



The Invisible Ethnic: Vladimir Nabokov, Richard Rodriguez, and Ethnic Literature

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Abstract

*This essay explores the possibilities and constraints of reading texts as ethnic literature. It does so by tracing the master theme of transcendence in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and by drawing comparisons with Latino autobiographer and essayist Richard Rodriguez. To date *Speak, Memory* has transcended categorization as a particular conception of ethnic literature that precludes also reading it as universal. Rodriguez, in contrast, laments that his books are less likely to be read as universal precisely because shelved and categorized as ethnic literature rather than as memoir or simply "literature." As Rodriguez notes, the conception of Ethnic Literature as a genre marginalizes even as it celebrates ethnic cultures. That is, treating works by ethnic authors as a conventional genre—in the sense that memoirs, westerns, and mystery novels are genres—can have a ghettoizing effect. I argue that ethnic literature is universal despite its focus on a particular culture. To the extent that any work of literature can be said to be universal it achieves that status through the particular: a story grounded in a particular culture and, usually, focusing on the particularity of individual characters. There is no view from nowhere. As with other works of literature, ethnic literature is the view from somewhere. I conclude that, when it comes to how we read ethnic literature, it is time for a paradigm shift.*

Keywords: *Vladimir Nabokov; Richard Rodriguez; Ethnic Literature; Autobiography; American Literature*

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Introduction

In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1966), Vladimir Nabokov poignantly expresses his desire for transcendence.¹ And in one sense he achieves it. Namely, his texts

are not read first and foremost as Ethnic Literature. They have transcended that categorization. Not that this should matter, and yet, in a peculiar way, it does. It matters in the same way that stereotypes matter. Even when fairly accurate, stereotypes and

categories compartmentalize our thinking, boxing us into a particular conception of the person or thing categorized. And, when you frame things one way, it's difficult to see that thing some other way at the same time. To do so requires a paradigm shift, a cognitive switch, such as happens when gazing at the optical illusions proffered by Gestalt psychologists or Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit drawing in his *Philosophical Investigations*: either you see the duck or you see the rabbit. But the mind's eye simply can't see both at the same time.

Something similar happens with ethnic literature. When readers think of a text as ethnic literature, they seem to conceptualize it as *separate and distinct* from that which is deemed (to use the currency of the literary realm) "universal." Of course, the very notion of universality is problematic in many ways—suffice it to say that all "universal" texts are grounded in the culturally and linguistically particular. More to the point, designation as ethnic literature is not mutually exclusive from designation as "universal," or as Literature (capital L), or any other hypostatization of individual literary texts into a general category, set, or class.

This exclusion of ethnic literature from universal literary status often happens despite our intentions to the contrary. In this multicultural age we—all of us, of all complexions and political persuasions—celebrate our ethnic heritages. One's ethnicity is no stigma, but a distinction worn with pride. As a society we profit from the diversity of ethnic cultures, benefitting from the varied points of view and wide range of experiences that stem from our diverse backgrounds. Our lives are enriched by the presence of ethnic friends and neighbors, and in far more ways than the mere culinary pleasure of having more ethnic restaurants to choose from.

Why, then, should ethnic writers and readers not also take pride in having a literature of their own? (Therein lies the problem, Richard Rodriguez would argue: "their own" suggests something separate, apart.) The reality is that ethnic literature as a *genre* designation marginalizes even as it celebrates ethnic cultures. That is, treating

works by ethnic authors as a conventional genre—in the sense that memoirs, westerns, and mystery novels are genres—can have a ghettoizing effect. The ghettoization effect is baked into the cake, despite our best intentions to transcend exclusive categories for more inclusive ones.

Writers of science fiction are all too familiar with this situation. But, and here's the beautiful thing, some writers manage to transcend the genre ghetto, to be recognized as "literary." Writers such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Ray Bradbury managed to do just that. All three of these writers are widely read, taught in college classrooms, frequently anthologized outside the SF genre, and otherwise deemed "universal." Nabokov manages to do the same as ethnic writer. He has transcended ethnic literature ghettoization, largely by virtue of the lesser visibility of his ethnicity in the American context.

