

# *Insight & Outlook*

## **A VIEW FROM THE MELTING POT** An Interview with Richard Rodriguez

From the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London

**W**hen Richard Rodriguez entered first grade at Sacred Heart School in Sacramento, California, his English vocabulary consisted of barely fifty words. All his classmates were white. He kept quiet, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of middle-class American speech, and feeling alone. After school he would return home to the pleasing, soothing sounds of his family's Spanish.

When his English showed little sign of improvement, the nuns at his school asked Rodriguez's parents to speak more English at home. Eager to help their son, his mother and father complied. "Ahora, speak to us *en ingles*," they would say. Their effort to bring him into the linguistic mainstream had far-reaching results. Rodriguez went on to earn a degree in English at Stanford and one in philosophy at Columbia. He then pursued a doctorate in English Renaissance literature at Berkeley and spent a year in London on a Fulbright scholarship.

Though Rodriguez had his sights set on a career in academia, in 1976 he abruptly went his own way, supporting himself through freelance writing and various temporary jobs. He spent the next five years coming to terms with how his education had irrevocably altered his life. His first book, *The Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Bantam), published in 1982, was a searching account of his journey from being a "socially disadvantaged child" to becoming a fully assimilated American, from the Spanish-speaking world of his family to the wider, presumably freer, public world of English. But the journey was not without costs: his American identity was achieved only after a painful separation from his past, his family, and his culture. "Americans like to talk about the importance of family values," says Rodriguez. "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."

While the book received widespread critical acclaim and won several literary awards, it also stirred resentment because of Rodriguez's strong stands against bilingual education and affirmative action. Some Mexican Americans called him *pocho* — traitor — accusing him of betraying himself and his

people. Others called him a “coconut” — brown on the outside, white on the inside. He calls himself “a comic victim of two cultures.”

Rodriguez explores the dilemmas of ethnicity and cultural identity more directly in his latest book, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (Viking). “The best metaphor of America remains the dreadful metaphor [of] the Melting Pot,” he writes. The America that Rodriguez describes is a new cross-fertilizing culture, a culture of half-breeds, blurred boundaries, and bizarre extremes.

Rodriguez has been compared with such literary figures as Albert Camus and James Baldwin. He is an editor for the Pacific News Service in San Francisco and a contributing editor of *Harper’s* and the Sunday “Opinion” section of the *Los Angeles Times*. His essays also appear on public television’s NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. I spent a morning with Rodriguez following a university lecture he gave in Santa Barbara, California. Our wide-ranging conversation began with the controversial subject of bilingual education — the practice of teaching immigrant children in the language of their families.

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**SCOTT LONDON:** In *The Hunger of Memory* you suggest that supporters of bilingual education are misguided. You write, “What they don’t seem to recognize is that, as a socially disadvantaged child, I considered Spanish to be a private language.” In what way was Spanish a private language for you?

**RICHARD RODRIGUEZ:** In some countries, of course, Spanish is the language spoken in public. But for many American children whose families speak Spanish at home, it becomes a private language. They use it to keep the English-speaking world at bay.

Bilingual-education advocates say it’s important to teach a child in his or her family’s language. I say you can’t use family language in the classroom — the very nature of the classroom requires that you use language publicly. When the Irish nun said to me, “Speak your name loud and clear so that all the boys and girls can hear you,” she was asking me to use language publicly, with strangers. That’s the appropriate instruction for a teacher to give. If she were to say to me, “We are going to speak now in Spanish, just like you do at home. You can whisper anything you want to me, and I am going to call you by a nickname, just like your mother does,” that would be inappropriate. Intimacy is not what classrooms are about.

**LONDON:** Some would argue that students are stripped of their cultural identity by being instructed in the dominant language. Isn’t there some truth to that?

