The Literary and Activist Works of Luis J. Rodríguez

Summary

Luis J. Rodríguez is a Chicano memoirist, novelist, poet, children's author, and activist. Born in 1954 in Mexico, his family migrated to the United States when he was young. As a youth, he spent many years immersed in the street gangs of Los Angeles while concurrently partaking in community protests and mobilizations that became known as the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It took Rodríguez several years to extract himself from a life of crime and addiction to drugs, though all the while he was writing, painting, and being inspired by revolutionary figures. His first book of poetry was published in 1989, but it was his memoir of gang life, *Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA*, released in 1993 in the aftermath of the LA riots, that garnered him mainstream literary attention. *Always Running* and its sequel, *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions and Healing*, eighteen years later, can be labeled *testimonio* for detailing a Latina/o "lived" experience and fighting social injustices. In many ways Rodríguez can be deemed a "classic" Chicana/o author: he addresses the experience of migration and writes in both English and Spanish; he explores themes of prejudice and identity for Mexican Americans in the United States; and he considers the role of heteropatriarchal aspects of Mexican culture in defining his relationships (with women and children). His steadfast dedication to Native American/indigenous spirituality is a more recent focus in his life and writings, situating him among a long list of Chicana/os who have embarked on the "Red Road," that is, life as indigenous-identified subjects. But what most arguably sets Rodríguez apart from fellow Chicana/o writers is his allegiance—throughout all his works in all genres—to proletarian politics and concerns for the working classes. His critiques of deindustrialization and its

subsequent effects, particularly poverty, are reflected, for example, in his depictions of the Bethlehem Steel Mill of LA, where Rodríguez worked.

Keywords

Chicana/o literature, Chicana/o poetry, Chicana/o autobiography, *Testimonio*, proletarian literature, Chicano movement, gender/Chicana, fatherhood, indigenous

If there is anything Mexicans are known for it's hard work and creativeness.

From a short story by Luis J. Rodríguez[1]

When you use words to share feelings with somebody else, you are a poet, a poet belongs to the whole world. Never forget this [. . .] A poet, América knows, belongs everywhere.

From a children's book by Luis J. Rodríguez[2]

Luís J. Rodriguez's Evolving Legacy

Luis J. Rodríguez has regularly been referred to as "a superhero in Chicano literature."[3] This title was first bestowed on the author following the publication of his autobiography, *Always Running: La Vida Loca—Gang Days in LA* (1993), a candid account of street life in East LA in the 1960s/'70s. Memorable for its representations of graphic violence situated rather remarkably alongside the narrator's concurrent participation in the Chicano movement, the book propelled Rodríguez into the spotlight, both as a grassroots community spokesperson following the LA riots of 1992 and as a "new" voice in Chicana/o literature. Over the past twenty-five years, his authorial career has snowballed with books of poetry, short stories, and non-fiction. Rodríguez has won a host of awards varying from the Hispanic Heritage Award

for Literature to the Dorothea Lange–Paul Taylor Prize in Journalism. All the while he has simultaneously pursued grassroots community activism resulting in the Dalai Lama honoring him with an Unsung Hero of Compassion award.

In 2011, Rodríguez released a much-anticipated follow-up to *Always Running* entitled *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions and Healing*.[4] This article will engage with *It Calls*—which has not been the subject of sustained scholarly inquiry—as a means of entering into a consideration of Rodríguez's works more broadly.[5] In an interview the author conducted with Rodríguez in 2017 to support this article (see "Links to Digital Materials"), he contended that *It Calls* was "in many ways a more important book than *Always Running*."[6] *Kirkus Reviews* labeled the memoir "a brilliantly jagged sequel," describing it as "raw, searing reading from start to finish."[7] *It Calls*, alongside many of Rodríguez's other works, adheres to the "traditional" concerns of Chicana/o authors. His writings often demonstrate a spirit of resistance in response to conditions of subordination and exploitation, concerns about lack of access to quality education, and awareness of the importance of geography and the need to identify oneself and control representations of the self through the mastery of language and writing (in English and Spanish).

Alongside much of Rodríguez's poetry and prose, *It Calls* challenges the parameters of the Chicana/o canon. Significantly, *It Calls* illuminates how the gendered signifying of Rodriguez's work, and his reflections on fatherhood, are more complex than many readers and writers may realize. This book also enables the exploration of a unique ontological trajectory in his work that has been ignored: Chicana/o indigenous identities. It also demonstrates why the *testimonio* may be a useful way of approaching his second memoir. But what especially sets Rodríguez apart from his contemporary Chicana/o counterparts is his steadfast dedication to proletarian politics. Chicana/o studies scholar Charles M. Tatum

details the Mexican American "social bandits" of the 19th century who took up arms to resist social injustices at the hands of Anglo landowners and officials in the Southwest.[8] Though peaceful in his protests and widening the scope of those he protects to the working class and poverty-stricken from all races and ethnicities, Rodríguez demonstrates the same defiant spirit of his ancestors, both through social banditry as well as through more organized revolutionary actions. This article will explore how Rodríguez has become a 21st-century social bandit and, ultimately, a proletarian superhero in the contemporary literary world.

Rodríguez's Life, Works, and Scholarly Attention

Born in 1954 in El Paso, Texas, upon release from the maternity hospital, baby Luis Javier and his mother returned to their family home in Ciudad Juarez (which Rodríguez has called "one unforgiving city") just across the border to join his elder brother.[9] Though Rodríguez's father was an impassioned high school principal, he was forcibly removed from his position by corrupt officials, and in 1956 he moved his two sons and newly arrived daughter to South Central Los Angeles, where they would soon welcome another daughter. While his father worked a series of menial, temporary jobs and the family regularly uprooted to different LA suburbs, Rodríguez faced his own struggles as he entered elementary school in the 1960s as a Spanish-speaking student. The theme of traversing boundaries–whether national or local, literal or metaphorical–is a prevalent theme in *Always Running*: "we never stopped crossing borders."[10] Meanwhile, the poem "Running to America" asks "Who can confine them? / Who can tell them / which lines never to cross?"[11] In the mid-1960s, when Rodríguez was 11, growing awareness of the youth violence in his Mexican barrio in the San Gabriel valley led him and his friends to form their own *clica* for protection. It was the tumultuous beginning of

Rodríguez's descent into the dangerous gangbanging subculture of East LA in the 1980s and 1990s.

Always Running balances the tales of gang conflict with a politicized conversion narrative. Two existing biographies of Rodríguez by Ben Olguín and Michael Schwartz start to illuminate such narrative contradictions and conflicts within his life itself.[12] Part of what makes Rodríguez's history so compelling is that, despite his fervent dedication to the gang, arts and cultures remained a central part of his life. By the late 1960s he had been initiated into Las Lomas, a large barrio gang made up of several *clicas*, and yet he continued to write and paint in private. Receiving support from the Bienvenidos Community Center, he returned to school at 16 and became involved with both city-wide and more localized events as part of the Chicano movement. Graduating in 1972, Rodríguez won a Quinto Sol publishing competition but was simultaneously arrested for trying to stop a police officer from unjustly arresting someone. Community members vociferously rallied the judge on behalf of Rodríguez to prevent a prison sentence.