Many readers will wonder what I'm talking about. Nabokov's texts as ethnic literature? (Paradigm shift.) Yes, in many ways, Nabokov is the quintessential ethnic author. The themes of exile, alienation, otherness, and language are all central to Nabokov's work. And then there is the obsession with identity, and the loss of it. In other words, just the kinds of themes you might expect to find in an immigrant writer. Consider, for example, three of Nabokov's most celebrated and paradigmatic texts: *Pnin*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*. In all three of these texts at least one protagonist's ethnic alterity, or cultural otherness, is foregrounded as a major theme.²

Lolita showcases keen anthropological insight on American culture, as only a cultural outsider can provide. Likewise, Nabokov's cultural otherness allows him to all the more perceptively dissect and parody the shallowness of American consumerism and popular culture. Add to this Nabokov's political and literary consciousness as an author. It is significant to note that Nabokov—far from disavowing his ethnic roots and attempting to fully assimilate (whether in Berlin, France, America, or Switzerland)—remained deeply immersed in the Russian

literary tradition: translating Pushkin, writing a study of Gogol, and otherwise assiduously linking himself to the big names in Russian letters. Open any Nabokov text and it won't take long to see how thoroughly and indelibly imbued it is with the ethnic stamp.

It is somewhat of a wonder, then, given the ethnic color of his life and writings, that Nabokov managed to transcend categorization of his works as ethnic literature. This essay will explore our paradigms of ethnic literature through the theme of literary transcendence in Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. I will then compare the framing of Nabokov's text with the ethnic framing and reception of Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*.

I argue that ethnic literature is commensurable with universal status despite its focus on a particular culture. To the extent that any work of literature can be said to be universal it achieves that status through the particular: a story grounded in a particular culture and, usually, focusing on the particularity of individual characters. One could also drill down into more technical descriptions—such as how the narrative is focalized through an individual narrator or character—to reach the same conclusions. There is no view from nowhere. As with other works of literature, ethnic literature is the view from somewhere.

Treating literary works by ethnic authors (or with ethnic characters, or covering ethnic themes) as universal is largely a framing matter: it requires a paradigm shift that starts with becoming aware of our own assumptions as readers and bracketing them off. These assumptions, the reading frames that we bring to texts, set reader expectations. Our beliefs about the conventions of the genre are a clear example of an interpretive frame.

There are also extratextual/contextual interpretive frames, such as the strength with which a given ethnicity signals in sociocultural context. In other words, the ethnic group's visibility. Despite the predominance of ethnic themes in *Speak, Memory*, and despite self-identifying as an ethnically-Russian author, Nabokov's autobiography is not read first and

foremost as ethnic literature. This stands in sharp contrast to the reception of Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical writing, though Rodriguez does not self-identify as an author of ethnic literature. The difference in reception boils down to the difference in visibility of each author's ethnic group, a theoretical point elaborated in the "The Invisible Ethnic" section of this essay.

The subsequent section offers a close reading of the theme of literary transcendence in *Speak, Memory*. A third section will take a more comparative approach, juxtaposing Nabokov's literary transcendence with the categorization and reception of Rodriguez's works within the genre of ethnic literature. Lastly, I offer some concluding thoughts on the context-framing role of how we shelve our books, and argue for broadening our conception of ethnic literature.

The Invisible Ethnic

The primary distinction between Nabokov as ethnic author and Rodriguez as ethnic author is the *visibility* of their respective ethnicities in the American context. Some ethnicities, for various reasons, are more visible in society than others. Italian and Irish identities were once highly visible in the American context. They are now much less so. The visibility of Russian ethnics was much higher during the Cold War. It, too, is now much less so, as is true of many other "white ethnics," now all banished to the edges of the visible spectrum of American ethnic vision. What gets read *as* ethnic literature tends to be works by or about ethnic Americans whose ethnicity is highly visible in American society: African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino. In other words, designation as ethnic literature largely reflects the ways in which ethnicity plays out in society at large.

