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Alternative Ways of Challenging and Resisting in
Richard Rodriguez's *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*

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Abstract

There are several reasons why essayist Richard Rodriguez could be classified as a 'minority' writer; namely, his Mexican-American roots, his Catholic faith, and his self-declared homosexuality. However, readers who expect his writings to display the kind of attitudes and features that are common in works by other 'minority' authors are bound to be disappointed. The meditations that Rodriguez offers are far from clearly dividing the world between oppressors and oppressed or dominant and subaltern. As he sees it, ethnic, religious, class or sexual categories and divisions present further complications than those immediately apparent to the eye. Does this mean that Rodriguez fails to resist and challenge the dynamics he observes between different social groups? Or that his observations are complaisant rather than subversive? Not necessarily, since his essays are always a tribute to the possibilities of disagreement and defiance. My analysis of his latest collection of essays, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* (2013), maps out and dissects the writing strategies that Rodriguez employs to generate dialogical forms of inquiry and resistance regarding such up-to-date topics as religious clashes (and commonalities), Gay rights (in relation to other Human Rights) or how public spaces are being re-imagined in this global, digital era.¹

Keywords: minority writing, resistance, religion, sexuality, place, writing strategies, essay form, dialogic structures, Richard Rodriguez

Rodriguez consistently demonstrates a formal emphasis on the collaborative process of intellectual discourse, as he seams together a myriad of seemingly disparate subjects and themes.

(Garcia Lopez 442)

Introduction

There are several ways in which one could think of journalist and essay writer Richard Rodriguez as a ‘minority’ individual; to wit, he is the son of Mexican immigrants to California, he is a believer in the Catholic faith, and he is a self-declared homosexual. However, readers expecting his writings to be primarily concerned with the fight for the recognition of the collective rights of those minority groups are bound to be partly disappointed, since his position and attitudes are likely to differ from those expressed by social activists in those particular factions, which are often quite rigid and belligerent. Claudia Milian Arias claims that Rodriguez usually takes us on a “more circuitous route,” presenting “a series of interventions that move beyond stereotypical expectations of his work, expectations inspired by a brown skin disadvantage that paradoxically provides socioeconomic benefit” (270). Indeed, Rodriguez’s embroilments, especially with Chicano scholars and left-wing critics, have been perfunctory from early in his writing career – almost forty years ago –, as he fails to align with the socio-political agendas of most contemporary minority intellectuals.² In this regard, Siddhartha Mitter has recently argued that “the Rodriguez method . . . is to examine major dimensions of American society in the first person with a deeply humanistic voice that is politically hard to place.” Truly, if anything characterizes the kind of testimony that he offers in his essay collections, it is precisely his reluctance to divide the world between oppressors and oppressed, perpetrators and victims or dominant and subaltern. Like Zora Neale Hurston or Ralph Ellison, although he is fully aware of the injustices and discriminatory treatment that minority individuals have historically experienced in American society, he is also conscious of the pernicious effects that expedient divisions and categorizations may bring.³ As he sees it, class, religious, ethnic or sexual relations and boundaries always present further complications beyond those immediately apparent to the eye. In a conversation with Hector Torres, Rodriguez remarked that “What’s interesting about my life is that from the sixteenth century onward, I am impure, I am mixed, and I am both raped and rapist, and I am both aggrieved and sinned, a sinner, that notion of being both parties

in history” (182). In this sense, it would be difficult to think of Rodríguez’s work as an instance of what Barbara Harlow has called “resistance literature” (6), that is, a literature that has been struggling against (neo-)colonialism and imperialism by repudiating the conditions of domination and oppression in different parts of the globe since the post-World War II period.

