An Interview with Richard Rodriguez
(San Francisco, 26.9.2016)

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In fall 2016, I undertook a research trip to the United States for a comparative-literature project on Turkish-German and Mexican-American Literature. I interviewed several writers like Alejandro Morales and Demetria Martinez to discuss their views on politics and their literary responses to them. After reaching out for over a year, and, with the help of other writers and colleagues in the field of Chicano Studies, I finally got in contact with Richard Rodriguez in San Francisco. Rodriguez was raised in Sacramento, where he went to a Catholic school, and attended universities in the U.S. and UK. He became a journalist and writer. His first memoir *Hunger of Memory* was published in the early 80s. During that time, American conservatives referred to him regularly as a model of how immigrant integration should work. In the following years Rodriguez published three more memoirs discussing his own life in relation to American history. I arrived in San Francisco during the pre-elections debates between Clinton and Trump and found my way to Rodriguez. I had read all his books and had repeatedly stumbled onto essays and articles on his works. From the beginning, his opinions had been notably distinct from writers within the Chicano movement in the 70s and feminist Mexican-American authors. His conservative advocacy against programs of affirmative action and his support for the mantra “English Only” made him an outcast in the Mexican-American writing community.

Labeled a “coconut” and “sellout” and being a strong individualist, Richard Rodriguez stayed away from “La Causa.” I was curious to meet this excellent stylist and writer who later in his career had a public coming out, admitting to his homosexuality, and who left politics behind in his writing and started exploring matters of religion and interfaith. In our interview, Rodriguez provides his personal insights on aging, writing, religion, the rise of xenophobia in the United States, and explains why he is not interested in politics anymore.

**DS:** Various scholars have written about you in essays and in readers on Mexican-American literature. At the MLA 2015 in Austin, TX there was even a whole panel devoted to your work. While so many people have their opinion

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about you and your positions, I am interested in how you view your writing, especially how it has changed through the years.

RR: Well, I think of myself as I think of you, as a person living in history and time. So when you write about yourself when you are twenty years old, you are going to sound a certain way. You have certain level of interests, writing about a number of interests. When you write about yourself ten years later, those interests will have changed because you are living in time. Your writing will change. Sometimes it becomes better. Sometimes it becomes more guarded. Sometimes it is more cautious as you get older. And when you get really old, I am now seventy two, there is a difference to my writing, which is in some ways less guarded than it used to be and in other ways more reckless and more daring than it ever was.

One thing I am discovering about old age is not that you don’t have anything to say, but that you have too much to say about anything and everything. About taking care of your parents, for example. I have 72 years of thinking about that. Do you understand? So, when I try to write about it, everything is dense. And sometimes this density works out, at other times it confuses people. But the way my writing has changed is the way I have changed. What people associate with you, because the written word tends to freeze your identity, is what you wrote and believed ten years ago. Well, I wrote this on a day ten years ago when I believed it, but I already have a different relationship with it the day after I wrote it. You understand, so all I see about my work progress is not that it is a contradiction, but that it is an evolution, sometimes in a bad direction, sometimes in a good direction.

For example, I think that the AIDS crisis in San Francisco, when I helped so many young men die—I knew all about giving people morphine when they were dying at the very last stages—changed me enormously. I don’t sound the same as I used to do. I have a certain changed relationship to the body. I know how what bodies look like when they are about to die. The man upstairs right here in this building, he is dying. And he is in a very late stage, not dying of AIDS. I can go up there and see him. There is a woman from Fiji who is taking care of him. I can tell you about how long he has to live. Maybe two weeks longer. That’s what I learned. I learned that when I was in my forties. So that changes you! That is both what is great about a human being and sometimes frustrating because we become strangers to ourselves over time.

DS: And how would you describe the young Richard Rodriguez? How do you look back on him? Do you like his writing style?

RR: I think he was interested in the clarity of argument. The young Rodriguez was also more politically interested than I am now. He was in some ways more daring in his arguments than I am now. But he was not as good a writer as I am. I am a better writer than he was. [RR laughs] See, I am not like an opera star. An opera star, when she is young, can sing better than anybody in the world. But the voice changes, and when she gets to be 60 years old, she does not sound like this anymore. She does not sound like her old self anymore. But writers are a different breed. Writers get better with time and I think I did too.

DS: Why are you less interested in politics?

RR: [sighs] Well, I think…I’ll give you some simple answers. One thing is that we are living in the middle of a religious revolution in the world. And I became
very much interested in Islam because of what happened on 9/11. I heard that the men had been praying when they brought these planes against these buildings. Just as journalist, I had to realize that I did not know anything about Islam. I knew cartoons, I knew caricatures, and I just felt that I needed to go to the Middle East. I felt that I needed to familiarize myself with the grievances in Islam, with the differences between Sunni, Shia and Sufi, with the sound of Arabic and with my own relationship to Arabic. I did not know anything about these things. And it turned out that up to three, four thousand words in Spanish are Arabic, and that I speak Arabic by virtue of that fact. It is probably also true that my DNA is somehow connected to the Arab world and maybe to the Muslim world through Spain; so, when I went to Cairo, I thought that I came to encounter a stranger, but instead I encountered myself in some sense; so, politics, Democrats and Republicans, they do not interest me as much right now. America does not interest me as much. There is a lot of chatter around politics. One of the reasons why we are not satisfied right now with our political leadership is that they are not reflecting what we are feeling. Americans are very much afraid right now, of the stranger from the South or of the East, and I am interested in those fears. But Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, they don't interest me.

DS: Not only Americans are fearful of the future or of people they consider strangers. There is a similar situation and tension in the European Union, and you can see a rise in nationalism and populist movements. It is like the ghosts of the past are very alive. How can you explain that?