It should be stressed that the visibility of one's ethnicity is not exclusively a matter of visible bodily markers. Ethnicity is far more complicated than simple racial logic. Ethnicity is, at core, about cultural differences rather than racial ones. But people often take racial features as a signifier of ethnic difference. As philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff notes in her

penetrating analysis of the visibility of ethnic and gendered identities: “The reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them” (p. 5). Alcoff’s monumental effort “offers a sustained defense of identity as an epistemically salient and ontologically real entity” (p. 5). That ethnic literature has become such a robust category of literature today reflects those realities—the reality of ethnic identities.

When Nabokov expresses, in *Speak, Memory*, his desire for transcendence of the corporeal self, he unwittingly articulates the situation of ethnic identity. The self cannot exist outside of its relations with others, nor can the ethnic self exist outside of social relations. Just as each of us has some notion of self, so each of us has one or more ethnicities that are constitutive of that self. Some would note that Nabokov cannot escape the “prison of time” as a disembodied self (and still maintain his former individual consciousness). There is no escaping ethnicity, it should be added: no non-ethnic self (p. 20). There is no view from nowhere.

The salient point, then, is not ethnic difference, but the varying visibility of different ethnicities. It can play out as a double bind: if your ethnicity is highly visible in society, you risk being marginalized (or worse). But the less visible your ethnicity, the less likely it is to be recognized by others as a salient and valid ethnic identity. The vanishing white ethnic knows the story well.

The Theme of Transcendence in *Speak, Memory*

The story of that vanishing, that ethnic invisibility, accounts in large part for the literary transcendence of *Speak, Memory*—it’s general regard as a universal work of literature. And the quest for transcendence is, in various guises, the foremost theme of the book. Nabokov dramatizes three kinds of transcendence in the text: transcendence of time, transcendence of the corporeal self, and the transcendence of art. In addition to making copious references to the ideas of

transcendence, timelessness, and mystical union throughout *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov opens the autobiography with “the awakening of consciousness” rather than the standard “my earliest memory” (p. 21).

Nabokov associates the existence of time, or a sense of the passage of time, with consciousness—“the beginning in the brain of our remotest ancestors must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time” (p. 21)—and associates mortal life with “the prison of time,” which “is spherical and without exits” (p. 20). It is no wonder, then, that Nabokov favors the open geometry of the eternity-promising spiral to the closed circle or sphere. Namely, the sphere is Nabokov’s metaphor for the imprisonment of human consciousness within the cocoon of one’s lifespan, while the spiral is a metaphor for escaping that prison, and thus avoiding the death of consciousness.

Human life, as Nabokov describes it in the opening sentence of Chapter 1, is such that “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour)” (p. 19). Like that other great magician, Prospero, Nabokov sees human existence as (terrifyingly) in the round, closed off on either side (the prenatal abyss and the endless sleep of death) by the absence of consciousness: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (*The Tempest* Act 4, scene 1, 156–58).

It is through “probing my childhood (which is the next best thing to probing one’s eternity)” that Nabokov can “rebel against this state of affairs”; namely, “That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness” (pp. 20-21). “I do not believe in time” (p. 139), Nabokov writes in concluding a chapter (Chapter 6, “Butterflies”) in which he describes a “forty-year race” chasing a Swallowtail from “the legendary Russia of my boyhood” to “an immigrant dandelion under an endemic aspen near Boulder” (pp. 119-20).

"I like to fold my magic carpet, after use," continues Nabokov, "in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip" (p. 139).

In addition to the trick of collapsing time and superimposing events from one point in space-time on those in another, Nabokov here elaborates (insofar as the old literary trickster is to be trusted when appraising his own texts) on his *ars poetica*: the subordination of plot- and character-driven narrative to the exploration of themes, an example of which (the "match theme" associated with General Kuropatkin in Chapter 1) he employs as a primer to instruct the reader on how to read a Nabokov text (p. 27).³ And it is no accident that the theme of timelessness is so spectacularly explored in the "Butterflies" chapter since, "the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy" (p. 139). Nabokov's passion for butterflies offers a portal through which he can experience timelessness. But, alas, it is an ecstasy that cannot (as can creating a work of transcendent art, or producing a body of scholarly work on butterflies) survive his own death.