**RODRIGUEZ:** My grandmother always told me that I was hers, that I was Mexican. That was her role. It was not my teacher's role to tell me I was Mexican. It was my teacher's role to tell me I was an American. The notion that you go to a public institution in order to learn private information about yourself is absurd. We used to understand that when students went to universities, they would become cosmopolitan. They were leaving their neighborhoods. Now we have this idea that, not only do you go to first grade to learn your family's language, but you go to a university to learn about the person you were before you left home. So, rather than becoming multicultural, rather than becoming a person of several languages, rather than becoming confident in your knowledge of the world, you become just the opposite. You end up in college having to apologize for the fact that you no longer speak your native language.

I worry these days that Latinos in California speak neither Spanish nor English very well. They are in a kind of linguistic limbo between the two. They don't really have a language, and are, in some deep sense, homeless.

**LONDON:** Many people feel that the call for diversity and multiculturalism is one reason the American educational system is in such bad shape.

**RODRIGUEZ:** It's no surprise that at the same time that American universities have engaged in a serious commitment to diversity, they have been thought-prisons. We are not talking about diversity in any real way. We are talking about brown, black, and white versions of the same political ideology. It is very curious that the United States and Canada both assume that diversity means only race and ethnicity. They never assume it might mean more Nazis, or more Southern Baptists. That's diversity, too, you know.

**LONDON:** What do *you* mean by diversity?

**RODRIGUEZ:** For me, diversity is not a value. Diversity is what you find in Northern Ireland. Diversity is Beirut. Diversity is brother killing brother. Where diversity is shared — where I share with you my difference — *that* can be valuable. But the simple fact that we are unlike each other is a terrifying notion. I have often found myself in foreign settings where I became suddenly aware that I was not like the people around me. That, to me, is not a pleasant discovery.

**LONDON:** You've said that it's tough in America to lead an intellectual life outside the universities. Yet you made a very conscious decision to leave academia.

**RODRIGUEZ:** My decision was sparked by affirmative action. There was a point in my life when affirmative action would have meant something to me — when my family was working-class, and we were struggling. But very early in life I became part of the majority culture and now don't think of myself as a minority. Yet the university said I was one. Anybody who has met a real minority in

the economic sense, not the numerical sense — would understand how ridiculous it is to describe a young man who is already at the university, already well into his studies in Italian and English Renaissance literature, as a minority. Affirmative action ignores our society's real minorities — members of the disadvantaged classes, no matter what their race. We have this ludicrous, bureaucratic sense that certain racial groups, regardless of class, are minorities. So what happens is those “minorities” at the very top of the ladder get chosen for everything.

**LONDON:** Is that what happened to you?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, when it came time for me to look for jobs, the jobs came looking for me. I had teaching offers from the best universities in the country. I was about to accept one from Yale when the whole thing collapsed on me.

**LONDON:** What do you mean?

**RODRIGUEZ:** I had all this anxiety about what it meant to be a minority. My professors these same men who taught me the intricacies of language — just shied away from the issue. They didn't want to talk about it, other than to suggest I could be a “role model” to other Hispanics when I went back to my *barrio*, I suppose. I came from a white, middle-class neighborhood. Was I expected to go back there and teach the woman next door about Renaissance sonnets? The embarrassing truth of the matter was that I was being chosen because Yale University had some peculiar idea about what my skin color or ethnicity signified. Who knows what Yale thought it was getting when it hired Richard Rodriguez? The people who offered me the job thought there was nothing wrong with that. I thought there was something very wrong. I still do. I think race-based affirmative action is crude and absolutely mistaken.

**LONDON:** I noticed that some university students put up a poster outside the lecture hall where you spoke the other night. It said, “Richard Rodriguez is a disgrace to the Chicano community.”

**RODRIGUEZ:** I sort of like that. I don't think writers should be convenient examples. I don't think we should make people feel settled. I don't try to be a gadfly, but I do think that real ideas are troublesome. There should be something about my work that leaves the reader unsettled. I intend that. The notion of the writer as a kind of sociological sample of a community is ludicrous. Even worse is the notion that writers should provide an example of how to live. Virginia Woolf ended her life by putting a rock in her sweater one day and walking into a lake. She is not a model for how I want to live my life. On the other hand, the bravery of her syntax, of her sentences, written during her deepest depression, is a kind of example for me. But I do not want to become Virginia Woolf. That is not why I read her.