RR: I think people have the capacity of being afraid of history when they see big changes taking place. I mean just take the Germans for instance. When Angela Merkel says: “we will take a million Syrian refugees.” Once you announce this, North-Africans come, Afghanis come, Pakistanis come, and Indians come, because there is so much frustration with one’s life in situations of poverty, or persecution, or war. The moment you offer a kind of solution to that, like saying “we will take you,” everyone will come. This is what is happening. If I were sitting in Bavaria and watching parades of people walking through my town, I would wonder whether I exist anymore or why my country in some sense does not belong to me anymore. It is something quite different. Maybe better, more cosmopolitan, more daring, but not exactly the country I grew up in. For example, I lived in London. There are parts of London where I do not go easily with my gay partner, because I don’t feel comfortable there. I am not even English, but I know a lot of English people who do not feel comfortable. None the less: When I would see something familiar growing unfamiliar or even threatening to me, I don't like this. So, am I a Neo-Nazi then? I do not know. I do sympathize with those people.

In Arizona or New Mexico, people suddenly see the state their grandmother knew gone. The emergence of something quite new. This is frightening. Something unstoppable is frightening. What I see in these people, of course, are agents of change, and Europeans had been agents of change themselves too, imposing their change for ages on other societies.

Even to this day the American drug addiction is so vast that it is destabilizing other parts of the world like Thailand, Afghanistan, Colombia and Mexico. In Mexico, some 60,000 people have been murdered drug war violence. Another
30,000 have disappeared. That is an enormous amount of chaos, which the American drug habit has caused in Mexico: “I need to put it in my nose, I need to put it in my veins, I need to swallow it.” This illicit desire of Americans has maybe destroyed Mexico. Would I resent it if I were a Mexican living in Tijuana or Guadalajara? Yes, I think I would! And this is the result of one country being poor and another that having an illegal illicit desire. What was the question?

**DS:** How do you explain the rise of populists like Trump, the rise of nationalism and racism?

**RR:** Oh! I mean Americans are not resented in Mexico. But if I and my brother were kidnapped, let’s say by a drug gang, I would resent what America has done to my country. I could not do a thing. There is no populist movement against America in Mexico.

**DS:** I meant the populism in the United States and Europe.

**RR:** Yes, I do understand. There are a lot of people who resent my being here. I do not know if Mexicans have the luxury to resent Americans. The desire for America is there in their country. Do you know what I am saying?

**DS:** Not really.

**RR:** I am American. I want drugs. And I will pay first world prices for drugs and I will take my desire to third world countries, where I can make a little thug into a billionaire. Because my desire is so vast and so wealthy that I can create drug lords, billionaires, who can tunnel under the border, who can fly across the border with their own planes and who have their own militia. This is what I can do as an American. Now, what I am saying is that I am not sure what right Americans have to resent Mexicans in this country because we are already in Mexico, and our desire is already in Mexico. So, do I sympathize with Americans who are unhappy with the Mexicanization of the United States? Yes, I sympathize. But I do see it in our own American perversion of Mexico. These are always reciprocal relationships.

Do the Americans fear now the rise of Islam in this country? Yes! But we Americans have been—through our interest in oil, our collaboration with Israel, and through our decision of working together with Saudi Arabia instead of Iran—involved in killing and bombing in the Middle East, and now we are surprised that we are here. It is all reciprocal. If we truly would be a little bubble like Switzerland, we could decide who comes in and who stays. But America is not that country.

**DS:** Switzerland also has a huge populist party and the same discussions. It is not a bubble anymore. There is a lot of racist thought there. Xenophobia and racism seem to be on the rise all over the globe, even in India. It seems like somewhere someone is always afraid of some ‘Other.’ Are these symptoms of larger structural changes?

**RR:** Part of the problem too is the means of traveling. Getting on a plane and traveling internationally is dangerous. I mean, you are processed at security, you have to be frisked and so forth. There is an attack on travel in this world right now: These people feel that the world is in movement, and in a world that is in movement, if you really want to fight the world, you attack them in their movements. It is really interesting how people are now becoming afraid of getting on an air-
plane, being in an airport or lingering too long at the ticket counter. There have been incidents in the United States recently where somebody heard something, like a pop and the noise turns out to be nothing, but still we feel uncomfortable because we know that the airport is one of the places susceptible to attack.

So am I sympathetic? Yes, I am sympathetic. I am sorry that I am. As a human being, I am sorry that people are afraid. Do I feel sad that in many cases the United States, that country which a lot people are coming to, is not what they expect? There was a wonderful theatrical piece set during the time of the L.A. riots in which a Korean woman talks about how L.A., the city she came to, was not the L.A. she saw in the movies. She ended up living in South Central Los Angeles with Mexicans and Black people, but she had seen blond people driving around [laughs], and she was resentful. This reality was not her fantasy. She had not even been here, but in her fantasy this was her L.A.

I have all kinds of fantastic dreams. I have images of Germany. And if I go to Germany and find out that everybody is leering at the Cologne Cathedral train station, staring inappropriately at all the young women walking by, I will say “this is not Germany! This is not the Germany I saw on the poster, this looks like something else, this looks like Yemen.” I mean, what is this when a woman cannot dress the way she wants to? It really bothered me a great deal to learn about this terrible incident on New Year’s 2015.

What women do with their dresses is extremely important in my world, what they are free to do or not free to do. Even in the case, what happened in the South of France when policemen bullied women for wearing a burkini or a headscarf. Fifty years ago, women were arrested at the beach for wearing a bikini. Now you are arrested if you don’t wear a bikini. That’s all interesting. I get tired of words like “racism” because they do not tell me enough about that nightmare. Sometimes I leave here in the early morning hours and go out to Fillmore Street. This neighborhood is filled with young people now, a lot of people who are very wealthy, carrying their technology, cell phones and computers and so forth. I leave this desk and go out on the streets, and everyone is on their cell phone. All these pretty young people, they never look at you, they don’t even look at the traffic crossing the streets, oblivious of the dangers.