In an interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov makes the method of his quest for timeless eternity even more explicit: "When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollection and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time" (in Appel and Newman, p. 141).⁴ (*Speak, Mnemosyne* was what Nabokov wanted to title the British edition of *Speak, Memory*, thus invoking the Greek goddess of memory and the mother of all nine of the muses.)⁵ Nabokov performs the abolition of time in this manner through the completion of *Speak, Memory* itself. He describes the rendering of his own life ("the individual mystery") on the page through the following elaborate metaphor: "a certain intricate watermark whose unique design

becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap" (p. 25).

Citing himself, or some aspect of himself, in the guise of Vivian Bloodmark (an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov), Nabokov remarks, "Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time" (p. 218). This philosophical statement describing "cosmic synchronization"—"trillions of other such trifles occur—all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus"—appears in the chapter in which Nabokov depicts the composition of his first poem (p. 218).

Thus Nabokov depicts the transcendence of time and space through passion, through being wholly in the moment, via the mystical sense of oneness that he describes attaining through his passion for butterflies: "A sense of oneness with sun and stone" (p. 139). Nabokov yearns for something even greater than whatever sublime ecstasy one can achieve within the constraints of physicalism: "and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love" (p. 139). Through his autobiography, Nabokov strives to harness memory and imagination to art, and thus to attain a kind of transcendence that is not confined by the "parting with consciousness" that sleep and death entail.

It is this strong transcendent impulse in Nabokov's writing that leads L.L. Lee to observe "that Nabokov accepts a kind of Platonic 'idea' of art" (p. iii). That is, "the esthetic ideas of Nabokov would seem to be a variant on an 'art-for-art's sake' esthetic....he seems to separate art from history—from man's life in time and community—to make art a pure object without direct human significance" (p. iii). One sees this aesthetic in action in the famous sleigh ride scene in which Nabokov depicts, in lavish detail, a scene that he imagines ("I vividly visualized her driving away") rather than actually experiences (p. 37). The scene concludes with an allusion to "a perfect case of art for art's sake" when Nabokov notes that the four-foot long Faber

pencil that his mother purchased for him on that fabulous trip is “far too big for use and, indeed, was not meant to be used” (p. 39).

Nabokov’s impulse is to reach for such Platonic ideals, but despite moments in which a sense of such transcendence is attained, Nabokov is too passionate about nature (such as his butterflies) and the embodied life to completely abandon lived experience. In fact, he expresses a mild obsession with getting the actual facts right despite the “impossibility of checking my memory when I felt it might be at fault” (p. 11), and with weeding out “the amnesic defects of the original [referring to the 1951 version of the autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence*]” (p. 12). What emerges in the autobiography, as in Nabokov’s fiction, is an irresolvable tension between what Lee describes as making literature “from life” (p. iii) and the creative rendering of that life through “re-version” and “multiple metamorphosis” into—one can hope—transcendent art (*Speak Memory*, pp. 12-13).

This tension between embodied experience and the hope of corporeal transcendence is found throughout the text, and along multiple axes. Of the topic of his first poem (his first attempt at transcendent art), Nabokov will remark with characteristic wit (in a parody of Poe, other Romantics, and his own early attempts to write in a similar vein), “It is hardly worthwhile to add that, as themes go, my elegy dealt with the loss of a beloved mistress—Delia, Tamara or Lenore—whom I had never lost, never loved, never met but was all set to meet, love, lose” (p. 225).⁶ No doubt Nabokov’s self-identification as a writer and perpetual exile lends him to such thinking, to the belief that “One is always at home in one’s past” (p. 116).

But what of the other people with whom one shares one’s past, the *real* people who are greater than one’s memory or characterization of them? It is perhaps in his profiles of key personages in his youth—his father, mother, siblings, maternal grandmother, and childhood governesses and tutors—that Nabokov is most aware of the limitations of his desire to abolish time through the persistent probing of memory, an endeavor that by its very nature involves degrees of fictionalizing:

“My enormous and morose Mademoiselle is all right on earth but impossible in eternity. Have I really salvaged her from fiction?” (p. 117).

