

Richard Rodriguez
The Chinese in All of Us

A Mexican American Explores Multiculturalism

The other day, the phone rang; it was a woman who identified herself as the “talent coordinator” for the “Oprah Winfrey Show.” She said Oprah was planning a show on self-hating ethnics. “You know,” she confided, “Norwegians who don’t want to be Norwegian, Greeks who hate Greek food.” Anyway, she said breezily, wouldn’t I like to make an appearance?

About 10 years ago I wrote a thin book called *Hunger for Memory*. It was a book about my education, which is to say, a book about my Americanization. I wrote of losses and triumphs. And, in passing, I wrote about two issues particularly, affirmative action and bilingual education.

I was a nay-sayer. I became, because of my book, a notorious figure among the Ethnic Left in America. Consider me the brown Uncle Tom. I am a traitor, a sell-out. The Spanish word is *pocho*. A *pocho* is someone who forgets his true home. (A shame.) A Richard Rodriguez.

Last year, I was being interviewed by Bill Moyers. “Do you consider yourself American or Hispanic?” he asked.

“I think of myself as Chinese,” I answered.

A smart-aleck answer, but one that is true enough. I live in San Francisco, a city that has become, in my lifetime, predominantly Asian, predominantly Chinese. I am becoming like them. Do not ask me how, it is too early to tell. But it is inevitable, living side by side, that we should become like each other. So think of me as Chinese.

Oh, my critics say: Look at you Mr. Rod-ree-guess. You have lost your culture.

They mean, I think, that I am not my father, which is true enough. I did not grow up in the state of Jalisco, in the western part of Mexico. I grew up here, in this country, amongst you. I am like you.

My critics mean, when they speak of culture, something solid, something intact. You have lost your culture, they say, as though I lost it at the Greyhound bus station. You have lost your culture, as though culture is a coat I took off one warm afternoon and then forgot.

I AM MY CULTURE. Culture is not something opposite us, it is rather something we breathe and sweat and live. My culture? Lucille Ball is my culture. (I love Lucy, after all.) And Michael Jackson. And Benjamin Franklin is my culture. And Elvis Presley and Walter Cronkite. Walt Disney is my culture. The New York Yankees.

My culture is you. You created me; if you don’t like it, if I make you uncomfortable now by being too much like you, too bad.

When I was a little boy in Sacramento, California, the son of Mexican immigrant parents, Spanish-speaking mainly, even then, in those years, America came at me. America was everywhere around me. America was in the pace of the traffic lights, the assertion of neon, the slouch of the crowd, the impatience of the fast food counter. America was everywhere.

I recognized America best, in those years, standing outside the culture. I recognized its power, and from the first I knew that it threatened to swallow me up. America did not feel like something to choose or not choose. America felt inevitable.

Truman Capote said somewhere that he never met a true bisexual. He meant, I think, that finally

people are one thing or the other.

Well, I must tell you that I have never met a truly bicultural person. Oh, I have met people who speak two languages, and all that. But finally, their allegiance belongs more to one side of the border than the other.

And yet, I believe in multiculturalism—my kind of multiculturalism.

I think the adventure of living in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic America leaves one vulnerable to a variety of cultures, a variety of influences. Consider me, for example, Chinese. I am also Irish.

About 10 years ago, I was going to school in England. One weekend, Aer Lingus, the Irish national airline, was offering a reduced fare to Dublin. I thought, "What a lark—it'd be fun to go off to Ireland for the weekend." Strange thing, once I got off the plane, I suddenly felt myself at home. I knew these people. I recognized their faces and their irony and their wit and their sadness.

I'll tell you why. I was educated by Irish Catholic nuns. They were my first, my most important foreign culture, intruding on my Mexican soul, reshaping my soul with their voices.

Sometime after Dublin, I realized something more about myself: All of my best friends from childhood to now, the people I have been closest to, have been Irish-Americans, Irish Catholics.

How is this possible? How is it possible for a Mexican kid from Sacramento, California, to discover himself to be Irish?

In the orthodox American scheme of things, it is nonsense. America is a Protestant country. A low-church Protestant country. America was founded by Puritans who resisted the notion of the group. The most important founding idea of America was the notion of individualism—your freedom from the group, my freedom from you. A most glamorous idea.

Consider this paradox: The belief we share in common as Americans is the belief that we are separate from one another.

There is already with this paradox implied an important tension, one basic to American experience. Our culture, by which I mean our daily experience, is at war with our ideology, by which I mean our Protestant belief in separateness.

Diversity is our strength, we say. There is not an American president who would say anything else: We are a country made stronger by our individuality, by our differences. Which is, in a way, true. But only partly true.

The other truth, I call it my catholic truth about puritan America, is that America exists. America exists as a culture, a sound, an accent, a walk.

Thousands of hotel clerks in thousands of hotels around the world will tell you that America exists. There is a recognizable type. Here they come, the Americans. Bermuda shorts. High-pitched voices. Too easy familiarity. Big tip, insecure tip. A slap on the back.