As explained in *It Calls* and fictionalized in *Music of the Mill* (2005), Rodríguez spent four years working at the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Maywood, California, while writing in the evenings. He married and fathered Ramiro and Andrea, though after a bitter divorce he moved to Chicago in 1985 in the hope of becoming a journalist. Rodríguez secured a fellowship from a Marxist organization, the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, that helped him cultivate a proletarian vision in his writing. He married Maria ("Trini") Cardenas, and they had two children, with Ramiro joining them in Illinois. Struggling to survive on journalist wages and heavily involved in community work, in 1989 Rodríguez won local grants that enabled him to publish *Poems Across the Pavement*; he established Tía Chucha Press in order to do so. He notes that the press "came out of a movement and a

cause—to democratize poetry and help make poetry central to U.S. culture (instead of war, social division, material gain, polarized politics . . .)."[13] Both this first collection and his second, *The Concrete River* (1991), won awards; the later success of *Always Running* often eclipses the fact that his first books were poetry. Yet while his literary works were now providing a livelihood, his eldest son Ramiro had, as detailed in the preface to *Always Running*, been "on a rapidly declining roller coaster ride into the world of street-gang America."[14] The epilogue to the memoir was, like the preface, dated July 1992 and poignantly opens with the statement, "This book is a gift to my son Ramiro" before moving into a powerful critique of the LA riots. *Always Running* would be published in 1993, the year that Rodríguez himself finally became clean of all drugs and alcohol. Yet only four years later, Ramiro was sentenced to twenty-eight years for three counts of attempted murder. At that time Rodríguez had, somewhat ironically, just released a children's book, *América Is Her Name*, speaking of children "stuck in a gray world where they can't find their way out."[15]

During the first years of Ramiro's incarceration, Rodríguez's literary output served a therapeutic purpose, releasing a new volume of poetry. *Trochemoche* (1998). and another children's book. *It Doesn't Have to be This Way: A Barrio Story* (1999). In 2000, Rodríguez, Trini, and their children moved back to the West Coast to the northeast San Fernando Valley. Rodríguez was busy in 2001 with the upcoming release of a collection of short stories, *The Republic of East LA*; the activist guide, *Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*; and the co-founding (along with Trini) of the Tía Chucha Cultural Café & Bookstore. Two years later, Rodríguez and Trini's joint concern over the lack of community arts–based support in the area prompted them to establish Tía Chuchas Centro Cultural next door, which boasts a performance space. This act fits with Rodríguez's vision that everyone can be an artist ("When you use words to share feelings with somebody else, you are a poet") and his

belief that for troubled youth to leave crime and violence behind, they must "Find a healthy and sustainable community. If you can't find one, create one."[16] The center was named after his aunt, Tía Chucha. In his poem of the same name, reprinted in *My Nature is Hunger: New & Selected Poems* (2005), he explains that while some regarded her as "crazy," "To me, she was the wisp of the wind's freedom."[17] His allegiance to his aunt reflects his fundamental belief that *anyone* can be (constructively) creative, while his support of the Centro Cultural flags his conviction that the arts and culture should be available even in "unexpected" places.

Rodríguez's versatility as poet, memoirist, journalist, speaker, and publisher—"There is a mixology of brews within me"—has continued unbounded over the past decade, as is demonstrated in the comprehensive bibliography at the end of this article.[18] In 2016 he released *Borrowed Bones*, a new volume of poetry stemming from his 2014–2016 role as the official Poet Laureate of LA. This appointment further confirmed that Rodríguez had stepped out from the shadow of *Always Running*, the book that brought him literary fame and yet threatened to keep him pigeonholed as a gang memoirist first and foremost. Regardless of his literary standing, Rodríguez's passion for community activism persists. He tours the United States and abroad, advising on gang intervention and advocating urban peace, and volunteers much of his time at home in LA to writing workshops in California prisons. A cursory glance at his Twitter feed (@luisjRodríguez) reveals that at the time of writing, over the past few days Rodríguez had spoken at the Lincoln Heights Youth Center in LA, to East Harlem students, and at the Barnes & Noble in Union Square in New York to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Always Running* (see "Links to Digital Materials"), all combining activist and literary sensibilities.

It is thus no surprise that Olguín has labeled Rodríguez a Gramscian "organic intellectual." Whereas "a 'traditional intellectual' oftentimes is co-opted to serve powerful

interests and preserve the status quo, organic intellectuals are distinguished for utilizing their skills and resources to empower society's downtrodden to transform society along more egalitarian principles."[19] Despite Rodríguez's authorial versatility, his status as an organic intellectual, and his significant literary output, I have argued elsewhere that his work (particularly his fiction) has received insufficient scholarly attention.[20] Joseph Sommers suggests three key approaches for studying Chicana/o literature: that which attempts to apply the norms and categories of formalist criticism; that which is based on the notion of cultural uniqueness; and a criticism that is historically based and dialectically formulated.[21] Yet none of these approaches alone, nor a combination of them, seem suitable for analysis of Rodríguez's writings. It is perhaps Rodriguez's versatility, activist sensibility, and aesthetic complexity that helps to explain why scholars have hesitated in approaching Rodríguez's work more comprehensively.

In *Chicano and Chicana Literature* Tatum references Rodríguez in a section exploring "the autobiography of the urban barrio experience" alongside authors Mary Helen Ponce and Gary Soto, though he notes that *Always Running* "presents a much more graphic and raw vision of barrio life."[22] *Always Running* has garnered most of the scholarly attention to Rodríguez's work, with researchers situating the narrative in a longer trajectory of gang memoirs. For instance, I have contended that a "new" production trend in contemporary street gang memoirs appeared in the aftermath of the LA riots, for which *Always Running* and Sanyika Shakur's *Monster* were prototypes.[23] David Brumble argues that some urban youth subcultures have reinvented classic tribalism and warrior cultures, which can be witnessed in memoirs varying from *Always Running* and *Monster* to Colton Simpson's *Inside the Crips*, Mona Ruiz's *Two Badges*, and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler*.[24]

Amaia Ibarraran Bigalondo also engages with *Always Running,* alongside Yxta Maya Murray's novel *Locas*, to reflect on male and female gang activity in Chicana/o literature specifically.[25] *Always Running* has been probed by sociologists, criminologists, historians, and pedagogical scholars, who have used it as serious evidence of life as a Mexican American in post-industrial urban California and a useful source for those wishing to understand the sociological structure and significance of gangs.[26] It is important to consider the danger of this genre of literature: it could reify stereotypes and, when in-group codes and cultural practices are revealed, could lead to further systems of control and subordination of these same populations. But the memoir has also prompted literary scholarship, focusing on narrative conventions and aesthetic interests, often framed by racial and ethnic premises.[27] Rodríguez's fiction is gradually becoming the subject of scholarly analysis, though at a surprisingly slow pace. *Music of the Mill*, *The Republic of East LA*, and selected poetry have prompted some scholarly attention that has started to open up further questions about contemporary Chicana/o poetry, urban fiction, genre, and readership.[28]

Heteropatriarchy, Rodriguez's Gender Politics, and Testimonial Narrative

Always Running has been criticized for its representations of violence and has regularly been one of the top 100 of the American Library Association's list of banned books. Yet teachers, critics, and scholars have argued against the readings of rapes and stabbings as glorifications of violence in the memoir (sometimes implied for commercial ends), rather defending Rodríguez for simply *telling it like it is*.[29] The gendered signifying of Rodríguez's work is

also easily misread, particularly his engagement with female characters in both fiction and non-fiction. The gang lifestyle has long been studied by sociologists for its hyper-masculine tendencies; the gang member must "perform" bravado in order to be perceived as manly by others. Rodríguez has contributed a collection of essays on this topic, *Muy Macho* (1996), in which he reflects on what it means to be a (Chicano) man and the meaning of *manness*.[30] He elucidates: "*macho* does not mean the bully, the jock, the knucklehead. He is warrior, protector, defender, and lover. He is artist, hero, father and elder."[31] For Rodriguez, this ethic is more than just a heteropatriarchal apologia for privilege. For instance, in the children's story *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way* (with text in both Spanish and English), Ramón's uncle calls him "brave" for not joining a gang and explains, "I know you want to be a man, but you have to decide what kind of man you want to be."[32] Rodríguez's new model of manhood seeks to challenge sexism. Yet in *It Calls* and some of his fictional works, Rodríguez's depiction and treatment of women does not evidentially fit this vision and thus has invited controversy.

During the Chicano movement, discussions of gender equality were subordinated to masculinist nationalist ideologies and absent in the movement's manifesto, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969).[33] Chicanas were inspired by the white feminist movement and in dialogue with Mexican feminists and third world feminists, as detailed by scholar Maylei Blackwell, though still struggled to have their concerns over race and class for women heard.[34] The Chicana Literary Renaissance, with authors such as Ana Castillo, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, started important discussions about Chicana feminism. In contrast to some critiques, women are crucial in Rodríguez's writings: they are not just present but often very strong and resilient characters. In particular, in the short story collection *The Republic of East LA*, a host of colorful female characters take center stage. By its release in 2002, third-wave

feminism was evidently providing an alternative to middle-class white feminist politics that were racist and classist and imperialist. In the 2017 author interview, Rodríguez spoke about the barrio that forms the subject of the tales in *The Republic of East LA* as "the largest Mexican community in the United States, with housing projects, poor neighborhoods, gangs, low-paid working mothers and fathers, but also drugs, alcoholism, and diseases of the system." But in the same conversation he then highlighted that the collection of stories is furthermore "about the joys, laughter, and hardiness endemic to these places." He emphasizes that "many of the stories are about the spirit that never breaks."