No doubt one of the themes that runs through Rodríguez’s writing career – which began in 1982 with the publication of *Hunger for Memory* – is that of exclusion or, more precisely, of separation and otherness, and how one needs to bear in mind those social chasms to achieve an understanding of one’s identity. This is by no means an easy task, for there is no question that, at least in the United States, issues of racial, sexual or even class identity have separated human contingents in rather insuperable ways due to the solidity of the constructed boundaries. Yet in *Brown* (2002), Rodríguez also argued that, despite the deadweight of those racial and cultural breaches, there is much historical evidence showing that in-between (or brown) states of being are possible outside those easy categorizations. Daniel Brook remarks in *The Nation* that “As a gay, male, Roman Catholic, middle-class, mestizo Mexican-American, he implores us all, weighed down as we are by our own particular modifiers, not to segregate ourselves from the rest of humanity” (44). In a similar vein, David Ulin rightly observes that Rodríguez seems to be equally fascinated by the possibility of pinpointing mindsets and prejudices that have fostered exclusionary practices – as most other minority intellectuals do – as by that of “seek[ing] out common ground” that would somehow smooth over the boundaries that keep human groups apart.⁴ *Darling* (2013) can be seen to continue with his lifelong project, as it tackles large issues of faith, place, and sexual identity through all sorts of prisms that problematize both divisions and alliances in rather unexpected ways. As he has maintained in several interviews, he prefers to adopt the role of the “naysayer or skeptic” (Milian Arias 275) who compels the reader to “get around” his ideas in defining their own stances, rather than to offer definite answers to complex issues, as many of his co-ethnics would want him to do. In the closing essay of the collection, for example, faced with the arduous task of justifying his allegiance to the Catholic Church –

despite the current wave of secularism and his ('illicit') sexual orientation –, Rodriguez writes: "It is simply that religion gives me a sense – no, not a sense, a reason, no, not exactly a reason, an understanding – that everyone matters" (*Darling* 224-25). And then, he goes on to further elaborate on what it is that brings him together with his highly diverse co-believers – downplaying differences of background and personality:

The congregation does not believe one thing; we believe a multitude of hazy, crazy things. Some among us are smart; some serene; some feeble, poor, practical, guilt-ridden; some are lazy; some arrogant, rich, pious, prurient, bitter, injured, sad. We gather in belief of one big thing: that we matter, somehow. We all matter. No one can matter unless all matter. We call that which gives matter God. (*Darling* 325)

Critics and reviewers have pointed out that it is his humanistic approach to rather thorny and controversial issues (see DeGioia) that has placed him in the difficult position of having to explain his often provocative views on assimilation, sexual politics or religious affiliations. Rodriguez has frequently described himself as "a comic victim of two cultures" as his explorations of the dilemmas of ethnicity and cultural identity in North America usually compel him to speak about hybridity processes, half-breeds, blurred boundaries and impurity, rather than their opposites. Because he usually lets his own experiences – and the opinions of others – permeate his views and understanding of what it means to be 'other' (or 'different') in a society that favors particular forms of adaptation and compliance, it is only natural that he should focus much of his attention on the kinds of sacrifices and temperance that developing a sense of belonging generally requires. In Leslie Jamison's words, Rodriguez is particularly fond of investigating "The possibilities embedded in resistance, those experiences of refusal that shape our intimacies and our yearnings."

Dialogic Strategies

Does what has been said above mean that Rodriguez fails to question and challenge the dynamics he observes between different social factions? Or that his views on the culture wars are more closely aligned with

mainstream positions rather than minority-oriented ones? Not necessarily – although some of his co-ethnic and co-LGBT ‘comrades’ believe that his opinions are rather tepid and, even, conservative.⁵ This reaction is very often due to the fact that topics such as ethnicity or religious faith are engaged in his essays as both individual choices and filiations but, also, as the result of objections and rebuttals that others may raise. As noted earlier on, Jamison confirms that “Rodriguez is interested in what resists our typical taxonomies, our standard systems of emotional and social order,” and, in this regard, it is important to acknowledge that he is more than ready to question and refute his own assumptions on different matters – something that would be quite unthinkable for other Chicano or Catholic writers. In an interview with Jeffrey Brown right after the publication of *Darling*, the essayist stated that, although he is a “believer,” he feels much more comfortable when he is described as “a questioner, a doubter, an explorer of what belief means.” As a matter of fact, he is certain that his “religious tradition has always accepted doubt as part of the procedure of believing in God. And I think that becomes a kind of protection against extremism” (Brown). To a great extent, it could be argued that his essays are predicated on that same principle of being willing to accept dissensions as a significant force in the process of shaping one’s own ideas. Rodriguez’s conception of human language quite closely resembles Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on the matter. Like Bakhtin, he is convinced of the dialogic nature of discourse, which he views as a constant struggle (dialogized heteroglossia) among different “socio-linguistic points of view” (Bakhtin 273). He has explained to Spencer Herrera that “Everything you read can be useful and a teaching experience for the soul, provided one is prepared to be alert to another soul speaking. . . . Everyone in the parade teaches me; all their voices are important to forming my own” (Herrera 19). As will be seen below, the more his views on gender politics (and human relations), religious creeds (and violence) or mortality (and love) run into counter-arguments from different parties, the more he is able to refine his opinions and develop “flexible strategies” for audacious breakthroughs (cf. Nguyen 4).