And when we ourselves are far from home, when we are in the Hilton lobby in Cairo or in Paris, we, too, recognize one another immediately. Across the crowded hotel lobby Americans find one another immediately, either with relief or with slight, acknowledging embarrassment.

It is only when we are home working alongside one another and living next to one another that we

wonder whether America exists. We wonder about our individuality. And we talk about our traditional Protestant virtues. We talk about respecting our diversity.

Nativist politicians are saying these days that maybe we should think twice about allowing non-European immigrants into this country. Can America, after all, sustain such diversity?

Liberal American educators end up echoing the point, in a way. They look at faces like mine and they see only what they call “diversity.” They wonder, now, if the purpose of education shouldn’t be diversity. We should teach our children about their separate cultures—forget the notion of a common culture.

The other day in Las Vegas I was speaking to a group of high school principals. One man, afterward, came up and told me that his school has changed in recent years. In little more than a decade the student body has changed its color, changed its complexion; the school is no longer black and white, but now suddenly Asian and Hispanic.

This principal smiled and said his school has dropped Black History Month in favor of what he calls, “Newcomers Month.”

I think this is absurd. I think this is nonsense.

There isn’t an American whose history is not black history. All of us, by virtue of being Americans, share in the history of black America—the oppression, the endurance, the triumph.

Do not speak to me of your diversity. My cultural forefathers are black slaves and black emancipators. I am an American.

America exists. Nothing more will I tell you, can I tell you. Let me tell you some stories.

A friend of mine—let’s call him Michael—tells me he’s confused by America. Mike goes to junior high school in San Francisco. His teacher is always telling him to stand up, look up. “Speak up, Michael, we can’t hear you! Look at me, Michael!”

Then Michael goes home. His Chinese father is always complaining at home. His Chinese father says that Michael is picking up American ways. “And since when have you started to look your father in the eye?”

America exists, dear Michael.

At the family picnic, the boy listens to his relatives argue and laugh. The spices are as familiar as the jokes. There are arguments about old civil wars and faceless politicians. The family is talking Greek or Chinese or Spanish. The boy grows restless; the boy gets up and wanders away from the family picnic to watch some other boys playing baseball in the distance.

America exists.

My Mexican father looks out at America from the window of his morning newspaper. After all these years in this country, he still doubts that America exists.

Look at this place, he says. So many faces. So many colors. So many grandmothers and religions and memories here. This is not a real country. Not a real country like China or Germany or Mexico.

It falls to the son to say, America exists, Papa. There is an unresolved tension between the “I” and

the “we.” We trust most the “I,” though grudgingly we admit the necessity of the “we.” The most important communal institution we have is the classroom. We build classrooms, recognize their necessity. But we don’t like them.

In the most famous American novel, our greatest book about ourselves, Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the school marm plays the comic villain. She is always trying to tie down Huck. She tries to make him speak regular. She is always trying to civilize.

We recognize the value of having Huck Finn learn to speak regular, even if we don’t like it. And we don’t like it. Something in us as Americans forces us to fear the coming of fall, the chill in the woods, the starched shirt, the first day of school.

Let me tell you about my first day of school. I came to the classroom clutching a handful of English. A bilingual child?

The important distinction I want to make here is not between Spanish and English, but between private and public language.

I was the son of working class, immigrant parents. I stress working class. Too often in recent years, we have considered ethnicity and race at the expense of economic standing. Thus, we speak of “minorities” in America and we mean only certain races or so-called “non-white” groups. We use the term minority in a numerical sense. Am I a minority? Well, yes, if we mean that Hispanics generally are “under represented” in American public life. But the term minority is richer as a cultural term. There are certain people in this country who do not imagine themselves to belong to majority society. White. Black. Brown. Most of them are poor. Many of them are uneducated. All of them share a diffidence, a fear, an anxiety about public institutions.

When I walked into the classroom, I was such a minority. I remember the nun wrote my name on the black board: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ. She pronounced it. Then she said, repeat it after me.

It was not that I could not say it. Rather, I would not say it. Why should I? Who was this nun?

She said: Repeat your name after me loud enough so all the boys and girls can understand.

The nun was telling me not just to speak English, but to use language publicly. To speak in a voice loud enough to be heard by strangers. (She was calling me to the first and most crucial lesson of grammar school.)

I was a minority child. It wasn’t a question of English versus Spanish. It was a question of public language. I didn’t want to speak to you—*los gringos*, boys and girls.

I would not. I could not. I refused to speak up, to look up.

Half a year passed. The nuns worried over me. Speak up, Richard. Stand up, Richard. A year passed. A second year began.

Then one Saturday three nuns appeared at our door. They walked into our house and sat on our sagging blue sofa.

Would it be possible, Mrs. Rodriguez, for you and your husband to use English around the house?

Of course, my mother complied. (What would she not do for her children’s public success?)

At first, it seemed a kind of game. We practiced English after dinner. But it was still your language.