**LONDON:** What's wrong with being a role model?

**RODRIGUEZ:** The popular idea of a role model implies that an adult's influence on a child is primarily occupational, that all a black child needs is to see a black doctor, and then this child will think, "Oh, I can become a doctor, too." I have a good black friend who is a doctor, but he didn't become a doctor because he saw other black men who were doctors. He became a doctor because his mother cleaned office buildings at night, and because she loved her children. She grew bow-legged from cleaning office buildings at night, and in the process she taught him something about courage and bravery and dedication to others. I became a writer not because my father was one — my father made false teeth for a living. I became a writer because the Irish nuns who educated me taught me something about bravery with their willingness to give so much to me.

**LONDON:** There used to be a category for writers and thinkers and intellectuals — "the intelligentsia." But not anymore.

**RODRIGUEZ:** No, I think the universities have co-opted the intellectual, by and large. But there is an emerging intellectual set coming out of Washington think tanks now. There are people who are leaving the universities and working for the government or in think tanks, simply looking for freedom. The university has become so stultified since the sixties. There is so much you can't do at the university. You can't say this, you can't do that, you can't think this, and so forth. In many ways, I'm free to range as widely as I do intellectually precisely because I'm not at a university. The tiresome Chicanos would be after me all the time. You know: "We saw your piece yesterday, and we didn't like what you said," or, "You didn't sound happy enough," or, "You didn't sound proud enough."

**LONDON:** You've drawn similar responses from the gay community, I understand.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yes, I've recently gotten in trouble with certain gay activists because I'm not gay enough! I am a morose homosexual. I'm melancholy. Gay is the last adjective I would use to describe myself. The idea of being gay, like a little sparkler, never occurs to me. So if you ask me if I'm gay, I say no.

After the second chapter of *Days of Obligation*, which is about the death of a friend of mine from AIDS, was published in *Harper's*, I got this rather angry letter from a gay-and-lesbian group that was organizing a protest against the magazine. It was the same old problem: political groups have almost no sense of irony. For them, language has to say exactly what it means. "Why aren't you proud of being gay?" they wanted to know. "Why are you so dark? Why are you so morbid? Why are you so sad? Don't you realize, we're all OK? Let's celebrate that fact." But that is not what writers do. We don't celebrate being "OK." If you want to be OK, take an aspirin.

**LONDON:** Do you consider yourself more Mexican, or more American?

**RODRIGUEZ:** In some ways I consider myself more Chinese, because I live in San Francisco, which is becoming a predominantly Asian city. I avoid falling into the black-and-white dialectic in which most of America still seems trapped. I have always recognized that, as an American, I am in relationship with other parts of the world; that I have to measure myself against the Pacific, against Asia. Having to think of myself in relationship to that horizon has liberated me from the black-and-white checkerboard.

**LONDON:** Do you think of yourself as an Indian?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yes, although it was something I did not know about as a child. I had an Indian face, but I never saw it as Indian, in part because in America the Indian was dead. The Indian had been killed in cowboy movies, or was playing bingo in Oklahoma. Also, in my middle-class Mexican family *indio* was a bad word, one my parents shy away from to this day. That's one of the reasons, of course, why I always insist, in my bratty way, on saying, "*Soy indio!*" — "I am an Indian!" I think it's an important thing for a Mexican to say, especially now with the rebellion in Chiapas. Mexico has to confront her Indian face, and yet she refuses to do so. When you turn on Mexican television, it's like watching Swedish TV: everyone is blond.

