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Rodriguez & Rodriguez: Between Chicano Marxist and Catholic Thought

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Abstract: One would consider Chicano literary figures Luis J. Rodriguez and Richard Rodriguez to be very different writers and from the opposite political spectrum. But there is common ground, too. For my research on Turkish-German and Mexican-American literature in comparison, I visited various authors and activists to tell a story of belonging and participation in contexts of migration. The essay *Between Chicano Marxist and Catholic Thought* is based on meetings and interviews with the Chicano veteran Luis Rodriguez in Sylmar and the homme de lettres Richard Rodriguez in San Francisco. Luis Rodriguez grew up in a barrio in L.A. where he got involved in gang violence at a very young age. Chicano activism and poetry showed him a way to understand social and racial structures of injustice and helped him to overcome his own patterns of toxic behavior. In contrast, Richard Rodriguez attended a Catholic High School, was able to pursue an academic education and became a sophisticated writer. His views on bilingual education and *Affirmative action* made him infamous within the intellectual Chicano community.

Keywords: Marxism, Chicano, Catholicism, Belonging, Participation, Activism



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Rodriguez & Rodriguez: Between Chicano Marxist and Catholic Thought

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My mestizo boast: As a queer Catholic Indian Spaniard at home in a temperate Chinese city in a fading blond state in a post-Protestant nation, I live up to my sixteenth-century birth. The future is brown, is my thesis; is as brown as the tarnished past (Rodriguez 1982: 162).

We seem to be in a general state of depression – a cultural malaise of isolation and meaninglessness. We are feeling more rootless and hopeless than ever before, despite the unprecedented prosperity permeating our society – where consumer products strain warehouses and retail outlets; technology and rapid service is at our fingertips; TV, video games, books, music, and movies bombard us at every turn; and access to every imaginable drug, drink, and sexual release is commonplace (Rodriguez 2001: 13).

Living and working abroad several times in my life, I became interested in borderlands as spaces of vivid creation and enrichment of culture. After teaching assignments in Azerbaijan and Pakistan, I moved to Tijuana, Mexico and experienced how the border separated people from each other. Due to my research and interest in Turkish-German literature, I was curious from the beginning to see how social conditions in the US.-American and Mexican borderland had an impact on the citizens who considered themselves being part of both sides. Often waiting in *la línea*¹ in order to travel to San Diego, I was able to witness a transborder country something beyond the myths of belonging created by nationhood. Having been held in secondary inspection for hours and been hassled (but still protected by my German passport) by young, most likely first generation US-American border officers at the San Ysidro crossing, the concept, or to be more precise, 'the ontological force' of transborder crossings appeared to me as a natural human response to the artificiality of the threshold created by men.

Being a scholar in the field of Comparative Literature, I am always tempted to think about texts outside a nation's canon. Taking a distant point of view on my home country and exploring Mexican-American literature and the authors' quest for participation finally gave me a new perspective to understand Turkish-German literature as a search and statement of belonging. Due to the fact that my first encounter with the Mexican-American academic community was during the *Mundo Zurdo Conference* on the works of Gloria Anzaldúa in Austin 2015, I want to try follow her technique and include my own persona in the following essay on Richard

¹ Spanish speaking people sometimes call the border "the line", "la línea".

Rodriguez and Luis J. Rodriguez, who each individually represent transborder approaches of belonging. Since the work of Gloria Anzaldúa is not only about establishing an independent *teoría* of emancipation but also about creating community, the sharing of personal insights are from my point of view essential for entering into the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa. In this regard I remember Norma Cantú once saying: "The battleground is us!".

In fall 2016, I was visiting the US for my PhD project, in which I compare Turkish-German and Mexican-American Literature. In my dissertation, I was focusing on various authors' writings on matters of participation, marginalization, exploitation, belonging and racism in countries of immigration. Contemporary politics in the US and Germany was in midst of the rise of racist and nationalistic movements, with, Donald Trump's witch hunt for undocumented Americans on the one side, the assassinations of Turkish-German citizens by the Neo-Nazi terror organisation NSU² on the other. Furthermore the Turkish president Tayyip Erdoğan's attempt to influence German-Turks has had a strong impact on the condition of living and inner peace in both societies.