Sometimes I feel angry that the youth is wasting its youth. That it is oblivious to themselves, even to their own bodies. They do not seem sexual to me. These young people are so distracted. On Saturday, I walked by on California Street and passed this series of cafes, and these couples had their cell phones instead of talking to each other. I get angry. Okay. What am I angry about? Technology? How can you get angry at technology? There is some desire of the young not to be wherever they are. Be here! Do I get angry? Yes, but I think what I am also getting angry about is

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3 On December 31st, 2015, hundreds of women were harassed by male gangs at the Cologne train station. The police failed to control the situation, and it took days for the media to report finally the real extent of the incident. The incident became a big political scandal in Germany and attracted worldwide attention. The perpetrators were mostly men originating from the Maghreb. The incidents were used to criticize Angela Merkel’s policy of open borders for Middle Eastern refugees in September 2015.

4 RR refers to incidents in Nice and other cities during August 2016.
that my time is passing, that I am seeing my generation pass and that the younger kind is something different. This is what I am getting angry about. So, if I am an old woman with cowboy roots living in Arizona, and I see Mexicans and Central Americans around me, I think: “Doesn’t anybody know to speak English? I want to hire some workers, but no one speaks English.” She gets angry, okay? But what she is really angry about is that her time is passing. She no longer owns the land. It’s now somebody else’s legend. You can brand that as racism or populism of a dark sort, but it gets close to our dream life. I take it seriously. […]

DS: You just mentioned that your time is passing by and that you are turning 72. What would have you done differently? What would you do if you were a young bilingual man from Sacramento nowadays?

RR: I would love to travel. Like someone from a small rural town like you, I would love to see the world. My parents, both of them, traveled great distances, in my mind, to get to Sacramento. My uncle was from India and at family celebrations, like Christmas, my uncle’s sister would sing this Hindu hymn. There were all these people from far distances, but I was living where I had always lived. I did not have the bravery. My only bravery was doing what they didn’t do, becoming linguistically somebody new. […] I was conquering this unknown literature, I was conversing with different cultures but only in the schoolroom, in the library, do you understand? Instead of rivaling their bravery of having taking long journeys, I took long journeys of the mind. But now, when I am listening to you, about places you got to go that I have not been to, like Tijuana or Pakistan, or Syria, these are places I wanted to see late in my life. And in many cases I went with news crews, with the camera man and the sound person and so forth. I couldn’t see what you saw while travelling bravely in countries the languages of which you don’t speak. That is wonderful, that is what youth is. That kind of daring! I wish I could say that when I was in my 20s I would have done that if I hadn’t done this. But in fact I became a writer. That was my journey. I made a journey from a very quiet boy who did not want to use English to a man who was really confident in English and who wanted to master it, who wanted to become a master of the English language, you know? That was my journey, but it does not compare in my mind with your journey.

DS: You mentioned your voluntary social work during the outbreak of the AIDS crisis…

RR: It was not social work. When you say that your father is in pain and it becomes clear and urgent that you have to take care of him; that is not social work. That is obligation from some deep, deep source.

DS: So we can call it Humanitarian work; you were there for people?

RR: My partner John, he is retired now, and on certain days of the week he goes to this place called Lava me/Wash me, and helps bathe homeless people. That is humanitarian, that is social work. But when your best friend calls you on the phone and tells you that he is dying, that is not humanitarian. There is another word for that. Some part of your being is dying and you have to attempt to help that. When I helped dying people, I didn’t help them out of a humanistic impulse. I was helping people. I was helping a young man who was very beautiful, whom I might have been in love with, but now had turned into an old dying bird. I had a stake in his path. It was my responsibility to help him die as well as I
could, especially when his family would not come. This is not humanitarian. This is something more radical. I wrote a piece in the *New York Times* about nakedness.\(^5\) I ran into a naked man on Divisadero Street recently who was coming from the Castro district. There he was completely naked. And there was a group of people gathering in front of Castro district, which is the gay area of San Francisco. It was a Sunday. No one really paid him any attention because he was an old man. But some Japanese tourists became aware of him and took selfies and so forth. I was describing him in a city where people have no bodies anymore. No one has a physical reality anymore. You are not part of a conversation.

In my essay in the *New York Times* there is a description of me as a young man in San Francisco with a group of homosexual men in a small car. All of us crowded in this one car driving down the peninsula. Within ten years, every man in this car was dead. They all had been in their 20s or 30s that day. I still can feel their jackets pressed against my face when they try to reach out their arms. I can feel their bodies against my body as we were crushed in the back seats together. Ten years gone: Gone! Germany knows that kind of loss, not your generation, but the ones before when suddenly a whole generation was gone. But this was not humanitarian, this was something else.

**DS:** The United States is one of the richest poor countries I ever have been to. It is also a very religious country, if you consider all these various churches, TV priests etc. Even politics is much more obsessed with religion than in Europe. But it seems to me that it is mostly about morals and not Christian compassion for the poor. Is that a contradiction?

**RR:** This is partly religious. Our oldest tradition is Protestant but Puritan. And one of the things the Puritans believed is the way God has favored you—whether you have money and success or have failed. Failure in some sense is a metaphor for the displeasure of God. We have the sense in this country that something must be wrong with the poor. They must be drug addicts; you must have done something wrong in your life to be poor.

**DS:** This sounds like the concept of Karma in Hinduism.

**RR:** A little bit. This is historical. I saw this young couple, they must have been in their late teens or early 20s. They had a sign out saying, “Help us to get food.” My American impulse would be saying: “What are you doing? You are 20 years old. You should be working now. You have healthy limbs, you have energy, why are you not working?” That is my American impulse, which is Protestant. As a Mexican who never has lived in Mexico, [my sense is that] Mexico does not judge people morally for being poor. That is just a different theological understanding. In some ways, because the experience of suffering is so intense in a country like Mexico, the poor are seen truer to the human experience. The difficult life is a human life.

**DS:** Is that the main difference between Catholicism and Protestantism?

**RR:** To some degree yes. The American understanding of poverty is one of moral suspiciousness. Generally speaking, you should not be poor.

