

**1. Read the following information about Richard Rodriguez, American writer, and fragments of an interview to him**

**A view from the melting pot**<sup>1</sup>

A conversation with **Richard Rodriguez**  
**Scott London**

Related Audio Clip: Scott London talks with Richard Rodriguez about cultural identity in a world of porous borders and blurring boundaries (from the radio series “Insight & Outlook”)

When 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 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 inglés,” 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 education had irrevocably altered his life. His first book *The Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, 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 only achieved 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.”

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was adapted from the 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 (forthcoming from Longman/Prentice Hall, 2009).

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 explored the dilemmas of ethnicity and cultural identity more directly in his second book, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. “The best metaphor of America remains the dreadful metaphor [of] the Melting Pot,” he wrote. The America that he described 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 News Hour with Jim Lehrer.

I spent a morning with Rodriguez following a university lecture he gave in Santa Barbara, California. Our conversation began with the controversial subject of bilingual education — the practice of teaching immigrant children in the language of their families.

### **Extracts of the interview**

**Scott London:** In *Hunger for 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 would always tell 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 dire trouble.

**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, 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:** So how would you define 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.

<http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/rodriguez.html>

## **2. MAKE GROUPS OF 4 PEOPLE (CHOOSE A SECRETARY AND A SPEAKER) AND DISCUSS ABOUT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS**

### **GROUP WORK**

- Do you agree with Rodriguez's view about bilingual education? Justify your answer.
- Answer to Scott London's question: "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?" Justify your answer.
- Do you agree with Rodriguez's definition of diversity? What is your vision of diversity?

## **3. WHOLE GROUP DISCUSSION - CONCLUSIONS**