For my PhD thesis, I was able to interview several writers to discuss their views on politics and their literary responses to racism and marginalization.³ After reaching out for over a year and with the help of other writers and colleagues in the field of Chicano studies, I finally got in contact with Richard Rodriguez in San Francisco and Luis J. Rodriguez in Sylmar and arranged meetings for interviews with both writers⁴ who, upon first impression, seemed to have nothing in common except their Mexican-American heritage. Richard Rodriguez was raised in Sacramento, went to a Catholic school and attended universities in the US and UK. Instead of becoming a scholar, he became a journalist and is well known for his first memoir *Hunger for Memory* in the early 1980s.⁵ American conservatives referred to him regularly in order to justify their idea of how integration should be. In the following years, Richard Rodriguez published three more memoirs discussing his own life intermingled with American history.⁶

Luis Rodriguez, on the other hand, was born in El Paso and grew up in a *barrio* in Los Angeles. He was a high school drop out, joined street gangs and became a heroin addict. It took him years to become sober. His engagement with Marxism and the Chicano movement, as well as his activities in the spiritual men movement made him community worker. He is most known

² See Kies (2016).

³ See Schreiner (2019).

⁴ See Schreiner (2017: 483-501).

⁵ See Rodriguez (1982).

⁶ See Rodriguez (2013; 2002; 1992).

for his first memoir *Always Running: La Vida Loca* published in the early 1990s, which sold 500,000 copies.⁷

During the pre-election debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, I arrived in San Francisco and found my way to Richard Rodriguez. I had read all his books and had stumbled over and over again on essays and articles on his works. At the Modern Language Association conference in Austin January 2016, I even attended a whole panel debating his role in Mexican-American thought. Ever since the 1970s, his opinions had been very different from other writers within the Chicano movement and feminist Mexican-American authors. His conservative advocacy against programs of affirmative action⁸ and his sole support for *English Only*⁹ had made him an outcast in the Mexican-American writing community. Being labeled as a "coconut" (a phrase pointing out the 'brown' ethnicity and the 'white' behaviour of an individual) and a "sellout" by the Chicano community for being a strong individualist, Richard Rodriguez stayed away from *La Causa*. He did not long for exchange with others and lived and wrote in his own borderland.¹⁰ Aureliano DeSoto sums up Richard Rodriguez' reputation from the perspective of Chicano community as follows:

Rodriguez was for many years, and continues to be for more than a handful of Chicana/o critics, the antithesis of the preferred variations of the Chicana/o subject. For Rodriguez, this initially assumed his self-identified role as a Caliban-like figure. A more compelling and lasting character analogy would be the Madwoman in the Attic. Given the sustained intensity of the focus on Rodriguez's four autobiographical works, Rodriguez effectively functions as a Chicana/o Bertha Mason/Antoinette Cosway, a literary character who lends himself to multiple parallel readings always already central and inescapable to the Chicana/o literary subject (DeSoto 2016: n. p.).

His outcast status made me even more curious to meet this excellent stylist and writer who later in his career publicly came out, leaving politics behind and started exploring matters of religion and interfaith. Being myself raised in a small Catholic village and interested in Judaism and Islam, I could connect with Richard Rodriguez' latest turn in his writings. On the other hand, I also was looking forward to meeting Luis Javier Rodriguez in person. I loved reading his memoirs and poems and, furthermore, due to my background as a social worker, I was

⁷ See Rodriguez (1993).

⁸ The term "affirmative action" summarizes policies of promoting the education and employment of citizens who are discriminated due to their ethnicity or gender.

⁹ The *English Only* movement promotes and demands English as the only official language of the US.

¹⁰ Interesting works on Richard Rodriguez are: Nieto Garcia (2014) and Guajardo (2002). Guajardo emphasizes the fact that Rodriguez in a way was standing outside the discourse and community: "The best approach to Acosta and Rodriguez is one that acknowledges their individuality as writers rather than as politicians. Both writers have been aptly viewed as contributors to particular ideologies, but no less central is their position as word-crafters, writers concerned with aesthetics. Very few critics have taken this latter approach. [...] As individuals, Acosta and Rodriguez both have been doubly marginalized: from the dominant culture and from the Mexican-American culture as well" (Guajardo 2002: 115).

fascinated by his political activism, his engagement with prison inmates and his poetry in the tradition of Raul Salinas¹¹ and Jimmy Bacca.¹²

Just after I had read the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa at the UT in Austin, I had become a member of a men group and could explore the power of storytelling and spirituality for myself. Especially Anzaldúa's text 'now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts'¹³ had made a deep impact on me. About the same time, I also found out that Luis J Rodriguez himself was a spiritual advocate for healthy manhood. Luis Javier Rodriguez had been a drug addict, a gangster and a prison inmate, and was thus looking at the Mexican-American experience from the opposite direction than Richard Rodriguez.

