved. (Rodriguez 132)

It is clear that what Rodriguez seeks with this experience is not a summer job, but the opportunity to work with his hands and back. He wants to feel his body in a way he had not known before. He wants to know what real work is like, if only for a short while. He wants for once to be the worker, the *bracero*. Like the men in City of Night who expect and desire the hustler to fulfill their sexual fantasies through performance, Rodriguez is also fulfilling his own erotic fantasy by attempting to align himself with the working class, a performance for his unsuspecting audience, as well as for himself.

The critic, Richard T. Rodriguez in “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic” analyzes a similar situation, but instead of *braceros*, it is homeboys who represent the field of fantasy.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Note the difference between Richard Rodriguez (author of *Hunger of Memory*) and Richard T. Rodriguez (author of critical article).
These Chicano homeboys are masculine-looking, rough, shaven-head men, who some might equate with gangbangers. However, what separates these homeboys from the imagined image of them is the fact that they are homosexuals. The homeboy aesthetic according to Richard T. Rodríguez “refers to a style within Chicano/Latino gay male spaces, whose visibility emanates from the interplay of materiality and fantasy” (128). What it essentially describes is a fantasy in which two presumably tough-looking Chicanos actually play out a homosexual act and the viewer, who becomes a voyeur, is taken back yet drawn to the scene of action as if he were participating by making a once-private fantasy public and becoming a desiring subject (R.T. Rodríguez 129).

Richard T. Rodríguez uses Teresa de Lauretis’s definition of fantasy to describe the feelings of desire that such a scene creates. She defines fantasy as a fundamental human activity based on the capacity for imagining and imaging, for making images in one’s mind (imagining) and making images in material expressions (imaging) by various technical means such as drawing and photography, but also language and even one’s own body, for example, in performance (R.T. Rodríguez 129). In Richard T. Rodríguez’s analysis of imagining fantasy he deals with the homeboy aesthetic and how one can participate by viewing and thus desire to relate to the fantasy through voyeurism. However, the act of imaging the fantasy can be achieved through a number of methods.

Richard Rodriguez in Hunger of Memory also creates his own fantasy world where he is the desiring subject, but instead of a homeboy aesthetic, he fantasizes about a bracero homoerotic aesthetic. However, this is not strictly a sex fantasy, but also a class fantasy. Yes, he skirts around an implicit sexual attraction to the braceros’ bodies, but it is more of an attraction to their bodies as what they represent, masculinity and the freedom to be working class men:

Closer to home I would notice the shirtless construction workers, the roofers, the sweating men tarring the street in front of the house. And I’d see the Mexican gardeners. I was unwilling to admit the attraction of their lives. I tried to deny it by looking away. But what was denied became strongly desired. (Rodriguez 126)

Once Rodriguez is finally able to take off his shirt like the braceros and perform and become part of the scene of desire, he enthusiastically describes his actions. To reiterate, when describing his construction work experience Rodriguez relies on hyperbolic language to paint an erotic scene full of physical pleasure: laboring with excitement, his chest silky with sweat, wild straining and sensation, and luxurious feelings of tightness relieved. Through physical labor Rodriguez is finally able to do what was necessary in order to make himself part of the desired group by erasing the physical differences as much as possible through performance and (perceived) shared pleasure. He even garners an audience who examines him as the worker, albeit not in the same context of his imagined fantasy. In this sense, he feels that he becomes more than just a desiring subject, but also the object of desire, or at the very least, he can imagine himself as such. Thus by imagining himself as part of this group through his daydreaming and known attraction to their lives and by imaging his fantasy through his physical performance with the Mexican workers, Rodriguez is able to bridge the differences between himself and the working class men, albeit temporarily.
Rodriguez may have been able to become part of the fantasy scene through performance with his body, but he realizes that he was only fooling himself when he believed that a few weeks of hard work would grant him admission into the world of the laborer. Although his body allows him to resemble the **braceros** in one way, his education and mastery of language make him different in others, details that his perceived gazing audience discovers about him through the (wrong) use of his physical body. An older man scolds Rodriguez for not working the shovel correctly: “You’re doing it wrong, too fucking hard” (Rodriguez 132). Despite the experienced advice and good intentions, Rodriguez does not want to listen: “I was annoyed. I wanted to tell him that I enjoyed shoveling the wrong way. And I didn’t want to learn the right way. I wasn’t afraid of back pain. I liked the way my body felt sore at the end of the day” (Rodriguez 132-33). However, Rodriguez realizes that a fantasy can only remain just that because even a perfectly imagined fantasy will become fractured by those who cannot authenticate the performance as real. Hence, Rodriguez’s fantasy about young men who are powerful in the *formal* sense of the word is easily foiled by an older man who is powerless in all other aspects of Rodriguez’s social context. For while Rodriguez can rely on his education to help him become more socially mobile, the workers on the other hand will for the most part remain socially, economically, and politically limited in their opportunities.

Eventually, Rodriguez acknowledges that he does not belong in the world of the **braceros**. For a moment he is able to enjoy a deep erotic pleasure by sharing the working experience with the **braceros** that allows him to superficially feel like the object of the gaze, but it is nothing more than a performance. For this reason, Rodriguez’s erotic experience falls more into the homoerotic category as described by Leon Edel, because in the end his **bracero** fantasy is nothing more than an exercise in impotence, for what he truly desires he does not achieve; he is not the worker, he is the intellectual. However, to his credit, Rodriguez is no longer completely the *pasivo* either. He has learned how to become more of an *activo*, more masculine, more of a man, and without giving up his love for literature, or his feminine side. By the end of *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez still desires a more passionate life. In creating the erotic connection of which Lorde speaks, we could say that Rodriguez is not only attempting to bridge the gaps of understanding between himself and others, but also the gaps between his internal conflicts. By lessening the threat of difference between his feminine being and his masculine desire, Rodriguez is one step closer to experiencing a deeper satisfaction within the rhythms of his own life, an erotic experience in itself.

**Bibliography**