Of course, women too suffer at the mercy of structural violence and socioeconomic issues and share in good times in the face of such hardships. In the aforementioned interview, Rodríguez explained that he deliberately wanted the short story collection to have "a special emphasis on women's voices." He accomplishes this through multiple characters: Noemi, the troubled school girl; her fiery sister, Liver; and Ysela, the churchgoing homeless woman. But the most memorable female character is Rosalba in the final story, "Sometimes You Dance with a Watermelon." We learn Rosalba fled an abusive husband and father in Mexico, running across the border with her then five-year-old daughter. Now remarried, living with her grown daughter and grandchildren in a small apartment and reliant on food stamps, early one morning she "worked on a plan" to get some extra money. On the spur of the moment, Rosalba dances the rumba down a bustling street with her head held high carrying a watermelon; she "had not looked that happy in a long time." She dances for scornful husbands, difficult daughters, and "her people, wherever they were scattered."[35] One of the most arresting closing images in Rodríguez's fictional works, in the face of poverty, hunger, despair and disastrous relationships, Rosalba seizes a brief moment to celebrate her own self-worth and dignity without regard to how others may view her act.

By contrast, in *It Calls*, Rodríguez is unashamedly chauvinistic. The narrator voices his concern more than once about women losing their shape after becoming wives and mothers.[36] He openly admits to cheating not just on his first wife (when he was arguably young and naïve) but also his second wife (and "soulmate"), Trini.[37] And when he explains that he has "been with mostly working-class women," he condescendingly states there is "nothing wrong with them" although "not as schooled as I would have liked."[38] But to take these statements as evidence of Rodríguez's world outlook would be erroneous. There is certainly an argument that gender representations will always be dependent on historical and social contexts. From this perspective, his brutal honesty in *It Calls* is deliberately placed to illustrate the difficulties Chicana women have faced—not just the bigotry that Mexican Americans suffered at the hands of mainstream America, but specifically sexist barriers that compound the challenges for Chicanas.

The narrator of *It Calls* takes a risk in not censoring the self when discussing women. This is mollified to some degree by explaining the history of Mexican families: "Often the father had the last word, held up by hundreds of years of patriarchy, peonage, and poverty."[39] As a lived example, we are informed that Trini's father reluctantly allowed her to attend college as long as she resided at home. When she moved out to immerse herself in university life, she was not permitted home again for nearly twenty years.[40] The presence of Trini's father works to explain—and somewhat neutralize—Rodríguez's deprecation for his two wives and various girlfriends. His arguably sexist comments in *It Calls* paradoxically serve to entice the reader's trust in him as a narrator. As Rodríguez explained in the 2017 author interview: "My books have to be image-laden, emotionally-charged, but most of all 'real'." He adds in the same interview, "in writing *It Calls You Back*, I couldn't shy away from the intense, dangerous, even embarrassing aspects of my life after *Always Running*. The 'real'

includes all of it." His honesty potentially garners the respect of the reader despite the clear and troubling traces of heteopatriarchal privilege in his views.

In the interview, Rodríguez succinctly clarified the need for all men to speak out against patriarchy, but then specified particular problems raised by his ancestry. Indeed, "I had to challenge the particular Mexican male roles forged by conquest, colonialism, and Spanish misrepresentations of manhood. I played those roles during my years as a teen and a young man." In resisting and defying her father's threats, Trini is presented as a courageous and steadfast character. This could potentially be threatened by her "weakness" at enduring her husband's addictions and disloyalty. And yet the narrator crafts—and the reader is left with—an esteemed image of a woman who, like Rosalba in his short story collection, remains strong in the face of familial hardships and plays a crucial role in the "conversion" of her husband into a "new" man. While this trope entails a double burden for women, it also involves a candid critique of men and the harm that comes from their gendered privileges. In his latest collection of poetry, *Borrowed Bones*, Rodríguez pays homage to his wife with three "Love Poems for Trini," with part one consisting of a prose poem. Yet rather than focus solely on romance and connections, adversity forms part of the love: "This is a bond made of bright and torn fabric, a whimsical joke, a slow dance, a stinging salsa, a good cup of coffee–also of nights without sleep, raging storms, the silences, the long walks, the secrets–unraveling talks."[41]

Being so pragmatic—refusing to gloss over hardships in love, one's own frailties and contradictions, as well as in various aspects of life—plays a fundamental role in the genre of *testimonio*, which involves a narrator or narrators using the story of a turbulent life of subordinated people to narrativize consciousness-raising activities and direct action pursuant to various models of empowerment. Rodriguez merges this genre with the street gang

memoir. The narrative arc of street gang memoirs often rests on conversion, and Rodriguez follows suit: the journey from violent young gangbanger through punishment and on to political enlightenment and renunciation of violence. His testimonios—*Always Running* and *It Calls*—deliver the frisson of gang exploits alongside the sober, salutary reflection of politicized hindsight. Pursuing the testimonial ethos, *Always Running* complicates the gang memoir formula by collapsing the "before" and "after" segments in order to reflect the contradictory currents in Rodríguez's life more widely. Just a couple of years after the release of *Always Running*, scholars including John Beverley and Barbara Harlow started to draw attention to the testimonial narrative in Latina/o writings, more recently addressed by others including Mario García and Isabel Duran.[42] In terms of Chicana/o memoir specifically, García engages with examples including Mary Helen Ponce's *Hoyt Street* (1993) and Ramón Eduardo Ruiz Urueta's *Memories of a Hyphenated Man* (2003).[43]

Testimonio shares similarities with autobiography and memoir in its "promise" to tell a "real" lived experience. And yet in the testimonial narrative, as Olguín details, there is "no individualist hero who eventually triumphs over adversity to become fully fledged member of society" (often seen in the gang or prisoner conversion narrative). Instead, the *testimonio* presents "an underclass antihero who experiences social injustice first hand and resolves to fight the status quo."[44] In these narratives there is rarely an easy resolution or closure; the protagonist must continue to arbitrate and change the situation(s) around them. This applies to the socioeconomic struggles that the narrator may face, but also, crucially, to his or her specific set of personal circumstances in the hope that they may set an example to readers. In *It Calls*, this is explicit in terms of Rodriguez's interactions with women. In the interview Rodríguez explained: "I promised I'd never go back to my former life. [. . .] But the madness kept calling me back in other ways—with my rage (from PTSD), my broken

relationships, my jumping around from job to job, and my addiction—this time with alcohol." For Rodríguez, leaving the gang was only the first step in escaping *La Vida Loca*; he faces a host of other challenges that *keep* calling him back and speak explicitly to the ongoing toils of the testimonial narrator. Though he professes that Trini is his soulmate, he acknowledges lapses in fidelity and alcohol abuse to remind the reader that his behavior, identity, and model of manhood are works in progress.

Critical Reassessments of Family and Fatherhood

If manhood—and the treatment of women—is a recurring theme in Rodríguez's didactic writing, so too is the related topic of fatherhood. This is painstakingly articulated in *It Calls*, where Rodríguez must come to terms with his own failings as a father, particularly in his relationship with his eldest son, Ramiro. The narrative poignantly details Rodríguez waking up to his responsibilities as a role model and paternal guide as his son faces a lengthy prison sentence. In the testimonial narrative, there is no straightforward turning point at which something is suddenly learned. Rather, parenting for Rodríguez requires continuing efforts, particularly when problems of fatherhood have run through generations (three generations of Mexican men are likewise portrayed in *Music of the Mill*). Discussing the workings of familial relationships is not unusual for contemporary Chicana/o literature; perhaps what is more unexpected in *It Calls*, and somewhat more compelling, is the airing of distressing family secrets and the responses of those it affects.