My analysis of Rodriguez’s latest collection of essays, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*, intends to dwell upon the discursive tactics that

the author employs to investigate alternative forms of resistance and interrogation regarding such up-to-date topics as religious clashes (and commonalities), Gay Rights (in relation to other Rights) or how public spaces are being reconceived in this global, digital era. Interestingly, the reader soon realizes that Rodriguez's – and his sources' – experiences of exclusion or segregation are conceived as opportunities for retrospection that will give shape to new meanings and connections.⁶ Thus, while it is true that in the "Note to the Reader," which Rodriguez inserts as a preface to the collection, the author informs us that all the essays were written after 9/11 – "years of religious extremism throughout the world, years of rising public atheism, years of digital distraction" (*Darling*), by page 3 of the opening chapter, it is already clear that the sense of loss and deprivation resulting from those quandaries needs to be more deeply pondered and thought through if one wishes to gain a better understanding of their ultimate significance: "It was in the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11 that I came to the realization that the God I worship is a desert God. It was to the same desert God that the terrorists prayed" (3). Mitter, Ulin, and others have complained that sometimes – unlike in the work of other minority writers – it is not easy to figure out how the various strands of inquiry that Rodriguez brings into his meditations are linked, yet most scholars have agreed that, although the journey of his ideas may seem tortuous at times, the "text is highly coherent" and the possible "gaps" serve "the double function of keeping us alert and of presenting different nuances on the topic" (Barradas). Indeed, one can easily observe that part of the disorientation the reader may sometimes experience derives precisely from the author's efforts to bring into the discussion other voices that may challenge his own thinking: "'Desert religions, desert religions,' the monk repeats. Then he says: 'You must be very careful when you use such an expression. It seems to equate these religions'" (43). Jamison observes that it is precisely his "willingness to embrace disagreement" and his acceptance of the "fallibility" of his own views that are the most prominent signs of his "maturity" as a writer.

Notwithstanding the subtitle of the collection (*A Spiritual Autobiography*), it is evident from early on in the volume that, rather than

with any kind of self-writing or conversion narrative, we are dealing with an assortment of essays – on wandering and intersecting ideas – that are somehow related to the theme of the “desert God.” Garcia Lopez corroborates that the reader is not faced here with a traditional autobiography, since “the narratives in this text are not so much centered on the self, but rather, focus on experience that inherently involves others, in and out of place and time” (443). Thus, the larger questions that Rodriguez raises about what it is that unites the three desert, monotheistic religions only begin to gain momentum when seen in the light of what others – from radically different backgrounds – have already said on the issue:

It never occurred to me with any intellectual or emotional force until 2001 – odd, because I had seen every Bible movie released between 1951 and 1964 – that Christianity, like Judaism, like Islam, is a desert religion, an oriental religion, a Semitic religion, born of sinus-clearing glottal consonants, spit, dust, blinding light. (19)

The first three essays in *Darling* and the closing one (“The Three Ecologies of the Holy Desert”) draw our attention more narrowly to the question of why God would choose to reveal Himself in a place of desolation and emptiness, and the kind of consequences that this choice has had on the three faiths. Rodriguez even travels to Jerusalem (in chapter 2) in an attempt to provide tentative answers to the many questions that keep surfacing as he wonders about his own religious upbringing, the Crusades, the influence of Arabic on Spanish, the Alhambra Theatre in Sacramento or the ecology of the Middle Eastern desert.⁷ Along the way, and invariably helped by others (guides, women, monks), he comes upon several epiphanies – some of them not too pleasant – about the effects that the primeval desert landscape may have had on the three religions: “The paradox of monotheism is that the desert God, refuting all other gods, demands acknowledgment within emptiness. The paradox of monotheism is that there is no paradox – only unfathomable singularity” (35). According to Rodriguez, the blasphemy of monotheism is “the blasphemy of certainty” (46): if God is on our side, we must be right and must defend ourselves (and God) against the godless. And, of course, certitude usually “clears the way for violence” (46):

