



Rodriguez, Richard (b. 1944)

by Victoria Shannon



Richard Rodriguez.
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Essayist and memoirist Richard Rodriguez is a thoughtful, and often controversial, commentator on issues related to the experience of American Latinos in particular and to American life generally. Perhaps the most widely read of Latino American authors, he positions himself as an outsider in America, not only because of his ethnicity, but also because of his sexuality.

Rodriguez's first book, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) brought him fame as an articulate and insightful memoirist, concerned with the tensions in American society between individuality and community, particularly as reflected in his experience as a Mexican-American. In the book's five autobiographical essays, Rodriguez describes his educational journey from a son of Mexican immigrant working-class parents who spoke only a few words of English to what he calls a "scholarship boy."

Hunger of Memory also established Rodriguez as an iconoclast with little respect for political correctness. Although he considers himself left of center in his politics, his strong critiques of bilingual education and affirmative action made him unpopular in liberal circles and a favorite among conservatives. But his positions are actually more nuanced than political labels can accurately convey.

As a contributing editor and regular essayist on PBS's *NewsHour*, and through his publications in such mainstream organs as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The American Scholar*, *Time*, *Mother Jones*, and *The New Republic*, Rodriguez has become one of the most familiar public intellectuals in the United States.

Early Life and Education

Born on July 31, 1944, in San Francisco, California, to Leopoldo Rodriguez, a dental technician, and his wife Victoria, a clerk-typist, Mexican immigrants who came to the United States in the 1920s, Rodriguez spoke Spanish exclusively in his home for the first six years of his life.

The family moved to Sacramento when Rodriguez's older brother developed asthma, and the family was advised to move to a dryer climate. Rodriguez was sent to Sacred Heart Grammar School, a Catholic school in "the white neighborhood" where they settled. The youngest of four children, Rodriguez struggled with not knowing how to speak English in the classroom. He viewed Spanish as his "private" language, the language spoken in his home with his parents and loved ones. For him, English was a "public" language associated with the public identity of mainstream America.

As Rodriguez struggled with the English language at Sacred Heart, three nuns visited his parents and asked that the family speak only English at home so that the boy could better learn the language. When they agreed, Rodriguez mourned the loss of his "private" language and its "pleasing, soothing, consoling reminder of being at home." As his parents struggled with English, Rodriguez immediately noticed a distance developing between him and them.

"The Irish nuns taught me the queen's English," Rodriguez says. They instilled in him a love of reading and helped him assimilate into mainstream American society. He credits their concern and encouragement with his decision to pursue higher education and to become a writer. But such success was not without its cost, particularly in terms of his relationship with his parents and his extended family.

As Rodriguez mastered English and excelled in school, his parents, while happy at his success, also lamented his loss of interest in Hispanic language and culture. Their son did not become bilingual: for him English *replaced* Spanish.

Rodriguez grew up increasingly alienated from his ethnic culture. He was frequently called "pocho" by relatives and family friends, and he was accused of betraying his people. "The Mexican American who forgets his true mother is a pocho, a person of no address, a child of no proper idiom," Rodriguez explains.

But, as the essayist has observed, his experience of alienation from his family and ethnic culture is itself thoroughly American. "Americans like to talk about the importance of family values," he notes. "But America isn't a country of family values; Mexico is a country of family values. This is a country of people who leave home."

Rodriguez's education continued at Christian Brothers High School, during which time his mother was hired as a secretary to Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown. She became known to legislators from all over the state, and the Rodriguez family entered the American middle class. Indeed, Rodriguez has accused his parents of having "aristocratic tendencies."

Throughout high school, Rodriguez associated with middle- and upper-class white classmates, and he easily absorbed their manners and tastes. "An accident in geography sent me to school where all my classmates were white, many the children of doctors and lawyers and business executives," and "both my parents continued to respect the symbols of what they considered to be upper-class life," he observed.