In his second memoir Rodríguez details his problematic relationship with his own father and is candid about his father's issues, including pedophilia. This flawed father character has often been presented in Rodríguez's fictional form. In *The Republic of East LA*, we witness

the *papá* who yells that "Writing is for bums [. . .] you should work like a man–with your hands," and another who "just didn't show up" and then struggles with cancer and dementia as his family watches him deteriorate.[45] In *It Calls*, Rodríguez contends that "this part of my life has been the most painful to recount" and notes how in Chicano and Mexicano households people often "keep their mouths shut." Yet in order for "healing to occur," people must speak up.[46] In the interview, Rodríguez expanded on how silence—as a response to trauma and shame—is perhaps particularly notable in Mexican communities because of the "macho mystique." He recalled the awkward family meeting with his siblings in which he informed them of the content of his new memoir: "I didn't want to make him a monster, to vilify him, he was still my father, and somewhere inside I loved him as such. But I also didn't want to get him off the hook." *Testimonio* makes a case for openly and honestly addressing the past in order to move forward, or at least reside comfortably in the present.

By revealing his own father's faults in *It Calls*, Rodríguez is not just facilitating his own healing but paving the way for his own failings as a parent. He confesses to throwing a four-year-old Ramiro against a basement wall when "something had snapped" and later admits he should have protected Ramiro from an abusive stepfather.[47] As with his treatment of women, the reader appreciates his sincerity in revealing his own questionable behavior as a parent. In one fiery scene, Rodríguez and Ramiro are physically fighting, with the son lunging at the father with a hedge trimmer. Yet Rodríguez suddenly becomes conscious that "my son was trying hard *not* to hurt me [. . .] that's when I realized what a stupid ass I was."[48] That Rodríguez's relationship with his son is a two-way struggle stands in contrast to his fragile relationship with his own father, which is less productive. Ramiro serves to "save" Rodríguez, for instance, from wallowing in addiction: "I was destroying myself [. . .] until I remembered Ramiro needed a dad. My son's drowning forced me to rethink my own

drowning." That Rodríguez should rescue Ramiro is absurdly dependent upon Ramiro first rescuing his father. The memoir suggests that Rodríguez belatedly comes into his element as a father when Ramiro is arrested for murder, providing an impassioned focus for the narrator to channel his guilt-laden energies. Such emotion is captured in the powerful poem entitled "to the police officer who refused to sit in the same room as my son because he's a 'gangbanger'," with Rodríguez asserting, "How dare you judge when you also wallow in this mud."[49]

The narrator is cautious in *It Calls* about fully excusing Ramiro for his criminal actions. As we will see, Rodríguez is an outspoken critic of the structural forces that lead to gang membership and imprisonment, and he acknowledges his own "neglectful parenting" as a key factor behind Ramiro's descent (e.g., "it wasn't just Ramiro's hand holding the gun that day").[50] He adds, nonetheless, that "I couldn't take full responsibility for what Ramiro did—he had to own this."[51] In a reading group guide to *It Calls* on the publisher's website, Rodríguez reiterates: "I definitely failed my oldest children" but "I also can't take away the individual choices my oldest son and daughter made—they have to make their own decisions."[52] *Testimonio* becomes even more imperative when addressing violence (and the life-and-death consequences), especially when the victim and/or perpetrator are young subjects. And in line with the ongoing collective and collectivist struggle frequently seen in testimonial narrative, adults must take partial responsibility: "I fought so that the state wouldn't lock him up and forget about him, as they've done to thousands of others before and since then."[53] Indeed, "Ramiro became everyone's son," with Rodríguez aligning himself with hundreds of fathers who similarly regretted their parental mistakes that resulted in extreme punishment (literal for son and metaphorical for father). Nonetheless, regardless of blame, crucial to the *testimonio* (and central to its growing call for action) is hope and

optimism. Ramiro speaks for himself in the penultimate paragraphs of the memoir where he voices support from family and friends and not "having to do it alone."[54]

Along these lines, Rodríguez's meditations and dialogues with his eldest son recall a host of other writers who have ventured on structural critiques through family genealogies and *testimonio*, including John Edgar Wideman's collaborative work with his imprisoned brother.[55] Like *It Calls*, Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* draws connections between socioeconomic forces and ravaged families. Though Wideman's voice dominates, the book is presented as a joint effort with his younger, incarcerated brother, Robby, who offers snippets of narration throughout. In words that could readily have been written by Rodríguez for Ramiro, Wideman remarks: "I could never run fast enough or far enough. Robby was inside me. Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him."[56] Both Rodríguez and Wideman see son and brother, respectively, as victims of the state without denying their actions. Each memoir reveals the tensions inherent in narrating the story of a violent offender who is also human and arguably naïve.

Writing in *Daedalus* in 1978, Harold Isaacs noted that while there was an abundance of "son novels in which writers across the generations have tried to deal with the experience of wrenching free from their fathers or have written sad or tender memoirs about what their fathers were like as they finally came to remember them," there was little written from a father's point of view toward parenting.[57] C. Martin Redman noted something similar in 2004.[58] Yet in 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates released a poignant letter to his fourteen-year-old son trying to explain the racist violence entrenched in American society. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates, like Rodríguez, reflects on his relationship with his own father as part of his wider conversation with his son and similarly links writing and politics—"the craft of writing as the art of thinking."[59] Nevertheless, while Coates foretells his son's future in which "you

are human and you will make mistakes," he contends "your route will be different" because his son is of a separate generation.[60] By contrast, the gang membership of both father and son in *It Calls* seemingly cuts across generational divides. Notwithstanding the American society of the early 1990s being far removed from the 1960s, street gang impulses such as a code of honor remain in place. Though shared experiences could arguably offer lines of communication and understanding between father and son, Rodríguez's *testimonio* becomes increasingly intense in its narration as a result of the practices of the gang destroying the father–son relationship.

Reclaiming Chicana/o Indigenous Identities

When Ramiro is "deep into rabble-rousing," Rodríguez professes that "my son ended up like me."[61] Such a statement carries weight beyond the gang as Ramiro also ends up following his father down an "indigenous-guided" path. *It Calls* details Rodríguez's trips to Mexico in 1983 and 1984 to investigate a number of peasant and indigenous uprisings, as well as the near enslavement of Indians as farm workers. Upon his return to LA, "I hungered to connect to the Mexico I lost when I was born."[62] Ten years later and struggling with Ramiro ("I was at a loss on what to do"), Rodríguez attended his first men's conference.[63] Unsure of the proceedings at first, the event stirred further interest in a spiritual calling stemming from his indigenous roots:

> And when I was through I was no longer Luis Rodríguez. No longer clay in unsteady hands. No longer perennial son of a conquered race. I had a deeper name, an indigenous name, unknown but as old as the stones, crevices and trees

> of this land. This name was in my bones, in the marrow, in the salt of my regrets.[64]

The epilogue to *It Calls* details that by Ramiro's seventh year in prison, he had "dedicated himself to Mexika and other indigenous traditions, letting his hair grow long, attempting prayers and small ceremonies in his cell."[65] We are informed that he would eventually be released in 2010 after serving thirteen and a half years. At the time of the author interview in 2017, Ramiro had moved in with his father in LA and been out of prison for seven years; he has become a Mexika (Aztec) dancer just like Rodríguez.[66]

The trips to Mexico in the early 1980s were not the first time Rodríguez's yearning for his ancestry was stirred. Some years earlier, his participation in the Chicano movement "stemmed from this reaching back, this clamor for birthright, for undeniable and profound heredity."[67] Aged sixteen in 1970, having been jailed for his involvement in the Chicano moratorium against the Vietnam War, he wrote his famous poem, "The Calling."[68] Since then, his Native American spirituality has become central to his writing, as have his activism and community work. More recent poems such as "*from* Notes of a Bald Cricket" and "Mexika Science" reflect on indigenous histories and identities.[69] *The Republic of East LA* is littered with references to "Injuns," his self-deprecating but nonetheless proud claim to indigeneity, as well as Aztec names and sun stones, and the history of land ownership in the Southwest.[70] Meanwhile the Tía Chucha Center offers classes in indigenous cosmology and languages, as well as Mexika *danza* groups with the *huehuetl* (Aztec drum).