Dogma strives to resemble the desert: It is dry; it is immovable. Truth does not change. Is there something in the revelation of God that retains – because it has passed through – properties of the desert or maleness or Semitic tongue? Does the desert, in short, make warriors? That is the question I bring to the desert from the twenty-first century. (45)

Elisabeth Ferszt has published an illuminating article in which she tries to explain how dogmatism (and Puritanism) of various sorts have been the forces that have given shape to Rodriguez's adversarial attitude and "hearty nonconformity" (451). In this critic's eyes, he has inevitably become a "wounded romantic" (Ferszt 445) because his ethnic heritage, educational status, and his sexual orientation are constantly taunting – and haunting – him to diverge from the paths opened by other intellectuals and activists. No wonder, then, that Rodriguez should be suspicious of any doctrines and practices rooted in such "immovable" dogmas – be they the desert religions or the academic elites.

And yet, in his characteristically ambivalent and contrarian manner, Rodriguez also discovers powerful elements in the desert (silence, solitude, scarcity, etc.) that may bolster some of the greatest virtues in human beings. In Jamison's opinion, one of the driving ideas in the collection is "the possibility that deprivation is useful: the barren landscapes offer subtler kinds of fertility, that occupying certain social margins might yield intimacies that wouldn't be possible otherwise." Hence, the author refers to Saint Sabas, who went to the desert to discern his true nature and, there, became a very different type of "warrior," one who confronts and overcomes the temptations of human nature: "*The desert creates lovers*. Saint Sabas desired the taste of an apple. The craving was sweeter to him than the thought of God. From that moment Sabas foreswore apples. The desire for apples was the taste of God" (47, italics in the original). By turning his ears to other voices, Rodriguez manages to find other dimensions of certain landscapes and belief systems that we tend to interpret in very restrictive ways.⁸ In this sense, he is overjoyed to come across instances in which religions become the sources, not of dogmatism and violence, but of hope and solidarity – Rodriguez refers in his essays to historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Robert McAfee Brown or Mother Teresa. Not only that, but in the

Sacred Books of the three religions, the desert – in its uninhabitability – is ultimately seen to advance the materialization of its opposite: oases, paradise, the Promised Land. Curiously, chapter 3 of the collection (“The True Cross”) brings us to Las Vegas (NV), another desert place trapped in the conundrum of its realities and its dreams, where the author is witness to a close friend’s slow death from an AIDS-related illness during Easter Week within the ludicrous ‘neon paradise’ that the city represents. The hospice in Las Vegas where his friend, Luther, is looked after becomes a present-day desert Golgotha in which his agony can only be relieved by the presence of his partner, Peter, and his sorrowful friends by his bedside. . . like the Persian carpets of old:

Nomadic people of the desert have, for centuries, woven carpets that are floral meadows or geometric pleasantries. Desert carpets refresh those for whom the desert is transient, repetitive. The desert is the day between the nights, the dry between the wetness of the stars. Carpets are portable gardens of repose. (76)

Rodriguez’s report from the Holy Land (“Jerusalem and the Desert”) is fraught with paradoxes and discrepancies between what guidebooks and his expectations had promised and what the author finds in situ. He had come with the idea of finding what joins the three religions (and cultures) with common ecological and spiritual roots, only to discover that “The theme of Jerusalem is division” (26). By looking at the sites and hearing the comments of the locals (receptionists, old men, his guide, etc.), the travel writer realizes that, despite the “oriental” commonalities of the three religions, what becomes evident at first sight are the signs of aggression and segmentation: “The city has been conquered, destroyed, rebuilt, garrisoned, halved, quartered, martyred, and exalted – always the object of spiritual desire, always the prize. . .” (26). But, of course, what disturbs Rodriguez most deeply is the fact that those elements of demarcation and severance in the city, where walls and temples are constantly policed to prevent human interactions, are also easily discernible in the people.⁹ The author feels frustrated and awed as he becomes aware that his own voice begins to show symptoms of oppression and impotence when confronted with “the closed nature of the city” (34) and the minds of its inhabitants. He realizes how easily one may