**LONDON:** That's true in the U.S. as well. What you see on television is a very distorted picture of American life.

**RODRIGUEZ:** That's right. I don't deny people their fantasy life, but I do think that we desperately need to start realizing just how complicated our reality is in America. Sitcoms just don't show us that. I keep trying to tell people that Los Angeles is already the largest Indian city in the U.S., that there are Toltecs playing Little League baseball in Pasadena, Mayas making beds at the Marriott in Westwood, and Chichimecs driving buses in LA. Los Angeles is a majority-Indian city. Of course, since we don't see the Indian as a living figure — having turned the Indian into a kind of mascot for the ecology movement, a symbol of prehistory — we can't see the Indian among us. But what really terrifies Americans right now is the prospect that the Indian is very much alive, that the Indian is having nine babies in Guatemala, and that those nine babies are headed this way. This is one reason why Americans hold on so dearly to the myth of the dead Indian.

**LONDON:** At the same time, we turn our backs on real Indians.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yes. The myth of the dead Indian goes back to the Protestant settlement of the U.S. The Pilgrims wanted to start a new life in America. They wanted to believe that in some sense they had come to a new Eden and that they could leave history behind in Europe. So they convinced themselves that this land had no history, that this was "virgin" land. This made the Indians'

presence inconvenient. The Indians had to be either killed, or herded onto reservations, which were essentially concentration camps, and forgotten. Their history had to be absolutely obliterated so that we could believe that we were living on virgin soil.

**LONDON:** Another place the Indian turns up today is in books about spirituality and native wisdom.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Suddenly the land is haunted by all these dead Indians. There is this new fascination with the Southwest, with places like Santa Fe, New Mexico, where people come down from New York and Boston and dress up as Indians. When I go to Santa Fe, I find real Indians living there, but they are not involved in the earth worship that the American environmentalists are so taken by. Many of these Indians are interested, rather, in becoming Evangelical Christians.

**LONDON:** In *Days of Obligation* you write about spending a week in the “twin cities” of Tijuana and San Diego. It occurs to me that, if you take the two cities as one, the combination offers a glimpse of what America might look like in the twenty-first century.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Absolutely. Of course, San Diego chooses not to regard the two cities as one. Talk about alter ego: Tijuana was created by the lust of San Diego. Everything that was illegal in San Diego was permitted in Tijuana. When boxing was illegal in San Diego, there were boxing matches in Tijuana; when gambling was illegal, when drinking was illegal, when whores were illegal, there was always Tijuana. Mexicans would say, “We’re not responsible for Tijuana; it’s the Americans who created it.” And there was some justification for that. But, in fact, the whore was a Mexican, the bartender a Mexican. Tijuana was this lovely meeting of Protestant hypocrisy with Catholic cynicism: the two cities went to bed and both denied it in the morning.

To this day, you will see American teenagers going to Mexico on Saturday nights to get drunk. Mexico gives them permission. The old Southern Catholic tradition gives permission to the Northern Protestant culture to misbehave. But what has happened in the last twenty-five years is that Tijuana has become a new Third World capital — much to the chagrin of Mexico City, which is more and more aware of how little it controls Tijuana politically and culturally. In addition to whorehouses and discos, Tijuana now has Korean factories and Japanese industrialists and Central American refugees, and a new Mexican bourgeoisie that takes its lessons from cable television.

And then there is San Diego — this retirement village, with its prim petticoat, that doesn’t want to get too near the water. San Diego worries about all the turds washing up on the lovely, pristine beaches of La Jolla. San Diego wishes Mexico would have fewer babies. And San Diego, like the rest of America, is growing middle-aged. The average age in the U.S. is now thirty-three, whereas Mexico gets younger and younger, retreats deeper and deeper into adolescence. Mexico is fifteen.

Mexico is wearing a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt and wandering around Tijuana looking for a job, for a date, for something to put on her face to take care of the acne.

It is not simply that these two cities are perched side by side at the edge of the Pacific; it is that adolescence sits next to middle age, and they don't know how to relate to each other. In a way, these two cities exist in different centuries. San Diego is a postindustrial city talking about settling down, slowing down, building clean industry. Tijuana is a preindustrial city talking about changing, moving forward, growing. Yet they form a single metropolitan area.