DS: As a Catholic, what do you think about Pope Francis? The Pope has a very social agenda, hasn't he?
RR: Ok. He is doing ok.
DS: Only ok?
RR: [laughs] Ja, what I mean is, I do not put my hopes on the Pope. As you said: In Europe, the churches are empty and that is the reason why Islam is becoming the strongest religion in Europe. I am not sure if you are ready for that. It will be the only religion in Europe because there is no other religion there. It is filling an empty space. It can do that because there is nothing there. And, consider the religious energy. Religion has energy. There is a fierce energy behind saying “MY GOD BELONGS TO ME.” That sentence has led to violence, wars and the slaughter of innocent people in this world. My God! And now Islam is coming into Europe, in a godless Europe, that does not really believe in much except the next World Cup. Actually, I am not sure what the Europeans believe in. It is going to be very hard because the religious energy is going to be Islamic. You already can see it. The churches are empty and the mosques crowded. I was in Norway and went to mass there. Norwegians are very wealthy people because of the North Sea oil. There was a park in the center of town and I went to the church, which was across from a gym. The gym was full of all these pretty young people. And the church was filled with Indonesians and not Norwegians. The priest was Polish.
DS: I won't debate that with you now otherwise we will have 70 pages of interview like I have with Alejandro Morales.
RR: [laughs] Okay. In regard to Pope Francis…I guess that the church is realizing now that its future is in Africa, Latin America and not in Europe, but it has to deal with Europe as a foreign country. Europeans are very sentimental people who also see the Pope in a sentimental way. But it does not change Europe. […]
DS: The churches do a good job with social work for refugees, they have shelters etc., but they don't try to missionize foreign people. They also don't try to communicate with Germans. So, if Germany becomes a-religious, it is also partly the fault of the churches who don't do a thing!
RR: It is not only the church. It is about the people who are not doing these things anymore. These were great societies were people had been healers, nurses. I grew up with “medicens sans frontier” who worked mostly outside Europe. I have great respect for this impulse inside us to help other societies. I also really admire the Germans and their curiosity because I think this is a great human impulse. And you see, in a time when Germans had been sort of lost, even when Germany has changed and is out of control, they still have this sense of curiosity. I remember when this beach resort in Tunisa was attacked, German tourists were there. Wherever in the world I have been, Germans have been there too. They have this daring to travel.
DS: This is because we have thirty days of paid vacation. Twenty more than an average American worker.
RR: This helps. This helps. There is a place in Tijuana called Casa de Pobrez, which gives free lunches every day. It is not far from the border, and, well, they get all their money from Germany. It is run by Spanish nuns. That is Germany. I know why German philanthropy exists in the world as it does, none the less there is no
American philanthropy in Lima/Peru like that. German philanthropy is everywhere in the world. This is not an insignificant achievement. So, take the credit.

DS: Yes, not for myself but for my country.
RR: Yes do it, you are a taxpayer. You are paying for Mexican and Central American migrant workers who are stuck in Tijuana tonight. You are paying for them to eat. This is an extraordinary achievement of Germans in the world. Even for a post-religious German society. You don’t understand what I am saying [laughs].

DS: In your recent book, you showed interest in questions of interfaith and similarities of the monotheistic religions. How does that help you understand current events?
RR: Yes, let’s take the crusades 400, 500 years ago. The first slaughter of Jews in Europe was a result of the crusades and the violence against Orthodox Christian churches. Young men like you, younger even, who had been charged by a Pope to conquer Arabia and convert Jews to Christianity. What is going on now with ISIS, for example, is part of the same impulse. It is the same age group. Young men from societies with great individualism, from let’s say, Birmingham, England, where young British Pakistani men or Syrian teenagers grow up in camps. He has all kind of possibilities in England but he has no community. So, he has everything about the “I”: I can be an engineer, I can be a doctor, I can be a scientist. But he has no we!

DS: There is no feeling of belonging.
RR: And here it comes, this ancient cause for battle. Where you can belong to something larger than yourself. The recognition of this great Caliphate in the desert. Look at the similarities of the Sunni Wars against Shia Islam, it is like the Catholic wars against the Orthodox Church. And it is enchanting to young men to be called to this former “we.” It is very powerful, very powerful in the world.

DS: You just said that there is a lot of “I” but a lack of community in the world. Terrorists, religious leaders but also populists use that, so what could be a healthy counter strategy? What can our societies offer instead of these false and hateful ideologies to young men and women?
RR: Well, looking where to find the way is what I would advise. There is so much need in the world for conciliation, relation, care, and compassion. You would not think that I would need to say that, it is just there. Jim and the others put up showers for homeless people so that they could clean themselves. There were maybe 50 in the afternoon, which is a lot of people. There are a lot of tech businesses downtown. You can see young tech people come and clean the showers perfectly afterwards.

DS: As a social worker, I see that as a useful pragmatic solution, but what about a grand narrative? I think that people who are joining ISIS are looking for a bigger narrative.
RR: Other people go and fight in the U.S. army. In the army, when a soldier gets wounded, it is like “oh no,” and he goes back to Dallas, Texas, and all he does is care for his fellow soldiers. Because the experience was so intense. “I will die for you. In fact, that night in Afghanistan I stayed up all night making sure that you are safe. I am back in Dallas where everybody tries to get my parking space
at Walmart, people get in front of me…” The country that he was protecting is not the country he loves. The country he loves was with his fellow soldiers in the desert. I cannot solve that problem. I cannot solve it. Somebody has to come along, some messianic figure who can do that. I am giving a speech at a Catholic University in Pennsylvania on Thursday. I am going to talk about Mother Theresa at the end of the speech. Back in the day, I was with Mother Theresa at the San Quentin Prison. She was this small woman from Macedonia, and she created this organization that everybody in the world knew. And all she did was sit with people when they were dying in India, and the order is now all over the world. By then she had gone through a spiritual crisis. But then everywhere in San Quentin on death row, where the most serious criminals are sitting, these murderers, big guys, robbers and rapists, they all came out and there she was—this tiny little woman. She could not give them rosaries because they could have been used to strangle themselves or others. But she said something to them which I’m going to tell the kids in Pennsylvania. She said, “This is the woman who has not felt God in the last 40 years. If you want to see the face of God, take a look at the prisoner next to you, the murderer or rapist. This is God.”

