

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Richard Rodriguez (1944-) *Complexion*

Published in 1982, *Hunger for Memory* has been a controversial book. Conservatives have liked it for its opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education; the left has objected that, as the exceptionally talented, well-educated young man, Rodriguez does not speak for all Mexican-Americans or member of minorities

In the book, Rodriguez acknowledges his good fortune. His parents aspired to the middle class and sent him and his brother and sisters to good Catholic schools in Sacramento, California. They did not live in a barrio. When Richard's teachers suggested to his parents that he would learn English faster if English were spoken at home, the family obliged. Later, he felt very grateful because "What I needed to learn in school was what I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of los gringos" (19). He became an outstanding student, won a scholarship to Stanford, and did graduate work in English literature at Columbia University, the Warburg Institute in London, and the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley in 1975, he then had his pick of jobs at prestigious colleges. Not feeling like a member of a "disadvantaged minority," however, and not approving of affirmative action, which gave "benefits for the relative few because of the absence of the many" (164), he turned them down. Then he says, he retired to an apartment in San Francisco to write "this intellectual autobiography" (175)

As this selection from the chapter "Complexion" shows, Rodriguez was not spared insecurity about his skin color. With his Spanish and Mexican inheritance, he also held different values and different definitions of manhood. The latter part of this short selection is typical of his gentle insistence on explaining misunderstood cultural differences and establishing his individual relationships to them. As he says at the end of *Hunger for Memory*, reversing the stoicism and insularity of his parents, "I have come to think that there is a place for the deeply personal in public life" (185).

The selection is taken from *Hunger for Memory* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). For further biographical information about Richard Rodriguez, see *Contemporary American Authors*, vol. 110 (1984), pp. 429-30.