Likewise, Humbert Humbert senses that his real crime, in the broadest sense, is that he has stolen Lolita’s childhood, which is the sentiment expressed in the final pages of the novel by the narrator when listening to a group of children at play: “I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (*Lolita*, p. 308). Lee notes this and offers an explanation of why this passage is such an indictment of Humbert’s actions: “what Nabokov attacks in *Lolita* is human insensitivity, the failure of one human being to allow another to live fully” (p. 123).

In writing (and revising) his autobiography, Nabokov finds himself in a similar dilemma. How is he to stay true to his ideal of uncompromising respect for specificity—his “loathing of generalizations” (“On a Book entitled *Lolita*,” p. 314)—and individuality while also striving to confer transcendence through art upon himself and those whom he loves.⁷ This, too, he shares with Humbert, who, in the final passage of *Lolita*, aspires to “make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (*Lolita*, p. 309).⁸

The sense of the author as demiurge (much as Humbert Humbert controls the narrative in *Lolita*) is a significant aspect of Nabokov’s writing. As a writer, his creative stance is that of complete authorial control over the world of the text. In writing an autobiography, such creative control must extend to memory, of which Michael Wood writes, “Nabokov will have no truck with involuntary memory, or indeed with anything involuntary. Memory is an act of will, and of the will at its most lucid and courageous” (p. 87). Hana Píchová also relates the “elaborate patterning” of Nabokov’s novels to the creative use of memory: “Through complicated twists

and turns of structures, images, and themes these writers [Nabokov and Kundera] create a masterful blend of personal and cultural memory, bringing together the pieces of their past in unique fashion" (p. 11).

Wood's analysis, in uniting Nabokov's penchant for thematic patterns and his attitude toward memory, is that, "death and time themselves begin to look like masks for something that Nabokov and memory are reluctant to name: loss. Nabokov's habitual (overt) stance is that of memory's proud agent and possessor. Nothing is lost, the past is not a foreign country. Then was then and *is also now*" (p. 86). Nabokov collapses the past into the eternal now:

[A] summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present....Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die (p. 77).

Thus he accomplishes, through the act of composing a memoir, the mystical sense of oneness that Nabokov calls "cosmic synchronization" (p. 218).

Likewise, the timelessness of pure being (such as that described during the construction of chess compositions: "The strain on the mind is formidable; the element of time drops out of one's consciousness altogether" [p. 290]), is accessed in a similar manner: through the "creative rights" of memory (p. 93). "I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past" (p. 170). By treating memory as "an act of will," Nabokov renders key events in his life (such as first love and his passion for chasing butterflies) as existing outside of time, or coexisting in both the present and the past.

Alas, actual transcendence by this manner evades even the master magician himself, for when he later encounters objective facts that contradict his memory of an event, "it was as if life had impinged on my creative rights by wriggling on beyond the subjective limits so elegantly and economically set by childhood

memories that I thought I had signed and sealed" (p. 93). Moreover, any desire to congeal the past into a perfect moment in which "nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die," can only exist in tension or outright contradiction with Nabokov's equal passion for personal metamorphosis. For self-transformation is a process of change over time, a process clearly at odds with the notion that by freezing one's memories one can escape time...and thereby achieve a state of timelessness.

Toward the Literary Transcendence of Ethnicity-as-Genre

While Nabokov may have failed to attain "timeless transcendence" as an individual consciousness, he has achieved a kind of literary transcendence through his art. And since one of those works of art is his own autobiography (his life on the page), he has indeed achieved personal transcendence of a sort. As comparison case (one where the text in question is widely thought of as ethnic literature), I turn now to the classification and reception of Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical books. Rodriguez makes a particularly salient comparison case as he specifically addresses the issue of ethnic literature's marginalization—or *de facto* ghettoization—in his own autobiography: "Let the bookstore clerk puzzle over where it [*Hunger of Memory*] should be placed. (Rodriguez? Rodriguez?) Probably he will shelve it alongside specimens of that exotic new genre, 'ethnic literature.' Mistaken, the gullible reader will—in sympathy or in anger—take it that I intend to model my life as the typical Hispanic-American life" (*Hunger*, p. 7).