I was quite sure that meeting both men in person would help me to understand their work and the variety and intellectual range of Mexican-American thought. In the Bay Area I would meet the Catholic queer, a true *homme de lettres*, a classically trained university intellectual, and in LA I would face a former gangmember, a self-taught Marxist activist and spiritual street poet. Considering my own working class background and first generation graduate – I am someone still struggling with style, grammar, orthography, a certain theoretic terminology, and with the concepts of a bourgeoisie literary canon and of 'high culture' as the opposite to popular culture – I have sympathies for both writers and their different approaches to find a place within the dominant Anglo culture of the US. While Richard tried to master English in order to find acceptance, Luis wrote literally for his life straight out of the *pinta*¹⁴.

In all honesty I thought that I would meet two totally different men. In some ways this was true. While my interview with Richard Rodriguez had already been published and the interview with Luis Rodriguez is hopefully going to be in the future,¹⁵ I want to present some thoughts on the similarities and differences between the two writers. I do understand this undertaking as an intellectual exercise to break through political oppositions which seem monolithic and undebatable in a time which is strongly affected by the a mistrust in science, the rise of populism, of a constant critique of the media, and the general unwillingness for discussion on both sides of the Atlantic.

Colleagues of mine and other writers had warned me about Richard Rodriguez. He had a reputation for being complicated. But then the same was said about Luis Rodriguez by some

¹¹ See Salinas (1999).

¹² See Bacca (2009; 1992; 1982).

¹³ See Anzaldúa / Keating (2002: 540-576).

¹⁴ Chicano word for 'prison'.

¹⁵ The interview with Richard Rodriguez was published in the journal *American Studies* (see Schreiner 2018) and the video-interview with Luis J. Rodriguez has not been transcribed yet.

scholars I had met. I had written several emails to Richard Rodriguez and sent him one of my papers to win his trust – and indeed he welcomed me in his office.

In the very beginning of our interview, Richard Rodriguez said something very important that helped me to understand his latest writings. When I asked him how he would describe his own turns during his career, he explained that his own experiences of aging, illness and loss have made him a different writer. He said that taking care of dying people during the outbreak of the AIDS crisis, and now of his neighbor, and the fading of his own body had taken away his eagerness to prove his position in political discussions. Like Luis Rodriguez and Gloria Anzaldúa, Richard Rodriguez had experienced his share of human loss and pain. It seems to be a matter of aging when authors seem to lose some of their harshness and turn to a deeper spirituality. As with Anzaldúa in her late text *Let us shift*, in Richard Rodriguez's *Darling* (2013), the author looks for what humans have in common instead for what divides them. In a sense Rodriguez's transnational Catholic understanding of human brotherhood shows similarities with a transborder concept of belonging beyond national identity politics.

Nevertheless, he is aware that a lot of people are afraid of changes that naturally occur within a supra-local transborder reality and the fading of the illusion of a White Anglo America. When I asked him about the rise of nationalism and populism in the EU and the US he argued, albeit despite his admiration for Angela Merkel, that people in Germany (and the US) are afraid of immigrants and of losing their culture. Richard Rodriguez understands that 'white' people in Arizona or Germany are afraid of the 'browning' of their societies. Focusing on Europe, the Catholic Richard Rodriguez discussed that European societies were losing their religion and that Islam would fill the gap. In a way, Rodriguez talked about *Critical Whiteness* without being a theorist of this sort. Richard Rodriguez avoided words like 'racism' since, from his point of view, terminologies would hide the nightmarish reality behind them. He understood that Trump demonized migrants and played on the fear of his voters to win his campaign. Although he had sympathies for the positions of people who are afraid to lose the world they are used to, he forgot to mention that 'Mexicanos' in 'Tejas' or California suffered far greater injustices with the US American takeover of their lands in the 19th century than the Anglo-Americans in Arizona who see migrants coming in today.