Rodriguez attended Stanford University and spent two years in a religious studies program at Columbia University. He later spent time at London's Warburg Institute and at Oxford University before earning a Ph. D. in Renaissance Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. When he left London, he moved back in with his parents for a year, but he says he could not recover his "lost ethnicity, remaining an academic . . . a kind of anthropologist in the family kitchen."

Critiques of Affirmative Action and Bilingual Education

Rodriguez's objections to affirmative action began when he sought university teaching jobs in the early 1970s and received offers based primarily on his minority status. He declined the offers because he could not endure the irony of being counted as a "minority" when, in fact, he was now a fully assimilated member of the majority.

Rodriguez came to oppose affirmative action on the grounds that "the program has primarily benefited people who are no longer disadvantaged, . . . as I no longer was when I was at Stanford." The focus on affirmative action, he charges, has contributed to society's "ignoring the educational problems of people who are genuinely disadvantaged, people who cannot read or write."

Rodriguez's objections to bilingual education are equally controversial and similarly rooted in his own experience: "To me, public educators in a public schoolroom have an obligation to teach a public language [i.e., English]. It is the language of public society, the language that people outside that public sector resist."

Rodriguez contends that mastering English allows immigrants to develop a public identity. He believes that children have an obligation to learn that they belong to a pluralistic society, and in order to assimilate into that society they must learn the language of mainstream America. "You can't use family language in the classroom--the classroom requires that you use language publicly."

Hunger of Memory

Although he received several offers of tenure-track positions teaching Renaissance literature at leading universities, Rodriguez decided to abandon his dream of an academic career after receiving his Ph.D. in 1976. He spent the next six years writing *Hunger of Memory*, parts of which were published in various magazines before being brought together in book form. *Hunger of Memory* was well-received and praised by many critics, especially for its discussion of the impact of language on life and for its own distinguished prose style. As Rodriguez acknowledges, "Language has been the great subject of my life."

The book won several awards, including the Gold Medal for non-fiction from the Commonwealth Club of California, the Christopher Prize for Autobiography, and the Ansfeld-Wolf Prize for Civil Rights from the Cleveland Foundation.

The book also received negative reviews because of Rodriguez's critiques of bilingual education and affirmative action. Some reviewers charged him with hypocrisy because he benefited from the affirmative action programs that he excoriated. He became a lightning rod in the debates over affirmative action and bilingual education that swirled in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes falsely accused of holding beliefs that he rejects.

Days of Obligation

Rodriguez' second book, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992), is another collection of previously published essays that examines many of the themes from *Hunger of Memory*: barbarism and civilization among Hispanics, religion, and language. It also includes a moving account of the death of a close friend from AIDS. In the chapter "Late Victorians," Rodriguez explicitly acknowledges his homosexuality, which was only implicit in *Hunger of Memory*.

While not as well-received as *Hunger of Memory*, *Days of Obligation* nevertheless established Rodriguez as one of America's best autobiographical writers. The book was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction in 1993.

Marginalization

Rodriguez sees himself as marginalized in many ways. He is frequently attacked by Hispanics for his views on affirmative action and bilingual education, and for not being "Mexican enough." He is also sometimes criticized by gay activists for "not being gay enough."

He accepts the latter criticism to the extent that he describes himself as "a morose homosexual" rather than a gay one. "I'm melancholy," he confesses. At the same time, however, he refuses to be apologetic about his sexuality. In a 1998 essay, he declared "As a gay man, I do not expect other Americans--male or female--to approve of my sexuality. But I demand the right to be. And I refuse to be saddled with responsibility for what is wrong with male-female relations."

Characteristically, Rodriguez also refuses to be a role model for any of his identities and rejects the notion that he has an obligation to be a "cheerleader" for homosexuals any more than he does for Mexican-Americans.

Similarly, he dislikes being pigeon-holed as a "gay writer" or a "Hispanic writer." He sees these labels as limiting and as not acknowledging the various, often conflicting, influences and identities that individuals possess.