You have to have this kind of vision in the world to form a commune vision. People like Steve Jobs. I think Steve Jobs had a vision that he could change the world. He could give peasants in rice fields in India access to communication. New technology would also cause the Arab Spring. People could force tyrants out of their office. With new technology, you could bring people to Tahrir Square. Just like that! I can tell them, “Go to Tahrir Square, there is a demonstration and police are arresting people, get there now!” But what happens is that tyrants got that communication too. The hackers got that communication and kids who I thought would use it for revolutionary reasons use it simply to play video games. That is not Steve Jobs’s fault. In some ways, you only can give people a dream. They are dreamers. You can give them technology, but technology does not make them into dreamers. Technology will be small when their lives are small, it will be large when their lives are large.

Why did Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan become this thing? It is because history is partly like this and we choose either this way or the other way; but it is also because there is this hunger for these heroes—so that we see her bravery and her stature. She sounds like she is an 80 year old woman, she is so wise. I can’t tell you why history does that. […]

**DS:** I have been interviewing different Mexican-American writers, and have written about even more. What do you think about Gloria Anzaldúa, do you know her work? If so, what do you think about her later texts? She became much more forgiving and spiritual before her death.

**RR:** I am so embarrassed. I don’t read Mexican-American literature. This is a confession I have to make.

**DS:** Why is that?

**RR:** I could ask you why you don’t spend more time in Munich than in Pakistan? [laughs]. Why don’t you spend more time in Berlin or San Antonio? It is just

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6 Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani activist for female education who survived an assault by the Taliban. In 2014, she was awarded the Peace Nobel Prize.
the way your brain works. When I say to you that I wanted to swallow English. There is a character in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, the New World Indian, who comes off forcefully and starts eating books because he wants what is inside. That is me, I just describe myself as Caliban. At the time of my first book, I wanted to swallow their books, not my books. And if you told me that this book is good, this book is Heidegger, I would rather swallow that than something from my hometown. I want something that everybody says is not mine. I am transgressive. I violate borders. I am an illegal immigrant. And you say what about these Mexican-American writers? And I keep saying “I want to know about Jewish-American writers, I want to know about Hungarian-American writers. I want to know about communities, which are not mine. Why have you been in Pakistan?” That question is so brilliantly thrilling to me. When one leaves home and is more interested in the stranger on the highway than in the neighbor. In fact, the neighbor next door is as interesting a human being as the stranger on the highway is. But this isn’t what a young man knows. You know what I am saying? I am talking to you not to me!

**DS:** I would say that I also had the drive to go out and see things unknown to me that I only know from books and films. And I still want to do these roadtrips Jack Kerouac wrote about and want to experience the songs of Bob Dylan and Kris Kristofferson in real life.

**RR:** And that is human to want the difference.

**DS:** But the more I learn about the differences and the other world out there which is not my community, the more I also learn about my own community—more questions are arising. Now, after my research at UT, Austin, learning about Mexican-American literature, I know how to look differently at my home community.

**RR:** That is good! That is good!

**DS:** Also, back home, people have a lot of secrets as well, lots of skeletons in the closet…

**RR:** Culture and history are so layered. I have a friend in England who went to a school, which has been around since the fifteenth century. He was a sort of a scholarship boy, he made a lot of money with scholarships. When he went there, he became part of the eighteenth century. The density of that place just introduced him to layers and layers of memories and students, but it preceded him, famous people, who also had sat in this room, just within the single space. It revealed…it burrowed into the past. It is very thrilling. You can become a traveler and never go anywhere. Sorry for not answering your question.

**DS:** No, don’t be sorry. I am not looking to fulfill my expectations; I am open to different aspects and answers I was not expecting.

**RR:** In my own defense, there were so many objections to my writings in the beginning. When you told me that there was a seminar on my work at the MLA, I didn’t know about these things. I don’t know who goes to them. I don’t know what is said about me. It is actually how I maintain my life. I was always the bad boy. So I got used to being the bad boy. I don’t have a relationship to the people who call me the bad boy. Once in a while, I meet an old Chicano when I give talks in San

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7 MLA in Austin. January 2016.
Antonio, and I suppose I should know who he is but I don’t. I think he is a poet. I feel embarrassed that I don’t know him.

**DS:** These people maybe misread that as arrogance from your side?
**RR:** I am sure that is the case.

**DS:** Maybe there is also jealousy involved because you were a media figure so you got the attraction of journalists and TV stations that other writers never got.
**RR:** Jealousy yes, but also resentment. You know the problem with awards and giving a prize for 50,000 Euros because they like your book? The problem is there are other books as good as your book. They are different but as good. If you are an artist and you realize: Why is that man getting his picture painted over there and why am I not? The sense of arbitrariness in our lives: One person can be lucky, one person is not lucky. There is no accounting for that. I tell writing students, “Think about your future. No one ever tells you that a lot of it is luck. Why is she gonna be published but you are not.” Maybe it is historical luck. Maybe we want to know about some lesbian gay writers right now and not about some crazy German in Tijuana. The arbitrariness of public taste is strange but real. Sometimes it must come down the feeling “my work is better than his and nobody pays attention to me.” I am sure this is part of it. But this is not envy, this is some other dissatisfaction or feeling of unjustness. […]

**DS:** In contrast to Turkish-German Literature, which is read mostly by a German audience or professional readers, Mexican-American Literature was written for Mexican-Americans right from the beginning.