Ironically, or perhaps presciently, while in high school Rodríguez had been "Joe Aztec," the school's mascot during the Chicano movement. He was also briefly head of MEChA Central at California State College during the brief time he attended—the *Movimiento*

Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán). During the Chicano movement, the concept of *Aztlán* evolved, a myth conceiving a separate Chicano homeland with origins in the Nahuatl peoples that included Aztecs, the dominant Indian group in central Mexico. Elizabeth Jacobs notes that from the 1960s onward, the importance of Aztlán can be seen: "its use as a literary symbol multiplies and books in whose titles the word Aztlán appeared were numerous."[71] It furthermore became a symbol for *mestizo* activists like Oscar Zeta Acosta, who argued for the legal right to the Mexican lands that had originally been annexed by the United States under the 1848 treaty. The term "mestizo" was popularized during the Chicano movement to denote Chicanos as "mixed race," a combination of Anglo-American, Spanish, Mexican, and indigenous or Indian lineage that is the upshot of subjugation. References to Aztlán and Mestizo were frequently intertwined with *La Raza*, Chicano nationalism channeled into "the people." George Mariscal's *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun; Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965–1975* proffers a useful sense of the different renderings of Aztlán as a nationalist and also immanently internationalist (or revolutionary nationalist/internationalist) trope. Along these lines, Mariscal contends that "A demystified and grounded revision of the term *Aztlán* is necessary."[72]

Rodríguez's allegiance to indigenous spirituality and identity has evolved greatly since the Chicano movement and locates him among a large number of other Chicana/o writers who also have reclaimed, or always claimed, their indigenous heritage. In the interview, Rodríguez commented that "The indigenous appears in interesting ways in Chicana/o literature," citing Victor Villasenor's *Rain of Gold* (1991) being set among the Tarahumara and the mestiza Curandera of *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rodolfo Anaya (1972).[73] Yet while *Bless Me* was released at the peak of the Chicano movement and Villasenor writes about his mestiza grandmother in the second installment to his trilogy, Rodríguez informed me that: "I

don't consider myself a *mestizo*—I am not a 'mixed up' or fractured person. I'm whole and complete as I am."[74] Scholars have long studied how the Chicana/o has materialized at the edge of several different cultural influences. Yet when considering these different cultural components, Indian ancestry has arguably not received equal attention from either scholars or authors. *It Calls* counteracts this by making plain the importance of the narrator's indigenous roots and situating them central to his transformation into a "better" person.

Throughout the memoir, since Rodríguez's involvement with the Chicano movement and his first trips to Mexico in the early 1980s, the reader is often guided back to his search for ancestral ties to three generations on his maternal side (part Rarámuri). We accompany him to *peyote* ceremonies, are informed that his (grand)children have been through Navajo rite-of-passage ceremonies, and witness him and Trini both undertaking sweat lodges (an ancient earth–based ceremony to give "purpose, destination") themselves and organizing such events for gang members. Toward the end of *It Calls*, we become acquainted with Rodríguez's Mexika name, *Xikome Tochtli* (Seven Rabbit), based on the *Tonalmatl*, a Mexika calendar that is thousands of years old.[75] In line with the *testimonio*'s attributes, Rodríguez's attention to his ancestry is not something that can be learned and respected and then dismissed; rather it has ongoing significance and relevance. Just as his search for a "new" masculinity (including "new" ways of treating his partners and children and tackling his addictions) is an unfinished process, so too is his search for an indigenous identity, which is unsurprising given that the two are somewhat interlinked.

As noted, a *testimonio* is grounded in a "real" lived experience. *It Calls* suggests that for Rodríguez, his Native American spirituality is more than the mythical symbolism of Aztlán; it becomes a literal connection between all elements of his life. As stated in the 2017 interview, "It all began to come together—my art with my healing, sobriety, spirituality, and

politics." Such indigenous spirituality has the potential to literally save not just Rodríguez himself. Indeed, in *It Calls*, Tía Chucha's Mexika drum and dance groups are credited with saving one fourteen-year-old girl from suicide.[76] We are told about a former gang member who had held his dying brother in his arms and stated, "If I could live my life over, I would learn my Mexican indigenous ways and never join a gang."[77] But to explain such organic forces and energies is difficult when writing (deliberately or otherwise) in a genre that is rooted in verisimilitude. Rodríguez must "prove" or persuade the reader of the power of indigenous culture without it seeming frivolous. Accordingly, in 2005, Tía Chucha released a poetry anthology, *Dream of a Word.* Writing in the foreword, Rodríguez explained that its title stemmed from an ancient Mexika concept, in which:

> Everything, every idea, every energy has its duality. A spirit to the thing. A person has a dream, so does a tree. A dual life. One is part of the "other world," the place of ancestors, eternal time, memory. The other is part of the temporal, waking, touch world. Both are real to the Mexikas. Every word therefore has its dream.[78]

Put simply, Rodríguez fundamentally believes in connections between the real, tangible world and the spiritual otherworld. In the "real" world, we can engage with holistic Native American practices to understand and process the consequences of the day-to-day lives we lead. In *Borrowed Bones,* the poem "Dance or Die" is dedicated to the Rarámuri people of Chihuahua, Mexico and states succinctly that "somebody / has to dance / to keep everything / from dying":

> Among the more traditional Rarámuri
>
> there's a concept—to dance or die.

They feel they must carry out rituals

for the rest of us since our so-called civilization

has forgotten what it knew.

We have lost our essence to industry,

to capital, to stolen labor.

We've forgotten how to respect and honor relationships,

the nature inside and around us,

and how these relationships held in balance

allow for abundance and renewal.

. . .

Somebody has to keep dancing.[79]

Similarly, in the closing pages of *It Calls*, just prior to Ramiro's release, Rodríguez undertakes a "vision quest—*hanblechya*" on the Lakota reservation in South Dakota. He uses this time to ponder "the past, my son's ordeals, and where we were going as a family, community, country, world."[80] He recalls his journeys through the gang, the mills, the construction sites, and into his activism and poetry. It is this indigenous rite of passage that makes it possible for Rodríguez to draw these connections and parallels to comprehend his existence in the world.

Rodríguez's ability to make sense of his life and those around him in this way relies on his conflicted presence in the United States. He is certainly not the first Chicana/o author to travel to Mexico in search of lineage. In Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), the protagonist spends much time searching for his birthplace and Acosta himself famously disappeared in the country.[81] Yet when Rodríguez wonders about

remaining in Mexico in *It Calls*, someone insists: "you must go back. You must take our stories, our struggles, and also our victories, and convince the American people to finally end their empire, their political maneuverings, to let Mexico belong to Mexicans again."[82] Central to his activist vision is that he lives in the recognized boundaries of the United States, whereby—as he regularly implies in various works—he is *not* outside of his indigenous lands but is "home." In the children's book *América Is Her Name*, the protagonist queries how the teacher can call her "illegal" when "she was born in the mountains of Oaxaca [. . .] She is Mixteco, an ancient tribe that was here before the Spanish, before the blue-eyed, even before this government that now calls her 'illegal.' How can a girl called América not belong in America?"[83] Rodríguez similarly spoke of himself in the 2017 interview: "I couldn't be an 'immigrant' to the United States. I have ties as deep as anyone on the land, with tens of thousands of years that Mexican natives are believed to have ancestors here, borders notwithstanding."

Rodriguez's Proletarian Politics and Poetics

In the 2017 interview, Rodríguez made an intriguing statement: "I've made my Marxist and indigenous cosmologies align." Scholars have neglected his allegiance to a Marxist philosophy, yet this is fundamental to all his writings across various genres, uniting diverse themes including gender, fatherhood, and spirituality. To understand Rodríguez's commitment to proletarian politics, it is useful to situate his works in a wider tradition of proletarian literature and art. Rodríguez dedicates the poem "Exiled in the Country of Reason" to the African American revolutionary Nelson Peery, a committed member of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). We learn that "For more than 25 years, I have sought your

counsel," and "You are my most enduring and endearing teacher."[84] In *It Calls*, we ascertain that, alongside Peery and others, Rodríguez founded the League of Revolutionaries for a New America (LNRA), which brought together "anyone affected adversely by the continuing crises in the global capitalist economy, particularly the United States."[85] This means fighting for those unemployed but moreover addressing the associated problems of addiction, abuse, crime, and homelessness that are rife among the poverty-stricken and working classes. One can see parallels in the literary works of Langston Hughes, a figure who was deeply involved in the US Communist movement of the 1930s and the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW), whose writings balanced proletarian and racial politics. Though the LRNA was founded in 1993, and the IURW over sixty years earlier, both wanted to educate revolutionaries who sought socioeconomic solutions to societal problems.