Rodriguez also feels "at odds" with his church. Although he identifies as a Roman Catholic, he is acutely aware of the ways in which his homosexuality and his church clash. He bemoans the fact that the Roman Catholic Church regards his way of loving as sinful, but he sees the disagreement on this matter as a kind of family disagreement, pointing out that he regards the Pope as also sinful.

Rodriguez points to the clash between his sexual and religious identities as an example of how today many people live within multiple, often conflicting, cultures and must learn, sometimes painfully, how to negotiate those cultures.

Brown: The Last Discovery of America

Brown: The Last Discovery of America (2002) completes the biographical trilogy Rodriguez began in 1982 with *Hunger for Memory*. In this book, Rodriguez characterizes America as brown in the same way that he is personally brown: "a glorious blend--descendent of the Conquistador and the Indian, a gay man and also a Roman Catholic, culturally descended from both the Spanish and the English empires, half-way between the greenness of youth and the white of old age in his middle years--a melt-down that far surpasses the color of his skin."

In discussing identity and race in America, Rodriguez uses "brown" as a metaphor for in-between states of being. He says, "I write about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America."

In *Brown*, homosexuality is a prominent subject, surfacing in his discussions of a variety of figures, ranging from Mabel Mercer to James Baldwin.

Homosexuality in *NewsHour* Essays

In his low-key way, Rodriguez occasionally discusses homosexuality in his *NewsHour* essays. In a prescient 1998 essay, he observed that the homosexual oppression has always been silence: "wanting to say, not being able to say the love that dare not speak its name. No wonder that the language of homosexuality was best expressed through irony, double entendre, and code words." He went on to predict that "the cultural war ahead will be a struggle between language and silence."

In a 2001 essay prompted by an exhibit of homoerotic photographs (later collected into a book by David Deitcher, *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*), Rodriguez draws upon his own experience as a gay man in decoding sexual meaning that society insists be cloaked: "At the simplest level, these tintypes and daguerreotypes sadly remind us how fragile friendship is, how time undoes the hand's clasp. But the sexual meaning of these images must trouble us, reminding us how much we do not understand about the human heart. As a homosexual man, especially in those years when my emotion was less easily described in public, I learned the habit of reading between the lines, deciphering glances or gestures' possible meaning. Sometimes I was right in my conclusions. Sometimes people told me I was being too literal."

In a 2004 essay prompted by the same-sex marriages in San Francisco, Rodriguez pointed out that homosexuals are taking their place within the American family. He ends the piece with this observation: "When I saw the couples at city hall waiting, often with their children, I realized that for pragmatic reasons--schooling, hospital emergency rooms, medical insurance--America is going to have to acknowledge the notion of gay unions if only for the sake of the children. But I also saw your uncle there at city hall, your niece, your cousin, your accountant, your clergyman, members of our American family--he and he; she

and she. People who have internalized a huge burden of loneliness in their lives suddenly stepped forward in the light of day to announce themselves publicly. Each said 'I do,' searching in America for 'we.'"

Conclusion

Rodriguez has produced documentaries for the BBC, and was the subject of a two-part profile on Bill Moyers' *World of Ideas* PBS television program.

In 1997, Rodriguez received a George Foster Peabody Award, one of television's highest honors, for his *NewsHour* essays on American life. He has also won the Frankel Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the International Journalism Award from the World Affairs Council of California.

An editor with Pacific News Service in San Francisco, Rodriguez also serves as a contributing editor for *Harper's Magazine*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the Sunday Opinion Page of the *Los Angeles Times*.

A gadfly who often speaks uncomfortable truths in a nagging voice, Rodriguez has nevertheless become one of the most visible Hispanic intellectuals in the United States. For all his nagging, however, his message is essentially optimistic: America, he believes, is creating a post-racial culture. The "children of mixture . . . do not know prejudice. They belong to no continent; they belong to the world. That is my optimism."

He lives in San Francisco with his partner of many years.

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About the Author

Victoria Shannon is an adjunct faculty member at DePaul University and Columbia College Chicago. At Columbia, she develops glbtq-related courses and teaches "Gay & Lesbian Studies," a course she created several years ago.