**RR:** There is also something to this concept of language. African Americans are the center of literary culture in America because of their complicated relationship to the English language. The slaves were not allowed to read, a lot of their language got infused with irony. There was a lot of servile language, which was just the opposite. For centuries they have had a relationship with the language. It is really complicated and rich and daring. I tried to write about that in *Darling*. But Mexican-Americans who speak or write Spanish when they write English, they don’t have that kind of relationship to the language. It is just English. They have not been bothered by English. Think of the Irish and their relation to English. English is the oppressor’s language. But they all are using it.

**DS:** Spanish was in this sense also the language of an oppressor. How can we criticize English but not Spanish then?
**RR:** That is right.

**DS:** Mexican-Americans write a lot of autobiographies, it looks like a very attractive genre. In this sense, you are very much a Mexican-American writer. In Turkish German Literature, this genre is not so much part of the literary production. Did you ever write a novel or poems?
**RR:** I wrote news stories, but not prose which is not about me. I am interested in the intersection of public event and the private reaction. Where were you when Hitler went by in Berlin and what did you see? That public event in January 1942, that afternoon…I am interested in that solitary point of view. You could give me the name of a really good book, like *Paris by Metro*, that was written as a book

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of art which talks about the trains, the beautiful Metro sign, the different stations. But is it poetry? I am looking for a way to poeticize the world, the world I live in. Whether there is garbage which can be picked up, or whether it is Donald Trump’s hair, I am interested in how you can write about this in poetry with poetic substance.

You know Roland Barthes! I was reading Roland Barthes this morning. He writes about a professional wrestling match in a suburban French town. That is what I want to do. I love to do that. When I was a young man, this was my journey. There was a boxer named… I forget his name. He was a featherweight boxer, very small man. But it was like he was on fire. I think Bobby Chacon, 9 he just died. I saw his picture in the New York Times. One night his wife said: “If you don’t stop boxing I gonna leave you.” He did not stop, and I saw him fighting that night in Sacramento. It was a 12 round match and everybody, a group of maybe 5,000 Mexican-American men, was standing for 12 rounds. This match was worth committing suicide for. I saw him, and it was like he was fighting God. It was just being witness to something very special. I can still remember the sound of the glove hitting flesh. Barthes talks about that too when he writes about the wrestling match. The sound of slapping flesh. Sweaty and bloody.

If you could write about these things as a poet would, the prosaic world of the everyday and the holy and the transcendental, if you could find a literature which can do both of these things, this would be magnificent.

**DS:** In my opinion you did that in *Darling*.

**RR:** Yes, I tried to do that in my life. About everyday events.

**DS:** I like the eclecticism of *Darling*. It combines so many different topics, but they are nevertheless connected with each other.

**RR:** What I am trying to find in this is book is the deliberate rhetorical strategy to describe the arbitrariness of falling in love with your DNA; I can’t imagine the DNA that you carry. Think of the travelers that you have within you. If you could find a prose style which could suggest the confusion of race, not the stability of it, “I am black. I am German,” but the water in it.

**DS:** Do you have a project like this at the moment? You have so many ideas about finding a new language...

**RR:** I think in *Brown* I tried to find a literary equivalent to that DNA. There are two chapters in that book where I really try to find in the confused rhetoric a verbal equivalent in to the confusion of my bloodline. I am an Indian, but I am also a conquistador. I read myself. I am probably an Arab who was forced to convert to Catholicism. I did all these things, but can I find a way to talk about it? A way which is not filled with self-pity or imperialism or boring language but filled with the wonder of it all? That Daniel in front of me has an entire universe traveling with him, and the originality that he is facing in the world is really reclamation of a memory that is so lost to him. He does not even know his own memory or some memory of some ancestors. That is really wonderful. […]

**DS:** What can literature do? In one of your books, you say “Books should confuse”?

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9 1951-2016.
RR: This is what it should do. By the time I have read your essay on what Turkish-Germans are, I should be more confused at the end of it than I was in the beginning. When I sat down to read that essay, I said to myself ‘I thought I knew all about the Turks in Germany.’ By the time I finished, I realized that I didn’t know anything, and that everything is a mystery to me. And this is marvelous and horrifying […]

Vladimir Nabokov—who wrote *Lolita*—wrote in German first when he was exiled there. But his first language was French because he grew up in an upper class Russian home. By the time he wrote *Lolita* in the United States, he was already writing in an American idiom. When he got back to Switzerland, he translated it into Russian. That is so astonishing to me, to do this with the literary creations. You know enough languages now besides English, Texas English, to write about Texas English in German. I think that this would be very thrilling to me. Forget Tex-Mex. Deutsch-Tex!

**DS:** I just saw this book on your shelf? *German-Texans*…

**RR:** You want me to tell you a story about Texas-Germans?

**DS:** Yes, go for it!

**RR:** The largest slaughter of Americans by other Americans happened near Victoria, Texas. It happened over the issue of slavery. Germans were much more for emancipation than the Anglo-Texans who tended to come out of the South into Texas. They tended to be pro-slavery. The issue of slavery killed a lot of German immigrants. There was a slaughter one day, and it is a story nobody knows. I have forgotten how many people were killed. Maybe 200 […] I am not talking about the slaughter of Indians by white settlers or vice versa. I am talking about white settlers killing white settlers, and the Germans know nothing about this story because we did not tell you the story; we iterated it from memory. And then you are in Texas and no one will whisper it to you! It is there! I will give you that book before you leave!

**DS:** Very interesting. Thank you very much!

**RR:** Ja!

**DS:** Another quote of yours. What do you mean by “the Cosmopolite has come to hate his browness, his facility, his indistinction, his mixture, the cosmopolite may yearn for a thorough religion, ideology or tribe.” Is that happening now?