Hughes is not considered the first "mainstream" proletarian writer to emerge from the United States in the 20th century. Rather, Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), a semi-autobiographical account of New York tenement poverty as experienced by Jewish immigrants, is generally deemed to be an archetype of the US proletarian novel.[86] Proletarian literature is, put simply, writings that express the experiences of working-class people under capitalism; it often features anti-capitalist or pro-socialist themes. The Bildungsroman genre (a novel of "education" or "formation") has played a central role in proletarian novels such as those by Gold and Hughes, with the narrator's class consciousness maturing throughout the narrative. Rodríguez notes that even at a young age he was committed to the ideas he expressed in the aforementioned interview: "A new society has to be about the common person, the workers, *los campesinos*, the artists able to rule themselves, in their own interests, for the common good of everyone."[87] His radical politics came into further awareness as he entered his thirties in the 1980s: "In time my interest in the subject of social change, tied to

my personal ordeal of self-transformation, compelled me to learn more." Indeed, his proletarian sensibility continued to be embedded in his writings, even as his politics evolved with the times.[88]

Rodríguez makes explicit his revolutionary attitudes in both memoirs; he is concerned with those who "could be thrown away" and wants to provide "something meaningful in the black hole of an existence called poverty."[89] In the 2017 interview he insists that "there is no 'white' working class, but *one* working class made up of all races and ethnicities. Only 'whites' in the national media are given a special category among this class." While working at the mill in *It Calls*, Rodríguez ponders his informal role as revolutionary alongside his official employment:

> It was our job to unite black, brown, and white despite these divisions, to turn people toward their class interests, especially among the mill hands. They may have walked into the plant with different-colored skins, but when they exited they were the same color–the color of dirt, oil, and grease on their faces, clothing and hands.[90]

Throughout Rodríguez's fictional works, literature and politics also are inextricably intertwined and the steel mill remains a recurring motif and context. In the poem "Bethlehem No More" (written for Bruce Springsteen): "We have made you rich, / rich enough to take our toil and invest it elsewhere. / Rich enough to make us poor again."[91] The novel *Music of the Mill* opens discussions around an industrialized America and its working-class constituents (black, brown, white) who are disposable and disrespected by management.

Situating Rodríguez's writings in a longer trajectory of proletarian literature, it is easy to forget that he also painted murals as a means of disseminating his proletarian outlook,

especially in his youth. In the opening pages of *It Calls*, he notes that his proletarian sensibility coexisted with other elements of his underclass lifestyle: even though he was in a gang and using an array of drugs, he still attended political meetings and learned to paint murals.[92] In the summer of 1972, along with some other "troubled youth," he produced eight murals, trained by professional Chicano muralists like Cecil Felix and Alicia Venegas. The images reflect the contradictions in his lifestyle—gang members and drug needles coexisting alongside images of Mexika and Mayan temples. In fact, "The biggest mural involved several panels portraying the then 125-year history of Chicanos in the United States."[93] Just a couple of pages later we are informed that when he left his street life and the drugs, he never picked up a paintbrush again. And yet the narrator must be aware that such descriptions early in the memoir lay the foundations for its revolutionary tone, considering the reputation of Mexican and Chicana/o murals more widely. Three of the most influential muralists of the 20th century, *Los Tres Grande* (Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco), were Mexicans who painted in the United States in the 1930s and were all communists, albeit with varying degrees of commitment. (Rodríguez's comment about the alignment of his Marxist and indigenous cosmologies sounds akin to some of the ideas and discourses in Rivera's mural, *The History of Mexico*.) In the early 1970s, the Chicano movement inspired another wave of politicized murals that continued in subsequent generations.

If murals carry a connection to Mexican and Chicano nationalism alongside a deeply proletarian stance, so too do the works of some contemporary Chicana/o authors. Writing about "Proletarian Literature Reconsidered," Bill Mullen cites the working-class writer Gloria Anzaldúa, poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, and playwright Cherríe Moraga, all of whom deliberate about the exploitation of Mexican workers for capitalism, to argue that contemporary US Latino/a and Chicano/a literature "regularly writes from a working-class

perspective while remaining sharply observant and critical of exploitative or oppressive conditions wielded by contemporary capitalism."[94] Yet Rodríguez's works—and personal visions—arguably depart in two notable ways. In *Always Running*, he becomes inspired by his participation in "the collective" (a different group to the CPUSA and LRNA), who seek to train radical leaders. The outlook of the collective was deemed to be unusual in the early 1970s, for "[u]nlike others in the Chicano Movement who strove to *enter* the American capitalist system, it prepared for a fundamental reorganization of society."[95] Second, while Chicano nationalism emphasized *La Raza*, the "people" for Rodríguez encompasses *all* working classes rather than a singular politicized ethnoracial identity. In line with the collective once again: "workers of all colors and nationalities, linked by hunger and the same system of exploitation, have no country; their interests as a class respect no borders."[96] It thus comes as little surprise that *Always Running* is used by scholar Tim Libretti in an attempt to reconstruct a proletarian literary tradition that recognizes cultural diversity, rather than situating such works within a narrowly defined ethnic or racial category that overshadows their working-class constituents.[97]

In *It Calls*, the city of Chicago serves to highlight Rodríguez's commitment beyond the Chicana/o working classes; it is a city far removed from the southwestern focus of many Chicana/o writers. As detailed in the memoir, much of his personal transformation (including overcoming addiction, finding spirituality, and salvaging fatherhood) takes place in Chicago. Tía Chucha Press was born with funds from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, only moving to LA in 2005. And though Rodríguez is regularly associated with LA, not least because of his former status as the city's Poet Laureate, his steadfast commitment to proletarian politics, reflected in his literal community activism, reminds us that the working classes in urban areas aside from LA require fundamental support. *Borrowed Bones* features a

"Love Poem to Los Angeles" as well as "A Hungry Song in the Shadows," the latter of which is written "for Chicago."[98] When he was thirty years old, Rodríguez left LA for the Mile-High City—"the city we've wept and bled to see"—enticed by Peery, to work for the *People's Tribune*.[99] His objective at the publication was journalism that spoke for "the most downtrodden," and he was, like he would be on the West Coast, motivated by "deindustrialization creating a class of people who would never again find a job."[100] His revolutionary journalism and community activism, as detailed in *It Calls*, draws parallels with Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), in which Obama too became a community organizer in Chicago in the 1980s, but of course Rodríguez took a different ideological turn by remaining grounded in grassroots organizing.[101] The first of three anthologies of poetry that Rodríguez would release stemmed from writings by Chicago's homeless, again discouraging us from pigeonholing him solely as a Chicano writer.[102]

Proletarian literature has become increasingly prolific in an age of globalization, and particularly so in this age of mass incarceration. That *Always Running* should be released in the aftermath of the 1993 LA riots was a timely opportunity for an author so impassioned about the specific spark to the uprising (police brutality and racism) as well as the wider structural issues at the time that fueled gangs and drug-dealing: "the disappearance of jobs from major industries had destroyed most meaningful work."[103] Meanwhile, in 2010 just prior to the publication of *It Calls*, Michelle Alexander's award-wining book *The New Jim Crow* addressed the desperate plight of people of color in the contemporary penal system.[104] Rodríguez's grassroots agenda has become increasingly focused on the sheer numbers of people incarcerated (not just in the United States but abroad, e.g., in El Salvador) and the specific nature of those implicated. As *It Calls* details, "Ramiro—with the United States attaining the highest incarceration rate in the world—was being directed toward one option,

like increasing numbers of poor and working-class men and women: prison."[105] Rodríguez's 2009 edited collection of writings, *Honor Comes Hard*, stemmed from prisoners for whom he had facilitated creative writing workshops. In the introduction, we are informed that the financial crisis of 20072008 removed funding for arts and education programs in prisons, despite these courses providing an opportunity for those serving a life sentence "to dream, to create, to write, to change."[106] When Ramiro was released in 2010 the economic downturn had affected even college graduates securing employment, let alone those with a criminal history. The poem "Nightfall" declares that "When prisons become the fastest growth industry / Our minds and hearts become the imprisoned."[107] Yet *It Calls* makes explicit its narrator's determination that "in such times, in such declines, when darkness and uncertainty reign, the best of us can still emerge."[108]