Rodriguez expresses here an acute awareness, as ethnic author, of reader expectations about ethnic literature when conceived as a genre.⁹ Moreover, there is an undertone of angst in the passage, an even greater awareness that reader expectations about ethnicity can have the unintended consequence of elevating some works of literature, while devaluing others. By avoiding designation as belonging to a particular ethnic or other subgroup, Nabokov, and his work, are more readily elevated to the status of

“universal,” while Rodriguez fears that his autobiography will be marginalized, displayed on some back shelf labeled “ethnic literature.” The designation, Rodriguez fears, will disadvantage his text when it comes to classification, canonization, and the likelihood of eventual elevation to high brow status.

This is not to say that there is conscious bias against ethnic literature on the part of readers. Nor is it to say that ethnic literature will always be considered marginal. Indeed, a cursory glance at recent anthologies of American literature shows a trend toward greater ethnic inclusiveness. Nevertheless, ethnic literature’s visibility as ethnic literature marks it in the minds of readers as separate from that which is perceived (by its ethnic invisibility and default privilege), as “literature,” or, even, “American literature.”

While some would like to see ethnic literature maintain a certain cultural and literary separateness from “American literature,” Rodriguez yearns only for universality—and sees anything short of that as exclusionary:

In the 1950s it would have seemed to me that a Negro writer was writing about the nation in which I was a part, regardless of whether my tribe was singled out for mention. But when the American university began to approve, then to enforce fracture, and when blood became the authority to speak, I felt myself rejected by black literature and felt myself rejecting black literature as “theirs.”

Neither did I seek brown literature or any other kind. I sought Literature—the deathless impulse to explain and describe. I trusted white literature, because I was able to attribute universality to white literature, because it did not seem to be written for me. (Brown, p. 27)

Rodriguez offers here the tangibly felt personal sentiment that literature that is not self-consciously ethnic, making no ethnic claims and having none imposed upon it, has more universal appeal because its indifference to the ethnic identity of the readers makes it more inclusive. Therein, argues Rodriguez, lies “the universality of dissimilarity”—literature

that focuses on individual characters and cases, rather than on groups (Brown, p. 12). What is true for Rodriguez is not true for all Latino readers, many of whom seek in Latino texts precisely the recognition of the ethnically familiar that Rodriguez seems to want to avoid. Indeed, these sentiments may not even be true for Rodriguez at different points in his reading life.

What’s more, opposing “white literature” to that “written for me” indicates that Rodriguez is thinking of himself as “not white” in this passage. So it seems a double standard (particularly if part of what makes literature universal is that it reflects human reality) to demonstrate self-consciousness about his own race and ethnicity while making the case for literature that eschews racial and ethnic consciousness. Whether or not one agrees with Rodriguez’s sense that literature should be written with no particular reader in mind, one would at least hope that there would be a space in which Latino writers could write texts that are received as just as “universal” as any other American author, should this be their aim.

Indeed, given the diversity of Latino lives, there should be no reason that Latino literature would not be a big enough tent to accommodate everything from ethnic tourism to highly original tales about characters who may or may not be Latino. “Books should confuse,” Rodriguez exhorts his readers; “Literature abhors the typical. Literature flows to the particular, the mundane” (Brown, p. 12).

Surely, then, one possible path to universality for ethnic literature is to revel in the cultural specificity of ethnic lives—the tortillas, Spanglish, and idiosyncratic Tías. All, of course, without trying to squeeze Latino authors into a procrustean bed that prescribes what does or does not qualify as authentically Latino. Latino literature, that is, must be among the most expansive of genres if it is to be true to the identities and experiences of real-life Latinos. We should, to be sure, even expect to see lots of science fiction and fantasy novels by Latino authors.