In contradiction to that, Richard Rodriguez addressed issues of economic injustices and stated that "The war on drugs"¹⁶ and the US-American demands for drugs would create migration in the first place. Rodriguez showed himself convinced that Americans were not

¹⁶ See Hari (2015).

really able to talk about their true desires. Instead, he said, they focused on their fears. Religion was another factor he mentioned as an explanation for the conditions in the US today. As a Catholic, he explained how Protestant and Puritan theology had its impact on the US-American understanding of poverty. While from the Catholic Mexican perspective the 'poor' were seen as 'true' to the human experience, in the US poverty would rather be seen more as a failure.

Just like Luis Rodriguez, Richard Rodriguez was aware that there was a lack of belonging in the world. Islamism and terror armies like the *Islamic State* remind him of the crusades: he said that the war between *Shia* and *Sunna*, between radical Islamism and Liberalism, offered young men a cause. In the absence of a stringent and promising socialist movement, religious groups attracted people who were looking for a change of system. The longing for purity, the extended fear of cosmopolitanism in times of globalization shows that Islamist thought is in some sense similar to the wish of people voting for populists in Western societies. They too claim that they will recreate a better "once upon time". The political projects of going back to the greatness of America or to the early days of the prophet Mohammed arise from the same fears or wishes for purity, which are illusional.

While Luis Rodriguez is a socialist at heart who believes in the power of grass roots movements, Richard Rodriguez rather hopes for a messianic figure who can establish a positive promise of belonging without using hate and fear to form society. By recalling his meeting with Mother Theresa, with whom he visited the San Quentin Death Row, Richard Rodriguez argued that humans longed for heroes and the 'great narration' as a way to keep them going. Here, one can perceive Richard's own wish for Christian thought and act. His ideal world would be one of certainties. There would be a certain set of values. Purity and engagement matter to him; but he knows that it stays an illusion. Maybe this is the great tragedy of Richard Rodriguez: He wants a society and world which he knows will never be real.

Richard Rodriguez is aware that the lack of belonging creates violence, yet, he awkwardly avoids to answer questions on participation. Nowadays, he resists to give his idea on how Mexican-American participation should look: Richard Rodriguez's quest was to master English. To become a brilliant stylist was his way of finding participation in society. While his personal story reminds me partly of Edward Said's private struggles of belonging and identity,¹⁷ I cannot understand how Richard Rodriguez is sensitive for matters of belonging, but blind for the marginalized position of Mexican-Americans. Maybe this is a psychological necessity: if Richard Rodriguez would focus on existing structural injustices for Mexican-Americans, he

¹⁷ See Said (1999).

might come to realize that even mastering English does not give him the belonging and standing he wishes for. I am not at all saying that Richard Rodriguez is a narcissist or an egoistic character. He was and is too much engaged in helping others. Yet, compared to Luis J. Rodriguez, who is a community driven tribal member of his people, Richard Rodriguez was right from the beginning a more individualistic person who had to find his own way. Their upbringing and family connections pushed both men in very different directions. While Luis J. Rodriguez found a failed substitution for home first in gangs influenced by toxic masculinity, then within the Chicano movement and spiritual mangroups, the young homosexual Richard had to face the homophobic reproach of his church while he was, at the same time, struggling for the acceptance within the Anglo world.

Narrations and story do matter for Richard Rodriguez when he talks about history. He stated that the older he gets, the more he is interested in the density of places. For Richard Rodriguez, the layers of memories in a person or a place are gateways to understand personal history on a meta level. Opposed to Luis Rodriguez, who wants to understand how history creates injustice for people, Richard Rodriguez focuses on history as a kind of transcentral DNA which creates the single individual. While Luis Rodriguez wants to understand himself and history to change society, Richard Rodriguez aims to examines history in order to understand himself. Asked what literature can do or shall do, Richard Rodriguez said that literature should confuse and raise questions.