**LONDON:** During every election in the U.S., there is a lot of rhetoric about “restoring the American Dream.” But the American Dream seems to be alive and well in Tijuana.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Very much so. Maybe the American Dream is too rich for us now in the U.S. Maybe we're losing it because we are not like our Swedish grandmother who came across the plains, hacked down the trees, and took the Spanish words she encountered and made them hers. Now her great-great-grandchildren sit terrified, wondering what to do with all these Mexicans. The American Dream is an impossible affirmation of possibility. And maybe native-born Americans don't have it anymore. Maybe it has run through their fingers.

Those people who say that America is finite are in some sense right. The environmental movement, for example, has a great wisdom to it: we need to protect, to preserve, to shelter as much as we need to develop. But I think this always has to be juxtaposed against the optimism of old, which is now represented in part by immigrants. I would like to see America achieve a kind of balance between optimism and tragedy, between possibility and skepticism.

**LONDON:** Why do we always talk about race in this country strictly in terms of black and white?

**RODRIGUEZ:** America has never had a very large vocabulary for miscegenation. We say we like diversity, but we don't like the idea that our Hispanic neighbor is going to marry our daughter. America has nothing like the Spanish vocabulary for miscegenation. Mulatto, *mestizo*, Creole — these Spanish and French terms suggest, by their use, that miscegenation is a fact of life. America has only black and white. In eighteenth-century America, if you had any drop of African blood in you, you were black.

After the O. J. Simpson trial there was talk about how the country was splitting in two — one part black, one part white. It was ludicrous: typical gringo arrogance. It's as though whites and blacks can imagine America only in terms of each other. It's mostly white arrogance, in that it places whites always at the center of the racial equation. But lots of emerging racial tensions in California have nothing to do with whites: Filipinos and Samoans are fighting it out in San Francisco high schools. Merced is becoming majority Mexican and Cambodian. They may be fighting in gangs



right now, but I bet they are also learning each other's language. Cultures, when they meet, influence one another, whether people like it or not. But Americans don't have any way of describing this secret that has been going on for more than two hundred years. The intermarriage of the Indian and the African in America, for example, has been constant and thorough. But it's never described in history books. Cohn Powell tells us in his autobiography that he is Scotch, Irish, African, Indian, and British, but all we hear is that he is African.

**LONDON:** The latest census figures show that two-thirds of children who are the products of a union between a black and a white call themselves black.

**RODRIGUEZ:** The Census Bureau is thinking of creating a new category because so many kids don't know how to describe themselves using the existing categories. I call these kids the "Keanu Reeves Generation," after the actor who has a Hawaiian father and a Welsh mother. Most American Hispanics don't belong to one race, either. I keep telling kids that, when filling out forms, they should answer yes to everything — yes, I am Chinese; yes, I am African; yes, I am white; yes, I am a Pacific Islander; yes, yes, yes — just to befuddle the bureaucrats who think we live separately from one another.

**LONDON:** There is a lot of talk today about the "hyphenating" of America. We no longer speak of ourselves as just Americans — now we're Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, even Anglo-Americans.

**RODRIGUEZ:** The fact that we're all hyphenating our names suggests that we are afraid of being assimilated. I was talking on the BBC recently, and this woman introduced me as being "in favor of assimilation." I said, "I'm not in favor of assimilation. I am no more in favor of assimilation than I am in favor of the Pacific Ocean." Assimilation is not something to oppose or favor — it just happens.

**LONDON:** *Time* magazine did a special issue on the "global village" a few years ago. The cover photo was a computer composite of different faces from around the world. It was a stunning picture — neither male nor female, black nor white. That is the kind of assimilation that many worry about — the loss of things that make us separate and unique.

**RODRIGUEZ:** José Vasconcelos, Mexico's great federalist and apologist, has coined a wonderful term, *la raza cósmica*, "the cosmic race," a new people having not one race but many in their blood.