Rodriguez's Enduring and Expanding Legacy as a Community-Based Artist

As of this writing, Rodríguez sits on the advisory board of the Arts for Justice Fund to help create more positive discussions around mass incarceration.[109] Tía Chucha's Cultural Center has received grant money in recent years to help in this endeavor, and when Rodríguez ran for California governor in 2014, prison reform was a major part of his campaign. He is currently completing a new book of essays that he hopes, as explained in the 2017 interview, will "help in the growing debates popping up everywhere in the United States over Trump, but more so over a new vision and direction for America and the world." He is also currently a script consultant for the new FX television show, *Snowfall*. Created by John Singleton

(famed for his 1991 movie *Boyz n the Hood*), *Snowfall* details the introduction and growth of the crack epidemic in the ghettos and barrios of LA. Journalist Ruben Navarette astutely reminds us that "The Latino community is delightfully complicated and multifaceted and certainly not monolithic. So it can't have a spokesman."[110] But in terms of the streets specifically, Rodríguez's role in *Snowfall* illuminates his importance as a voice of the poor; someone who can narrate the inner city with valuable informative hindsight.

In 2018, the infamous account of Donald Trump's journey to and early days in the White House, *The Fire and the Fury* (2018), was making headlines.[111] Author Michael Wolff notes succinctly that "the Trump campaign became a sudden opportunity to see if nativism had legs" and draws attention to the map that was paraded on the campaign trail showing every state was now dominated by Mexican immigration.[112] In this post–civil rights, post–Rodney King United States where nativism and right-wing extremism is moving into the mainstream, authors such as Rodríguez are now more important than ever. Fifteen years before Trump assumed the presidency, Rodríguez ironically foresaw Trump's United States in *The Republic of East LA*: ""a country that always seemed to be looking over their [Mexican] shoulders—as if their failure would only be a matter of time."[113] But as Rodríguez made clear in the interview, he is not interested in "taking on Trump head-on," rather, as he has shown throughout his career, "taking on the root and source within the system that's behind Trump is my interest." Rodríguez does not merely want to offer a retort to Trump's stereotyping of Mexicans, though of course this forms a crucial part of his activist agenda and the subject of his literary works. Rather, he remains an interstitial figure with an interracial focus on class. To this end, he is currently on the steering committee of the new "Poor People's Campaign."[114] While Rodríguez avoids preaching, he certainly implies that all his readers have a role to play in creating an inclusive and cooperative society by questioning what it

means to be an engaged citizen in a 20th- and 21st-century democracy. For these reasons, Rodríguez remains a "superhero" literary figure precisely because he is so grounded in and committed to serving all the ordinary working poor people who constitute the majority of the world.

Links to Digital Materials

Annotated transcript of author interview conducted with Rodríguez in December 2017.

Video excerpts of public reading conducted by Rodríguez at Barnes & Noble in Union Square, New York, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Always Running,* February 2018.

Video 1: https://ssl.gstatic.com/docs/doclist/images/icon_10_generic_list.png] freddy&Luis.mp4

Video 2: https://ssl.gstatic.com/docs/doclist/images/icon_10_generic_list.png] 2018Luis&Freddy pt2.mp4

Video 3: https://ssl.gstatic.com/docs/doclist/images/icon_10_generic_list.png] 2018Luis&Freddypt3.mp4

@luisjrodriguez[https://www.luisjrodriguez.com/published_works].

@TiaChucha[http://www.tiachucha.org/].

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Notes

[1] Luis J. Rodríguez, *The Republic of East LA* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 178.

[2] Luis J. Rodríguez, *América Is Her Name* (New York: Curbstone, 1998), np.

[3] See, for example, Reed Johnson, *"Luis J. Rodríguez Wrestles His Demons in *It Calls You Back*[http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/11/entertainment/la–ca–luis–Rodríguez–20120311]*," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 2012.

[4] Luis J. Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addiction, Revolutions and Healing* (New York: Touchstone, 2011).

[5] Both of the studies that have considered *It Calls* to date are doctoral theses, and they explore the memoir in terms of addiction and the labor workforce alongside other texts. See Ian M. Kernohan, "You Are What You Smoke: Redefining Latino Addict Identities in Memoirs," which addresses *It Calls* as a source alongside *The Sum of Our Days* by Isabel Allende, *Chicana Lives and Criminal Justice*, by Juanita Díaz-Cotto, and **The Boy Kings of Texas*[http://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/6591/]* by Domingo Martinez. See also Felix Medina Jr., *"The Mexican Worker: A Marxist Reading of Labor Struggles in Californian Chicano/a Literature[https://search.proquest.com/openview/fbc2947c0aa6d924bd13c982a7894198/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y]*," which explores works by Rodríguez as well as

Luis Valdez, Helena María Viramontes, Francisco Jiménez, Cherríe Moraga, and Alejandro Morales .

[6] Author interview conducted with Rodríguez, December 2017.

[7] *"It Calls You Back[https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book–reviews/luis–j–Rodríguez/it–calls–you–back/]*," *Kirkus Reviews,* October 4, 2011.

[8] Charles Tatum, *Chicano Popular Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), xvi.

[9] Garth Cartwright, *More Miles than Money; Journeys Through American Music* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009), 82.

[10] Luis J. Rodríguez, *Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 19.

[11] Luis J. Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger: New and Selected Poems 1989–2004* (New York: Curbstone, 2005), 2.

[12] B. V.Olguín, "Luis J. Rodríguez," in *Latino and Latina Writers*, ed. Alan West-Durán (New York: Charles Scribner's, 2003), 441–453; and Michael Schwartz, *Luis Rodríguez (Contemporary Biographies)* (Chicago: Heinemann-Raintree, 1997).

[13] Luis J. Rodríguez, "Introduction," in *Dream of a Word: The Tia Chucha Press Poetry Anthology,* ed. Quraysh Ali Lansana and Toni Asante Lightfoot (Sylmar, CA: Tia Chucha Press, 2006), 11.

[14] Rodríguez, *Always Running*, 3.

[15] Rodríguez, *America Is Her Name*.

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[16] Rodriguez, *America Is Her Name*; and Luis J. Rodríguez, *"From Trauma to Transformation[https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/trauma-transformation]*," *Los Angeles Public Library Blog*, June 23, 2015.

[17] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 17.

[18] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 100.

[19] Olguín, "Luis J. Rodriguez," 442.

[20] Josephine Metcalf, "Still Running; An Interview with Luis J. Rodríguez," *MELUS* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 158–181.

[21] Joseph Sommers, "Critical Approaches to Chicano Literature," in *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 31–40.

[22] Charles Tatum, *Chicano and Chicana Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 97, 99.

[23] Josephine Metcalf, *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Street Gang Memoirs* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012); and Sanyika Shakur, *Monster: The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

[24] David Brumble, *Make My Blood Thick: Street Gang and Warrior Tribe Autobiographies* (New York: Anthem Press, 2018).

[25] Amaia Ibarraran Bigalondo, "Wolves, Sheep and *Vatos Locos*: Reflections of Gang Activity in Chicano Literature," *Journal of English Studies* 4 (2003–2004): 107–113.