fall into the trap of fundamentalist and dogmatic attitudes in such a context. In the end, Rodriguez's literal and mental journeys through the desert bring him to the conclusion that, besides its barrenness and desolation, what is most unique about it is its emptiness and quasi-nonexistence: "So I come away each night convinced I have been to the holy desert (and have been humiliated by it) and that I have not been to the desert at all" (50). It is precisely its very inhospitality and destitution that makes it such a convenient location to seek "the unknowable" (218) – be it God, or something else.

Startling Connections

Mitter cogently argues that, in spite of the interesting revelations about the nature and influence of desert landscapes in the early essays of the collection, it is evident that "this is not a political work," since no precise resolutions are proposed to the various problems the author encounters. In Mitter's opinion, instead, "he offers an efflorescence of subtle questions that may be more useful than the blunt ones that dominate today's media and public conversation." The same thing could be said about the second important theme that runs through several of the essays in the volume; namely, the key role that women have played in the writer's life and how their experiences are integral to explain some of his own as a gay man and a Catholic. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Rodriguez should decide to dedicate the book to "the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas," an order of Irish nuns whom he greatly reveres, for they have been offering their ministry to the poor, to immigrants, and to the elderly for almost two centuries now: "In 1855 the Sisters of Mercy nursed San Franciscans through a cholera outbreak. In 1868 the nuns cared for the victims of a smallpox epidemic. In 1906, after the great earthquake and fire, the Sisters of Mercy set up a tent hospital in the Presidio" (107). Rodriguez's gratitude to these women is primarily linked to the education he received from them, which allowed him to integrate more smoothly into the mainstream culture – again, most of his co-ethnics would not think so positively of this influence. Nevertheless, in this collection his admiration for these nuns transcends their service as a teaching and nursing religious

order: “most of the women who swelled the ranks of missionary orders had left peat-fumed, sour-stomached, skinny-cat childhoods behind. They became the least-sequestered women imaginable” (106). Rodriguez is convinced that these brave and determined women – although often regarded as women of low repute by non-Catholics – were the forerunners of the suffragettes and feminists of the turn of the 20th century. Furthermore, he also believes that, in the longer run, his own chances of coming out of the closet were also made possible by these independent spirits who were preparing people – and especially the marginalized – for a future that they could hardly foresee: “I cannot imagine my freedom as a homosexual man without women in veils” (132). Again, Rodriguez’s defense of the Sisters of Mercy is very much a reaction to the various attacks and scandals they have historically been the target of.¹⁰ In view of this response, it is clear that the author would agree with theorists such as Raymond Williams or Terry Eagleton who have argued that “all readers are socially and historically positioned” (83) and how they come to utilize language is very much a result of the “practical social uses” (Eagleton 88) that they wish to give to their work. In Rodriguez’s case, one cannot fail to notice that he is trying to rebut some presumptions about women that had displaced them to rather peripheral socio-cultural spaces.

Perhaps a clearer example of Rodriguez’s alertness and constant interaction with the social forces that have shaped and transformed his own views on sexual politics is to be found in his discussion of another order which seems to be taking over the work of the quickly disappearing Sisters of Mercy of the Americas: “Nuns will not entirely disappear from San Francisco as long as we may occasionally glimpse a black mustache beneath a fluttering veil. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is an order of gay drag nuns whose vocation is dress-up” (108). Like many of his neighbors and co-Catholics, Rodriguez initially positioned himself as a radical detractor of them in the mid-1980s, assuming that their main intention was to mock the heroic lives of their predecessors. However, after coming into closer contact with and listening to some of the Sisters of PI, whose catechism teaches sexual precaution and drug safety, the author admits to having “experienced something like a conversion”: “Those men are ministering on a street corner to homeless teenagers, and