But the Mexicans who come to America today end up opposing assimilation. They say they are "holding on to their culture." To them, I say, "If you really wanted to hold on to your culture, you would be in favor of assimilation. You would be fearless about swallowing English and about

becoming Americanized. You would be much more positive about the future, and much less afraid. That's what it means to be Mexican."

I'm constantly depressed by the Mexican gang members I meet in East LA who essentially live their lives inside five or six blocks. They are caught in some tiny little ghetto of the mind that limits them to these five blocks, because, they say, "I'm Mexican. I live here." And I say, "What do you mean you live here — five blocks? Your granny, your *abuelita*, walked two thousand miles to get here. She violated borders, moved from one language to another, moved from a sixteenth-century village to a twenty-first-century city, and you live within five blocks? You don't know Mexico, man. You have trivialized Mexico. You are a fool about Mexico if you think that Mexico is five blocks. That is not Mexico; that is some crude Americanism you have absorbed."

**LONDON:** You mentioned Canada earlier, and now Mexico, and it reminds me of a comparison someone made between the countries of North America and Sigmund Freud's three levels of mind: Canada represents the superego, or the higher self; the United States is akin to the ego, or the personality self; and Mexico, of course, is the id, or unconscious self.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yes, that's quite accurate. And isn't it curious how it corresponds to the topography of the body, too? Mexico is sex and Canada is mind. There is much about Canada that I find admirable — the treatment of immigrants, for example, particularly those from Central America during the recent civil wars there. But there is confusion, too: I know of Croatian Nazis who are subsidized by the Canadian government to maintain their racist culture. There is Canada, trying to sustain diversity without knowing exactly what it's doing.

**LONDON:** You have described Los Angeles as the "symbolic capital" of the United States.

**RODRIGUEZ:** I find LA very interesting, partly because I think something new is forming there, but not in a moment of good fellowship, as you might expect from all this "diversity" claptrap. It's not as if we'll all go down to the Civic Center in our ethnic costumes and dance around.

After the LA riots in 1992, my sense was not that the city was dying, as expert opinion had it, but that the city was being formed. What was dying was the idea that LA was a city of separate suburbs and freeway exits. What burned in that riot was the idea that the east side was far away from the west side. People went to bed that first night watching television, watching neighborhoods they had never seen before, streets they had never been on, burn, and they were chagrined and horrified by what they saw. Sometime in the middle of the night they could hear the sirens and smell the smoke, and realized that the fire was coming toward them — that the street they lived on, the boulevard they used every day, was in fact connected to a part of town where they had never been before, and that part of town was now a part of their lives.

That moment of fear, of terror, of sleeplessness, was not a death, but the birth of the idea that LA is a single city, a single metropolitan area; that Tijuana is not some other planet, but right down the freeway; that Santa Barbara and the east side are part of the same world. I believe that was the birth of LA. What we have seen in the last three or four years is, if not optimistic, at least something very young and full of possibility. Women have been telling men forever that childbirth is painful, that life begins with a scream, not with little butterflies and tweeting birds; life begins with a scream. In 1992, LA came to life with a scream.

**LONDON:** If LA represents the future, does that mean we're looking at more riots?

**RODRIGUEZ:** We're looking at complexity. We're looking at blond kids in Beverly Hills who can speak Spanish because they have been raised by Guatemalan nannies. We're looking at Evangelicals coming up from Latin America to convert the U.S. at the same time that LA movie stars are taking up Indian pantheism. We're looking at such enormous complexity and variety that it makes a mockery of "celebrating diversity." In the LA of the future, no one will need to say, "Let's celebrate diversity." Diversity is going to be a fundamental part of our lives. That's what it's going to mean to be modern.

If you want to live in Tennessee, God bless you. I wish for you a long life and starry evenings. But that is not where I want to live my life. I want to live my life in Carthage, in Athens. I want to live my life in Rome. I want to live my life in the center of the world. I want to live my life in Los Angeles.

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