[26] Discussions of *Always Running* can be found in texts on contemporary Californian and Latino history, including Kevin Starr, *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary California* (London:

Allen Lane, 2005); David Wyatt, *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe and the Shaping of California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres, *Latino Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). References to *Always Running* can also be found in social science and criminology sources, including Martin Guevara Urbina, "Latinos/as in the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems," *Critical Criminology* 15, no. 1 (March 2007): 41–99; and Claudia Durst Johnson, *Youth Gangs in Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 167–184. *Always Running* has made regular appearances in pedagogical journals, including Antonia Darder, "Latino Youth: Pedagogy, Praxis, And Policy," *Latino Studies* 4, no. 3 (2006): 302–304; Susan Roberta Katz, "Teaching in Tensions: Latino Immigrant Youth, Their Teachers, and the Structures of Schooling," *Teachers College Record* 100, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 809–840; and J. Singer and R. Shagoury, "Stirring Up Justice: Adolescents Reading, Writing, and Changing the World," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 4 (December 2005): 318–339. Sociological scholarship exploring *Always Running* is still appearing, pointing to the longevity of the memoir. For example, see Roberta Wolfson, "Chicano Gang Members at Risk: Containment, Flight, and an Alternative Vision of Sociality in Luis J. Rodriguez's *Always Running*," *MELUS* 43, no. 1 (February 2018): 21–45.

[27] In addition to Bigalondo's article, see Vincent Perez, "'Running' and Resistance: Nihilism and Cultural Memory in Chicano Urban Narratives," *MELUS* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 133–146; and Paula Moya, "This Is Not Your Country! Nation and Belonging in Latina/o Literature," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 183–195.

[28] Rodríguez's *Music of the Mill* (New York: Rayo/HarperCollins, 2005), and *The Republic* (New York: Rayo/HarperCollins, 2002) are probed in Jens Martin Gurr, "The Multicultural Marketing of Urban Fiction: Temporality, Language, Genre, and Readership(s) in Luis J. Rodríguez's *The Republic of East LA* and *Music of the Mill,*" in*E Pluribus Unum? National and Transnational*

Identities in the Americas, ed. Sebastian Thies and Josef Raab (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008), 263–276. For an analysis of Rodríguez's poetry, see Andres Rodríguez, "Contemporary Chicano Poetry: The Work of Michael Sierra, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Luis J Rodríguez," *The Bilingual Review* 20 (1995): 203–18; and Julian Murphet *Literature and Race in Los Angeles* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also brief references to Rodríguez's poetry and prose in Matt Witt, "Out of the Mainstream: Books and Films You May Have Missed," *New Labor Forum* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 132–133; and Theresa Delgadillo, "The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 600–624.

[29] Metcalf, "Culture and Politics," chs. 5 and 6.

[30] Rodríguez, "On Macho," in *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood*, ed. Ray Gonzalez (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 187–202.

[31] Rodriguez, "On Macho," 201.

[32] Rodríguez, *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way: A Barrio Story* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1999), 31, 27.

[33] Elizabeth Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 134.

[34] Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power; Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

[35] Rodríguez, *Republic of East LA*, 239.

[36] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 39, 71, 148.

[37] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 242.

[38] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 148.

[39] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 61.

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[40] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*.

[41] Luís J. Rodríguez, *Borrowed Bones; New Poems from the Poet Laureate of Los Angeles* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 22.

[42] John Beverley, *Testimonio; on the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Barbara Harlow, "*Testimonio* and Survival; Roque Dalton's Miguel Mármol," in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. George Gugelberger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 70–83; Mario T. Garcia, *Literature as History; Autobiography, Testimonio, and the Novel in Chicano and Latino Experience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017); and Isabel Dúran, "Latina/o Life Writing: Autobiography, Memoir, Testimonio," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latina/o American Literature*, ed. John Morán González (Austin: University of Texas, 2016), 161–177.

[43] Mary Helen Ponce, *Hoyt Street* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); and Ramón Eduardo Ruiz Urueta, *Memories of a Hyphenated Man* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

[44] Olguín, "Luis J. Rodríquez," 445.

[45] Rodríguez, *Republic of East LA*, 178, 83.

[46] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 200.

[47] Rodríquez, *It Calls You Back*, 97, 228.

[48] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 294.

[49] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 57.

[50] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 307.

[51] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*.

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[52] Rodríguez, *"It Calls You Back; Reading Group Guide [https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/It-Calls-You-Back/Luis-J-Rodriguez/9781416584179#reading-group-guide]*".

[53] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 299.

[54] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 322.

[55] John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Mariner Books, 2005).

[56] Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, 4.

[57] Harold Isaacs, "Bringing Up the Father Question," *Daedalus* 107, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 189–203.

[58] C. Martin Redman, "Son Writing Fathers in Auto/biography," *Auto/Biography Studies* 19, nos. 1–2 (2004): 129–136.

[59] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 63, 65, 51.

[60] Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 95, 120.

[61] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 236.

[62] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 190.

[63] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 267.

[64] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 268.

[65] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 310.

[66] Ramiro is also a mentor to the Young Warriors youth empowerment program at Tía Chucha's.

[67] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 190.

[68] Luis J. Rodríguez, *"From Trauma to Transformation[https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/trauma-transformation]*," *Los Angeles Public Library Blog*, June 23, 2015.

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[69] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 100 133.

[70] See, for example, Rodríguez, *Republic of East LA*, 3, 10, 78, 136, 137, 170, 172, 212, 218, 219, 221.

[71] Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature*, 118.

[72] George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun; Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965–1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 54.

[73] Victor Villasenor, *Rain of Gold* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1991); and Rodolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, CA: TQS Publications, 1972).

[74] Suzanne Ruta, *"Mexican Roots[https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/25/books/mexican-roots.html]*," *New York Times*, February 25, 1996.

[75] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 116, 288, 279, 279, 275–277, 313–314, 298.

[76] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 314–316.

[77] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 280.

[78] Lansana and Lightfoot, *Dream of a Word*, 9.

[79] Rodríguez, *Borrowed Bones*, 11–13.

[80] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 319.

[81] Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972).

[82] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 191.

[83] Rodríguez, *America Is Her Name*.

[84] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 116, 117.

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[85] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 297.

[86] James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment; The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 65.

[87] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 20.

[88] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 22.

[89] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 11, 16.

[90] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 54.

[91] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 45.

[92] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 2.

[93] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 12.

[94] Bill Mullen, *"Proletarian Literature Reconsidered[http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-236#ref_acrefore-9780190201098-e-236-note-59]," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017).

[95] Rodríguez, *Always Running*, 184.

[96] Rodríguez, *Always Running*, 185.

[97] Tim Libretti, "Is There a Working Class in US Literature? Race, Ethnicity and the Proletarian Literary Tradition," *Radical Teacher (Working Class Studies)* 46 (Spring 1995): 22–26.

[98] Rodríguez, *Borrowed Bones*, 26–29, 18–19.

[99] Rodríguez, *Borrowed Bones*, 19.

[100] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 212.

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[101] Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers, 1995).

[102] Luis J. Rodríguez, ed., *With the Wind at My Back and Ink in My Blood: A Collection of Poems by Chicago's Homeless* (Chicago: Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 1991).

[103] Rodríguez, *Always Running*, 239.

[104] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow; Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

[105] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 296.

[106] Rodríguez, "Introduction; 'A Chance to Live Like Human Beings'," in *Honor Comes Hard: Writings from the California Prison System's Honor Yard*, ed. Luis J. Rodríguez and Lucinda Thomas (San Fernando, CA: Tía Chucha Press, 2009), 5, 8.

[107] Rodríguez, *My Nature Is Hunger*, 143.

[108] Rodríguez, *It Calls You Back*, 296.

[109] *Ford Foundation[https://www.fordfoundation.org/ideas/equals-change-blog/posts/announcing-the-art-for-justice-fund/]* website.

[110] Ruben Navarette, *"Language and Identity Issues for Mexican Americans[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2006/02/language_and_identity_issues_f.html]*," *Real Clear Politics*, February 23, 2006.

[111] Michael Wolff, *The Fire and the Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018).

[112] Wolff, *The Fire and the Fury*, 62.

[113] Rodríguez, *Republic of East LA*, 210.

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[114] See also Katrina vanden Heuvel, *"A New Poor People's Campaign Wants to Change How Society Defines Morality[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-new-poor-peoples-campaign-wants-to-change-how-society-defines-morality/2017/12/05/d4524b68-d90d-11e7-b1a8–62589434a581_story.html?utm_term=.f1126b63920a]*," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2017.