

A View From the Melting Pot: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez

By Scott London



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, Mayans making beds at the Marriott in Westwood, and Chichimecs driving buses in L.A. 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 into 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.

This interview was adapted from the public radio series "Insight & Outlook." It appeared in the August 1997 issue of The Sun magazine under the title "Crossing Borders." Portions of it also appeared in the December 1997 issue of The Witness magazine. In addition, it has been reprinted in several books, including The Writer's Presence, edited by Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan (Bedford/St. Martins Press, 2003), and, most recently, the Eleventh Edition of The Little, Brown Reader, edited by Marcia Stubbs, Sylvan Barnet and William E. Cain (Longman/Prentice Hall, 2009).