they are pretty good at it. No sooner had I applied the word ‘good’ that I knew it was the right word. Those are good men” (109). Once Rodriguez realizes that these ‘Sisters’ also do what nuns have always done, that is, to protect and to heal the vulnerable, his prejudices automatically vanish. In a typically dialogic way, he feels compelled to accept the heteroglossic nature of terms like “mockery” or “scandal” which, as Bakhtin would have it, acquire a new meaning in this specific context (cf. Morson 24). This profound change in the author’s perception of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is particularly revealing because it teaches him something both about his own position within the Catholic Church, but also about the importance of challenging ‘authority’ when circumstances seem to demand it:

I do not believe the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are enemies of the Church; I believe they are a renegade church of true vocation. They are scourges; they are jesters. Their enemy is hypocrisy. In a way, they are as dependent upon the Church as I am. They are as dependent on the nun in the brown wool suit as I am. Without the Church, without the nun, they would make no sense at all. (109-110)

The chapter that provides the collection with its title (“Darling”) is best read as a microsample of all the key tactics that Rodriguez uses throughout the book. At first sight, the essay merely broods over the author’s use of the term ‘darling’ as an expression of endearment in friendships in which sexuality is out of the question – such as the one Rodriguez had with a female friend who has recently passed away. But besides the meandering elegy for a lost friend, who had once hoped in vain to become the author’s lover, the essay is filled with all sorts of female presences and voices which have played a fundamental role in securing some social space for homosexuals.¹¹ Not only that, but Rodriguez succeeds in blending his own misgivings about religion with those of many women who have also felt excluded and marginalized by the Church hierarchy: “It is because the Church needs women that I depend upon women to protect the Church from its impulse to cleanse itself of me” (104). Daniel Burr notes that if Rodriguez, as a gay man, feels especially attached to women, it is primarily because “the desert religions have waged holy wars against homosexuals and women.”

Monotheistic religions, Rodriguez claims, are based on male conceptions of God that underline the importance of the male seed and its generative powers for the perpetuation of humanity. And yet, the author insists that the Church hierarchy had better stop thinking of both women and homosexuals as “expendable,” if the institution wants to survive in the 21st century:

The Church cannot afford to expel women. . . . Women have sustained the Church for centuries by their faith and their birthrates. Following the sexual scandals involving priests and children, women may or may not consent to present a new generation of babies for baptism. Somewhere in its canny old mind, the Church knows this. Every bishop has a mother. (104)

In the aforementioned conversation with Brown, in which he preferred to describe himself as a “doubter,” Rodriguez also clarified that *Darling* is not so much a book about a gay man trying to find his place in the desert religions and, more specifically, in the Catholic Church, but about women: “Where are women going to play? What role are they going to play in this theological battle?” (Brown). This ability to identify unexpected links amid seemingly disparate topics and people, and to make us excavate in the arduous construction of the meaning of issues we presume to know is the greatest skill every essayist should cultivate.

Although Rodriguez set out allegedly to explore religion, sexuality, and place in the weeks following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in fact, as several critics and reviewers have concluded, *Darling* becomes in the end more like an “ecology of the soul” (Garvey 29; Hazleton). By looking closely into those issues through the experiences and tribulations of others – St. Francis, Muhammad Ali, Lance Armstrong, John Keats, Pope John Paul II, Andy Warhol, Cesar Chavez, William Randolph Hearst, etc. –, Rodriguez manages to refine and come to terms with the divisions and interconnections that he finds among various human groups. As noted earlier on, sometimes the links between such disparate themes as the failure of the future in California (“Disappointment”), the twisted legacy of Cesar Chavez (“Saint Cesar of Delano”), and the gradual demise of newspapers in San Francisco (“Final Edition”) may seem somehow “forced” (Jamison). But in most instances the author is successful in showing how all of these issues add new nuances to his own meditations