Cutting in the opposite direction are forces that cause the genre to contract rather than expand. A fetishizing feedback loop seems to emerge in any genre predicated on the notion of representing an entire culture or ethnicity. Expectations for ethnic authenticity are sure to trail any book regarded as “ethnic literature,” and so authors writing within the genre tend to self-police their writing to avoid accusations of failing to be “ethnic” enough.¹⁰ Such expectations come from both inside and outside the ethnic group. Those outside are often coming to ethnic literature as “ethnic tourists,” expecting to find (in any text deemed ethnic literature) an ethnographic account of Latinos, Native Americans, or whatever ethnicity the book is associated with. Perhaps more interesting are the ways in which expectations about ethnic authenticity (reflecting fierce internal struggles over what it means to be authentically Chicana/o, for instance) can also come from inside the ethnic group. Nabokov himself was denounced by Russian émigrés (to America) for writing literature that was inauthentically “Russian.” In the words of Ludmila A. Foster,

Many critics used a basic formula: talented, brilliant stylistically and formally BUT “un-Russian.” The “un-Russianness” although it was used normatively, was, however, an indefinite quantity, which encompassed a multitude of “sins” from an inability to touch the heart of the reader, to an absence of verbal experimentation, conceived as peculiar to Russian writers. (p. 53)

Rodriguez received the same treatment in reviews and literary criticism by Chicana/o academics. The shared experience of criticism from within the ethnic and immigrant community obscures, at first blush, important differences in the critical reception of the two authors. Nabokov is primarily criticized on stylistic and literary counts, but the criticism of Rodriguez is overwhelmingly political.

In part this is owing to the inherently political content of topics and themes in Rodriguez’s books. Even as he abjures overt political identification himself, the subject matter of his books (as are the identities and experiences of ethnic subjects) is inescapably political. And in Rodriguez’s case, situating

himself squarely within the raging identity politics debates of the era had the effect of raising to higher levels the vituperative against him.

That the bulk of negative criticism leveled at Rodriguez in the 1970s and 80s came from those who most identified themselves (either as readers, subjects, or writers) with Chicana/o Studies raises an important question about genre: to what extent are ethnic genres and subgenres (associated as they are with ethnic, political, or other group identities) *defined* by identity politics? And more pointedly, to what extent do the master narratives of Chicana/o identity (or whatever ethnicity) dictate the conventions of literary texts by ethnic authors?

We must also ask to what extent *narratives* of ethnicity (rather than social relations in a broader sense) lead to the classification of Rodriguez’s books as ethnic literature (specifically, “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “Chicana/o,” or “Mexican American” literature) while Nabokov’s memoir is (to this day) more likely to be read under the more encompassing rubric of “American literature,” or even just plain, old “literature.”

Even when the autobiographical works of both authors are referred to as “autobiography,” and approached through the lens and genre conventions of “life writing,” Rodriguez’s books are often imagined and shelved under the additional overlay of “ethnic literature,” while Nabokov’s memoir is not. Nabokov thus escapes (even though foregrounding his Russian ethnicity in *Speak, Memory*) the constraining conventions of the ethnic genre, as well as dodging (though not completely) charges of ethnic inauthenticity.

That is, by virtue of *not* being read as “ethnic literature,” Nabokov transcends the expectation that he represent his ethnicity in a particular way in his autobiography while retaining the freedom to represent the self in all of its dimensions, including as an inescapably ethnic self.

Conclusion

Research libraries arrange their books differently than bookstores do. So a theory of genre that relies too heavily on where readers find the books they read has to take into account the great variety of logics by which books are shelved, situated, and encountered. Such things are all significant aspects of the framing context. But the language of the text itself has to count for more than its cover or the shelf it is found on.

That said, such a theory, by giving appropriate weight to the framing context in which books are encountered would have to conclude that readers of the same book are actually reading significantly different books, depending upon how the book was shelved. And that is Rodriguez's point: in some significant way, *Hunger of Memory* is a different book when shelved under Literature than when shelved under Hispanic Studies or Ethnic Lit.

If read first and foremost as ethnic Russian literature, Nabokov's autobiography would be a different text indeed. Fortunately, most readers of Nabokov do not see the category of (universal) Literature as mutually exclusive from ethnic literature. *Speak, Memory* has so far transcended designation as a particular conception of ethnic literature that precludes also reading it as universal. One cannot help but wonder how future generations will regard Nabokov's text if reading it primarily as ethnic literature.