**RR:** Yes! I am describing the terrorists of September 11. Those young men were conversive with the world. A number of them travelled to cities like Las Vegas, San Diego; they had gone to school in Germany and France. They were born in Saudi Arabia or wherever and knew several languages. And they knew several ways to behave. Girls were lap dancing on them in Las Vegas. There are people who are very complex, people who at some point in their life come to resent that complexity. “There is something of the Christian in me; there is something of the Gringo in me. There is something of the German in me. I want to be one thing. I want to be a son of Allah! I do not want to have anything else in my life. I want the purity of that construction so that at the end of my life I only associate with my

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own kind.” I think that impulse can happen to people who are very cosmopolitan, maybe to you too, Daniel, you who has travelled all over the world and knows several languages, many cities. He comes to a place in his life where he says: “I do not want to be all of this. I am an old man now, living in Germany. I want to be all German again. I want to learn what this is.” This is a very benevolent experience. But I think some kids can search out their purity. But maybe Germany was a place for purity in the past, by denying everything else. Think of the Nazi years!

**DS:** But it is a myth. A pure identity is an illusion. A construction...

**RR:** Right, it is not possible, but still these men learned how to fly seven Boeing jets and could run them into buildings. Notice what they attacked. They attacked the World Trade Center, buildings which were established to facilitate world commerce. That was exactly what they were objecting to. The world of commerce! They wanted purity!

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**DS:** My PhD thesis is about belonging and participation and how writers in countries of immigration are addressing these issues. What is your understanding of participation in a society?

**RR:** What does that mean?

**DS:** Ja, exactly, that is my question: What do participation and belonging look like from your perspective? What does it mean to you?

**RR:** Voting? Is that what you mean?

**DS:** I ask you! It can be also cultural participation. You can use your own language, although it is the language of a cultural minority. Political participation: everyone who pay taxes is allowed to vote...

**RR:** Well, I guess civility is something. That I am polite to you at an intersection. That I help you cross if you need help. That I look after you, that I leave the door open for you. Participation to me means participating in the public life, in the lives of other people. The woman who lived in the other building died a few weeks ago. When I was in my bedroom I knew that she was up until three o’clock in the morning. That worried me. Is that what you mean by participation?

**DS:** What you explained is participation on a personal level, which is important for a community, I agree, but my question aims much more at how a state is including all citizens, also migrants.

**RR:** So then you refer more to the realm of voting, when you deal with the power of a voting block as we call it. Or there are two Spanish-speaking TV stations with commercials which are run by big American corporations, and the commercials are for foreign car companies or tight soap. But this is a decision by corporate America to make Hispanics speak Spanish, even if their children are drifting away from it, and bring Mamacita to watch the telenovela in the afternoon. Is that what you are saying? My mother would watch Mexican soap operas. Or Venezuelan soap operas, and she liked them very much. And they ended up in Russia and all over the world. She participated in South American lives by watching these soap operas. She also went out and voted? Is that something you want to ask about?

**DS:** Yes, the fight for participation. What would you need to feel that you are participating or to feel a sense belonging to this country?

**RR:** My first book was a political essay in objection to some liberal policies, which were intended to increase my integration to American society. I thought
they were false solutions—talking about bilingual education and affirmative action. What does affirmative action mean? It gives me an advantage over you. The two of us are best friends, and when we apply for a place in college, I get an advantage over you; so, my participation in society was to object those policies. There is an interview with Bill Clinton when he was president in which I say to him “you are more minority than I,” because Bill Clinton grew up very poor in the South. His mother worked in bars, and drunken men came to their house all the time and start beating her up. He would have to come between them. He lived on the outside. I went to a school, I mean my parents were working class, but we lived in the part of town where I went to the Catholic school. Everybody else was middle class or upper middle class. I did not grow up in trailers like Clinton did. You know what I am saying to you? So, in some sense my objections to these false liberal solutions is my participation in society, my joining the argument. Is that what you mean?

**DS:** Oh, it is an open question.

**RR:** So, I wrote an essay about that slaughter of young women and men at that gay bar in Orlando for the *Los Angeles Times*.11 Very angry essay. I talk about an ultra-orthodox man in Israel who attacked gay parades with knives. He did that ten years ago and almost killed two people. Then he went to jail for ten years. He got out and came back to the parade. And he took the knife again. I was very angry. This is participation, yes?

**DS:** I am asking you what you think about participation. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your point of view. My idea is as follows: You were born to Mexican migrants in the United States and by birth became a full citizen of the United States. Right away, you got the American passport. I have friends in Germany who were born to Turkish migrants, and they still only have the Turkish passport and are not allowed to vote. Until the year 2000, you could only be German if you had German blood heritage. Due to legal tradition of *ius sanguis*, which dates back to the nineteenth century, you would most likely never become a full German citizen with the right to vote. The Schröder government changed that law, and now it is much easier to become German.

**RR:** My nephew is named Tom Schnitz. His grandfather was a German. His grandmother on his father’s side was not German. She is American. But he wanted to have a German passport. On his mother’s side he is Mexican. He became relatively wealthy—you and MaryAnn should go to his restaurant in Oakland, it is called Zahara, down on Telegraph. Very good restaurant. It is a day-time taqueria, you know the food; so, here is this German-Mexican kid who has written one of the best cookbooks on Mexican food in America. You can look it up! This is participation. He has essentially taken the recipes of Mexico and is making them his own. This is participation, no?

**DS:** Yes, this is cultural participation.

**RR:** I go to his restaurant and eat his food. I eat Mexico…

But it is translated into German. What he is doing now is creating a German restaurant. So the circle is closed. He has never been to Germany. He and his girl-

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friend travel all over the world, but so far they never have been to Germany. They just came back from Rome. She is Pakistani-Norwegian. Participation...I write somewhere about a skinhead who hates Mexicans. And I took him out. He hates Black people, he hates Chinese, he hates everybody. And when I offer him some lunch he actually says, “Yes, I like Mexican food.” And I tell him, you cannot like Mexican food if you don’t like Mexicans. He says: “Why not? I like burritos, no fucking big deal.” And I say, “it is a fucking big deal.” This is how culture happens. When Marco Polo takes the spice and puts it into his mouth, he is becoming someone different. That is participation. When I eat your food, when I say, “do you eat it like that? Yeah, try it! Try this one it is hot! Try it!” Participation, understand? And he comes back to Europe and he tries to remember what China taught him; so, I go to Mexican restaurants. [laughs out loud]. [...] 