on the sense of loss (of faith and attachment to place) and mortality (of friends and cultural myths) that seem to prevail in the contemporary era. In the author's own words, "A large concern of mine, in writing *Darling*, was the fact that so many moderns, particularly in our age of religious unbelief, are losing a sense of place. ... All around me, I see people distracting themselves from a sense of place with digital technology" (Herrera 15). Something that Rodriguez greatly extols in most of the people/ characters he brings into his ruminations is the fact that he can easily associate them with specific places and circumstances. In most cases, he has words of praise and admiration for all those historical and ordinary figures that have helped in conforming his own views, but he is also ready to admit that, like he himself, they were all also weak and fallible: "*Bless me, father, for I have sinned*" (92, italics in the original). As pointed out above, this is not an attitude that one could easily find in other minority writers. In an insightful essay on the problematical lessons that renowned United Farm Workers union leader Cesar Chavez – here ironically renamed "Saint Cesar of Delano" – left for Mexican-Americans, he writes:

It is heartening to learn about private acts of goodness in notorious lives. It is discouraging to learn of the moral failures of famously good people. The former console. But to learn that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was a womanizer is to be confronted with the knowledge that the flesh is a complicated medium for grace. To learn that there were flaws in the character of Cesar Chavez is again to wonder at the meaning of a good life. (135)

Closing Remarks

According to Ignacio Rodeño, Rodriguez has always tried to confront and "contest issues of marginality and displacement" (205) by striving to secure a new position for his "hybrid, transcultural, and nomadic" (206) subjectivity. In order to do so, he often resorts to a "dialectical triangulation" (206) of opinions that eventually allows him to untangle, at least partly, some of the problems and contradictions that afflict his soul – and that of American society at large.¹² In this regard, Milian Arias points

out that “Rodriguez’s engagement with [those other] figures merits consideration; it is as though his brown sensibility takes ownership of texts that he is not supposed to read, analyze, and reference” (271). Of course, interacting with and dissecting all those other texts and voices is quite a daunting task but one for which, as most critics have concurred, he seems to be perfectly equipped with the best skills of the essayist and the stylist (see Garcia Lopez 443). In Paul Griffiths’ opinion, Rodriguez’s “work is consistently intelligent, beautiful, and deeply Catholic. Writers who manage even one of these are rare enough; those who consistently combine all three are something close to a wonder.” As has been contended throughout this article, some of the skills that he uses most assiduously in his essays are keen observation, a skeptical – or doubt-seasoned – attitude, and a special sensibility to pinpoint the contradictions and paradoxes that plague our contemporary world (cf. Brook 42).¹³ If to these skills we add the highly dialogical orientation that he gives to his discourse, always aware of those other voices and utterances around it, it is easy to see how he is creating a new intellectual and artistic potential to resist and challenge many of the perfunctory – and monologic – opinions that pervade the media today. In Bakhtin’s terms, Rodriguez’s use of language (and style) is particularly productive because it

enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words [and voices], value-judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. (276)

Interestingly, it may be demonstrated that a close connection exists between those dialogic and flexible discursive strategies that Rodriguez deploys in his essays and some of the key mysteries he tries to unravel in them. As he explained to Herrera, both require a great deal of attention and close observation “of the other” (19), since one can only expect his readers to make the effort to unlock and to decipher the paradoxes and tensions within his soul if he, in turn, has shown the same type of alertness and respect for the opinions of others. It is not coincidental, in this sense, that a number of scholars have discovered in Rodriguez’s essays some of

the best qualities often found in great novelists (see Brook 42), whose works are fundamentally intersubjective and highly intertextual. Or, as Tzvetan Todorov has phrased it with evident Bakhtinian undertones: “Every element of the work can be compared to a thread joining human beings. The work as a whole is the set of these threads, that creates a complex, differentiated, social interaction, between the persons who are in contact with it” (40). Likewise, thematically, *Darling* is very much about the possibility of finding similarities (and differences) among the variegated strands of human experience, if one does not let “distractions” occlude the revelation of those connections and, thus, “prevent one from keeping company” (Garvey 30). In my view, the following short passage from the final essay in the collection exemplifies some of the features referred to in this concluding section. Here, Rodriguez is addressing both the resilience of his faith in an age of generalized atheism and, also, the comforts (and anxieties) that he derives from his participation in the Catholic Mass:

This confraternity of strangers – the procession of the living with the dead – is the most important, most continuous confraternity in my life, though unpronounced except by rote prayer. I take my place in the pew as I would take a seat within a vast ark. Going where? We don’t know. All we know is that one Sunday we will not be here. We know that nothing will change for our absence. Those are the names of the dead under the stained-glass windows and on all the tombs and plaques and rooms of testament, and so forth, and so what? That is the consolation I take from the Mass – that I will join the obverse, which is represented to me by a lantern in a corridor that leads behind the altar. That I will join, for a while, the passive, prayed for. And then I will be forgotten. The procession will go on; it will emerge from the other side of the altar. (226)

Notes:

¹ A much shorter version of this article was presented during the 13th International SAAS Conference held in Cáceres, Spain, in April 2017 under the title of “Understanding (Human) Nature.” I would like to express my gratitude to co-panelists and other participants in the conference who came up with all sorts of interesting questions and comments after the paper was delivered.

² It was especially after the publication of *Hunger for Memory* (1982), in which Rodriguez opposed both affirmative action and bilingual education, that many of his views came under attack and he was described by other Chicano scholars as a “coconut” and a “dupe.”

³ As he has explained in several interviews, “The compartmentalization that academics have allowed themselves to fall victim to is a catastrophe. That’s why I really don’t want to be a Chicano, I mean, I don’t want to be a Chicano writer” (Torres 193).

⁴ Predictably, Rodriguez has used the image of the U.S.-Mexican border as that type of boundary that is clearly pushing people to be entirely one or the other when, in fact, what one sees in borderlands is precisely the exhilarating state of being many things at once and of showing multiple allegiances.

⁵ These more radical ‘comrades’ are of the opinion that Rodriguez sometimes pays little attention to the historical burden of his Mexican ancestry and gay victimization – a view that I do not think is quite accurate – and instead focuses on the potential for self-invention that the United States offers.

⁶ As suggested in the epigraph to this article, Christina Garcia Lopez insists that Rodriguez is as much interested in the difficulties posed by the process-oriented (and intersubjective or dialogic) “construction of narratives and ideas” (442) as in the socio-cultural problems he tackles in the individual essays.

⁷ About the seeming disparity of the topics he covers, Milian Arias remarks that “Formally, Rodriguez mirrors in his writing the meandering way in which the mind functions, moving circuitously from one thought to the next without explicit connection” (443). Yet, as observed earlier, she also states that “interconnectivity” ultimately prevails as the author proves to be a master of the dialectics in the essay format.

⁸ Like many a novelist, Rodriguez has often described himself as an impersonator, a literary persona performing various roles in the human drama: “There was always this sense that I had to be agile at borders, that I had to be able to play several roles. I had to be able to impersonate. I’ve loved that as a gift; and finally that served me well” (Torres 193).

⁹ J. A. Marzan has concluded that Rodriguez’s greatest contribution to the craft of essay writing is his sensibility to contradictions and situational ironies (63) of this kind. As this critic would have it, his own condition as a minority writer has compelled him to develop this very keen eye to perceive (and sometimes hide) tensions and inconsistencies.

¹⁰ As mentioned earlier on, Rodriguez is particularly sensitive to the plights of human contingents that, for various reasons, have been historically stigmatized and marginalized by the majority group.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva’s views on Menippean discourse – which echo Bakhtin’s ideas – seem very relevant to Rodriguez’s own use of the language: “Its discourse exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment. The dialogism of its word is practical philosophy doing battle against idealism and religious metaphysics, against the epic. It constitutes the social and political thought of an era fighting against theology, against the law” (83-84, italics in the original).

¹² Rodriguez is convinced that partial truths and understandings can only be achieved this way: “*All understanding is dialogical*. Understanding is opposed to utterance like one reply is opposed to another within a dialogue. Understanding is

in search of a counter-discourse to the discourse of the utterer” (Todorov 22, *italics in the original*).

¹³ In this regard, Rodríguez’s skills seem to resemble those that Viet Thanh Nguyen discovers in the best Asian American literature, which shows very “flexible strategies that concern struggle, survival, and possible assimilation” (5) and which often requires reading/writing against “the rigid assumptions” of the newly institutionalized ethnic-minority criticism.

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