In my interview with him, Luis Rodriguez, on the other hand, saw literature and poetry as tools of social work which bring individuals in contact with their inner shadows and true character; a tool which helps to understand how the environment creates someone's life. But literature has to happen within a community. Luis Rodriguez, as an elder and such as a mentor, shares his stories so that the younger ones start telling their own life stories and rewrite them for the better by aiming for enhancement in the future. Luis follows the Marxist insight that the social being determines their consciousness. Hence, Luis Rodriguez implies that the people in the *barrio* need education to understand the conditions of the society that holds them down. Storytelling is a cultural tool for Luis, which helps to deconstruct race and class and to heal the individual:

There are already many programs dealing with young people. Far too many of them, however, are organized inadequacies. They don't seem to go deep enough; they don't get to the heart of the matter. They don't address the essence of the transformation process for individuals and society. What we need is a fundamentally different system of relationships that, as a whole, sets the conditions in which anything that can happen will happen. [...] Everyone is a "story" – a storehouse of experiences, thoughts, memories, sentiments, traits – with links to other stories. Not story as history, but as Michael Meade says, story as "symbolic liveliness". Remember, if you don't know your gifts, you can't see the gifts in others (Rodriguez 2001: 67).

Culture matters mainly to strengthen the group's identity and self-consciousness. Hence, to find one's native roots is an emancipatory act that challenges the power structures of the dominant society. After all, the dominant society creates race and cultural differences to rule.

As I could gather in the interviews, the two authors' approach to communication with society is quite distinct. While Richard Rodriguez gives talks at universities, Luis Rodriguez goes into prisons and teaches inmates to write. He also helps the Mexican-American community in and around Sylmar with his *Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural*¹⁸ which provides education, counseling and books. Due to their different personal conditions, Richard and Luis Rodriguez operate in contrasting environments. It takes a former *vato* and gangmember to have enough credibility to reach people struggling in prison.¹⁹ Luis Rodriguez's analysis on toxic masculinity is helpful to understand the social conditions which lead to male violence:

We know that many young people express their rage with violent fury. Almost anything can set them off. Mostly this happens when they feel wrongfully challenged, disrespected, or misunderstood. Many of the young people I've worked with were highly sensitive to a variety of dangers around them. They confront a steady stream of abuse at home, in school, and on the street, which heightens their levels of fear, resulting in an acute state of awareness. Chemical changes occur in the brain as a defense mechanism against habitual threats. These kids sometimes react like frightened animals. The oldest known responses to these situations are called the three Fs: "fight, flee, or freeze" (Rodriguez 2001: 98f.).

Luis Rodriguez is, as mentioned before, until today a community driven activist. Like Trump's racism or the tribes fighting at Standing Rock: he is aware of the social, cultural and political battlegrounds and is connected with activists throughout the US. The native element of his existence is very important for him. While Richard Rodriguez finds comfort in the church, which had been implemented by the Spanish colonizer, Luis Rodriguez connects with the native spirituality of the Tatomajas, the Hopi, Showshone, Pueblos and with the old Mexican religions – the same spiritualities that also had an impact on Gloria Anzaldúa.²⁰

¹⁸ See www.tiachucha.org/ [30.12.2019].

¹⁹ Luis J. Rodriguez's engagement as a community worker is also reflected in his books. See Rodríguez / Martínez / Rodríguez (1998); Rodríguez / Parson-Nesbitt / Warr (1999); Rodríguez (1999).

²⁰ Luis J. Rodriguez is influenced by the works of Michael Meade. See Meade (1996; 1994).

Here again we see the main difference between the two men: while Richard Rodriguez looks for unity in the church, Luis Rodriguez finds unity in diversity and community. Luis Rodriguez is a political activist and a man of statistics and data. While Richard Rodriguez talks about symbolism and theological concepts, Luis Rodriguez looks for the sociological facts which explain the problems his people have to deal with. He is able to point out how many 'Black American' or Mexican American are killed by police, and that 'white' people mostly get killed by 'white' people etc. Here is a political mind at work, and it is not surprising that Luis Rodriguez was running for Governor in the state of California with the Green party in 2014.

From my point of view it can be said that Luis Rodriguez owes his life to *La Causa*. Instead of dying of heroin addiction or gang violence, he became a part of the change and will be a veteran in the struggles to come. His writings and poetry teach us about the past but also show how Donald Trump's anti-migrant policies can be confronted. In this sense, also Richard Rodriguez does his part: his actions and writings represent a Christian compassionate conservatism that can serve as an ally for other social movements. The rapid change and enrichment of culture in the US and Europe has created transborder societies. Hence culture, identity and belonging are now the most important factors of economic and political struggles of distribution.

Further work on the common grounds of compassion, central to Gloria Anzaldúa, Luis Rodriguez and Richard Rodriguez's work can help to build and sustain the desired alliances which, in early 2019, are on the rise in both the US congress and foremost at grassroots level to challenge nationalistic and racist policies.

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