Until one other Saturday. I remember my mother and father were speaking Spanish to one another in the kitchen. I did not realize they were speaking Spanish until, the moment they saw me, they switched to English.

I felt pushed away. I remember going over to the sink and turning on the water; standing there dumbly, feeling the water on my hand. I wanted to cry. The water was tepid, then warm, then scalding. I wanted to scream. But I didn't. I turned off the faucet and walked out of the room.

And now you have forgotten how I used to go after school to your house. I used to watch you. I watched television with you, there on the floor. I used to watch the way you laughed. I used to listen to the way you used words. I wanted to swallow you up, to become you. Five-thirty and your mom said, Well, Rickey, we're going to eat in half an hour. Do you want to stay? And I did. I became you.

Something happens to you in the classroom if you are a very good student. You change.

A friend of mine, who went to Bryn Mawr College in the 1950s—when she was the only black student in her class—remembers coming home to North Carolina. She remembers getting off the Greyhound bus. She remembers walking up the sidewalk on the hot early summer day.

When she got home and walked up the five steps of the front porch, her mother was waiting for her behind the screen door.

"I don't want you talkin' white in here," her mother said.

There is a sad story in America about "making it." It is the story of summer vacations. Of no longer being able to speak to one's parents. Of having your Chinese father mock your American ways. ("And since when have you started to look your father in the eye?") It is the story of the girl who learns a different kind of English at school and then is embarrassed to use it at the dinner table.

Bilingualists speak of the necessity of using what they call "family language" in the classroom. If I know anything about education, it is that such a bilingual scheme is bound to fail. Classroom language can never be family language. It is a matter not of different words, but of different contexts. We don't like to hear such things. We don't like the school marm to change us. We want to believe that August will go on forever and that we can avoid wearing shoes. Huck Finn is America's archetypal bilingual student. He speaks one way—his way, his free way—the school marm wants him to speak another.

As Americans, we must root for Huck.

Americans have lately been searching for a new multi-cultural metaphor for America. We don't like the melting pot. Hispanic Americans particularly have been looking for a new metaphor. Our political coming of age in the late 1960s was accompanied by a stern resistance to the melting pot model of America.

America is a stew. (All of us, presumably chunks of beef in a common broth.)

Or America is a mosaic. A Mexican-American bishop recently said that to me. He pointed at a mosaic of the Virgin of Guadalupe. "That is how I think of America," he said. "We are each of us different colors, but united we produce a wonderful, a beautiful effect."

The trouble, I thought to myself, the trouble is that the tiny pieces of glass are static. In our real lives,

we are not static.

America is fluid. The best metaphors of America for me are metaphors suggesting fluidity. Our lives melting into one another.

For myself, I like the metaphor of the melting pot. I like it for two reasons.

First, its suggestion of pain—and there is pain. The school teacher can put a sombrero on my head and tell me to feel proud of my heritage, but I know I am becoming a different person than my father. There is pain in the melting pot. Fall in and you are burned.

But there is to the metaphor also a suggestion of alchemy or magic. Fall into the melting pot and you become a new person, changed, like magic, to gold.

Why do we even talk about multiculturalism?

For several reasons, most of them positive. First and foremost is the influence of the great black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. We are more apt today to recognize the colors of America than perhaps we were several decades ago. On the TV ad, on the football field, in the bank, in a room like this—we have grown used to different shades of America. But that is only to say that we are more apt to be struck by our differences now that we are side by side than in earlier times when segregation legalized separation.

Less positively, the black civil rights movement was undermined by a romantic separatism. Americans were romanced by the moral authority of the outsider, and the benefits of claiming outsider status. White women. Hispanics. Asians. Suddenly, in the 1970s there was a rush to proclaim one's separate status. The benefit was clear: America confronted real social problems. But the decadence also was clear: middle class Americans ended up competing with one another to proclaim themselves society's victims.

The second factor that gives rise to this multicultural preoccupation has recently been the epic migration of non-Europeans into this country.

A friend of mine teaches at a school in Los Angeles where, she says, there are children from 54 language groups. "What possibility is there," she asks, "to teach such a diverse student body anything in common?"

These children do have something in common, however. They may be strangers to Los Angeles, but they are becoming Americans in Los Angeles. That is the beginning.

While I believe in the notion of a common culture, I believe also in the notion of a dynamic culture. Even while America changes the immigrants, the immigrants are changing us. They have always changed us. Assimilation is reciprocal.

Consider American English, for example. It is not British English. The British forced it down our throats, but the language we speak is changed. We speak American here. There are the sighs of German grandmothers and the laughter of Africans in the speech we use. There are in our speech thousands of words imported and brought unregistered through Ellis Island. Swedish words. Yiddish. Italian.

Listen to my voice and you will hear your Lithuanian grandmother. Listen to my American voice and you will hear the echoes of my Chinese neighbors. Yes, Mr. Bill Moyers, we are all destined to become Chinese.