When I wrote an essay about Donald Trump a year ago – I didn’t want to be against Donald Trump, it is not of interest. Of course Mexican-Americans are against him, what interests me is something different. I am writing an article about American clowns. The traditions of clowns in America. Because that is interesting. Clowns. I don’t know if you know the Marx Brothers’ movie. There are two clowns—a very interesting intersection of two comedy traditions: There was a silent clown, Harpo, and the chatty one Graucho. And the way they would sort of collide, sound and silence, and that silent clown. Emmet Kelly was a great circus clown in America, and he was just a great sad face clown. He was like Chaplin, most effective when he did not say anything. But there is this other Donald Trump tradition, Bang Bang Bang [RR slaps his hands]. “Boooo!” So, for Reuters I wrote a piece I sold in England.¹² This was my participation in the election. I was proud of it. I like this piece only because it did not sound like I am against Donald Trump. I actually like Donald Trump. I like the clown. And I talked about professional wrestling in America. There is a company, you might have seen in this in Germany, it is called WWE. They do not really wrestle each other, they badmouth each other. If you are a really good athlete and you want to fight, and you only know fighting, you could be fired because you don’t know how to use the microphone. Participation.

DS: Last question. In regard to machismo and the incidents of sexualized crime at the Cologne Cathedral in 2015, let us talk about healthy manhood. What do you think about manhood? Is there a crisis of manhood? What is the future of a healthy woman and manhood?

RR: Right now in America, there is a crisis. And I see that crisis mainly when I visit colleges and universities. Women are now the majority population of these places. When I ask for questions at the end of a speech, women will ask the questions, men won’t. When I go to a women’s college or high school, the girls are so different from boys at a boy’s school of comparable wealth. They are just so alive. What I don’t understand is when one sex excels, the other decels. You know? In the America of the 1960’s, women started wearing pants. Nowadays we see Hilary Clinton’s pant suits all the time. Men started wearing shorts. You never saw men

wearing shorts before in America like they wear now. So now you see a couple coming down the street. She covers her legs and he uncovers his legs. Is that not a kind of symmetry that when one covers the other uncovers? And when one does one thing, the other has to do the opposite? I don’t know the answer to this question.

There are religions which are very female-orientated. Catholicism, for example, if you think of South America. The women are ingrained in the church activities. [...] If you go to a mosque anywhere in the Middle East, it is all men. That is the sociology of these religions, that one is more male and the other more female. The husbands of the women in Mexico will stand at the door of the church because there is so much female energy in the church. They are begging for things from God. The weeping, the lighting of the candles, the touching of the crucified Christ, this is not what a man does. Women do that. They are asking for favors. “I am so weak. I cannot do that by myself.” That is a feminine religion. Male religion is this other energy.

There is a group of women in Los Angeles who just have opened their own mosque for women. I am not sure if it has happened in Arabia, but in America it has never happened before. Men are not there. I do not know whether we are going to see the decline of men in priestly orders, the number of women rabbis, the number of female Episcopal, Lutheran and Protestant ministers, for example. These are all new things. But what I don’t understand is whether the energy between these two take place within a kind of dialectic where one behaves this way so the other one behaves that way.

**DS:** Male and female energy. Female church. Is weakness for you part of a female energy?

**RR:** I think that women can acknowledge weakness much easier than men.

**DS:** So men are weak too sometimes?

**RR:** Oh, they are mostly weak. I think they are weaker. They are the weaker sex, but they keep on not acknowledging it and they have trouble with it. And I think the world today has to choose between these two oppositions.

But there is also this transsexual development in America, I am (not?) sure how much it is increasing in Europe. But take that Olympic athlete, Bruce Jenner, who is becoming a woman now13. Or rather he is not becoming a woman, he would say, she is revealing herself as a woman. With this we already get into the territory of ambiguity of sexuality identity. Rather than the questions that we were discussing earlier about DNA and racial identity where….look at your hair! You are already feminine. I wish I had it! You look like Gina Lollobrigidaa, you look like Sophia Loren.

**DS:** No, this Nordic Viking hair.

**RR:** [. . .] That is right! You look like a Viking!

**DS:** Interesting stereotypes you have in your mind.

**RR:** That is right! It is certainly the case that in America when I was growing up, young men did not have long hair. In the 60s they did. They were rebellious, and they moved into that direction. That kind of luxuriant hair. At that time you would be at a rock concert, you would see him like that and you would see her with short hair.

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13 Caitlyn Marie Jenner.
DS: But it changes through history. Look at these old so-called “sandals movies.” Hercules and the others also have long hair. Okay, not the 50s’ movies with Kirk Douglas, but look at the current representations of Vikings with long hair and braids. It changes.

RR: But now you guys are shaving your heads. Women don’t do it this often, shave the skull. I don’t know how to answer your question. As a gay man I was always close to women. I used to sit with women in school. This was pretty dangerous because boys would see it and say: “Only sissies sit with girls.” But I loved the company of girls. I loved growing up with women, their stories. My best friends have always been women. I always thought that there is a special relationship between the homosexual man and the heterosexual woman. She always was looking...in some way we dressed her. We designed her dresses, we combed her hair at the beauty shop. We put on her make up. We were always imagining the man she would meet. Creating an ideal for him in her. But she never met the ideal. And we [laughs] never met the ideal either. There was a kind of sympathy. That Darling chapter “A failed dream” ended on that afternoon when all the men were watching a football game, but I go out with women to have lunch. That is very interesting to me but not your question.

DS: Right this was not my question but it was okay.

RR: [laughs]

DS: Thank you very much Richard!

RR: You are welcome!