Much will depend upon how they conceive the category of Ethnic Lit. To date, our conception of ethnic literature has been too constraining. Perhaps much will have changed by then: a broadening of the genre to reflect the full spectrum of diversity within ethnic groups, a reimagining of the genre's conventions, a loosening of self-imposed constraints...and an elevation of literary status. In any case, when it comes to how we read ethnic literature, it is time for a paradigm shift.

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Endnotes

¹ It should be noted that autobiography (nonfiction) is categorically different from works of *fiction* by ethnic authors. Readers expect memoirs to accord with the basic facts of the writer's life in historically accurate ways. On the transcendence theme. See Michael Garcia, "Nabokov's Index Puzzle," pp. 167-91.

² An excellent treatment of Pnin's ethnic situatedness in society and how he responds—including by performing Russian identity—to the ethnic expectations of others can be found in Masha Raskolnikov's "Pninian Performatives," pp. 127-59.)

³ Lisa Zunshine notes that taking Nabokov too much at his word has led to "the current critical reticence to explore musical subtexts of his prose or his engagement with Augustan aesthetics, based on the fact that Nabokov had on several occasions proclaimed his indifference to music and characterized the English Age of Reason as pedestrian and devoid of imagination" (*Nabokov at the Limits* p. xix). Rather, Zunshine continues, "the system of aesthetic values articulated by Nabokov in his self-reflexive critical writings, and subsequently developed by the scholars" is replete with "unavoidable inconsistencies" (p. xix).

⁴ Hence Matt Reed, in his article "Homo Lepidopterist: Nabokov and the Pursuit of Memory," refers to "Nabokov's aesthetics of memory" when comparing *Speak, Memory* to Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (p. 273).

⁵ Stanley Lombardo will later translate (in an intertextual allusion not only to Nabokov's memoir, but also to the odyssey from Russia, to the Crimea, Germany, England, France, and westward to America that Nabokov describes therein) the invocation of the muse in his rendering of *The Odyssey* as "Speak, Memory" (p. 1).

⁶ As is well noted, Nabokov shared a great deal of affinity with Poe, even as he parodied much of Poe's work. In *Lolita*, Humbert's first love was named "Annabel Leigh" (an allusion to Poe's

"Annabel Lee," a poem depicting endless love that even death cannot conquer). The two authors also shared an obsession with the theme of doubles (Humbert and Quilty), held similar notions about the beautiful and the sublime, and thought of the writer as, in the words of Edward H. Davidson, an artist that "may be, like God, a timeless mind or a being who can transcend time" (*Poe*, p. 247).

⁷ Brian Boyd notes in his biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, that "Nabokov fuses the roles of art and love in his life" (p. 631).

"As he falls in love time after time, the theme of colored glass develops," which converges with his emergence as a writer (penning love poems for his first true love, "Tamara"), thus linking—as similarly transcendent—the themes of art and love (p. 631). Moreover, Boyd underscores Nabokov's desire to transcend time in general by taking "total command of the past" and aiming "to show the mind triumphing over time, as far as it can, and to intimate something beyond human time" (pp. 152-53). Against this view, Martin Hägglund argues that "The chronophilic desire to remember the finite is not compatible with the metaphysical desire to transcend finitude as such" ("Chronophilia," p. 450).

⁸ As Hägglund observes, "Many of Nabokov's novels are fictive memoirs where the protagonists narrate their own lives" (p. 447).

⁹ See Peter J. Rabinowitz's *Before Reading* for a cogent analysis of the literary conventions with which readers approach texts, esp. pp. 42-46. Elsewhere, Rabinowitz notes that "genres can be seen not only as sets of formal features, but also from the audience's perspective, as menus of interpretive procedures for putting together literary meaning" ("*Lolita*," p. 328).

¹⁰ See, for example, Henry Staten's award-winning *PMLA* essay on Rodriguez, "Ethnic Authenticity, Class, and Autobiography." In regard to expectations of ethnic authenticity and Rodriguez's writing, Staten perceptively notes that "Instead of merely betraying a presumed Chicano identity, Rodriguez's life narrative mirrors the tensions and contradictions of the Mexican and Mexican American societies" (p. 105).