



Days of Obligation

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In *DAYS OF OBLIGATION*, Richard Rodriguez pushes the poetic style of his much acclaimed *HUNGER OF MEMORY* (1982) to even more ambitious literary and cultural limits. In the earlier book, Rodriguez dramatized how his successful academic education as a “scholarship boy” painfully but inevitably alienated him from his Mexican-American parents, and he surprisingly argued against affirmative action and bilingual education. In contrast, *DAYS OF OBLIGATION* presents a much wider range of personal experience and cultural issues: historical, religious, educational, and racial.

Though he subtitles the book as an “argument,” Rodriguez pursues neither a single consistent argument nor an unbroken autobiographical line. Rather, he plays numerous variations on the contrasts he derives from an argument he once had with his father: “Life is harder than you think, boy.” “You’re thinking of Mexico, Papa.” “You’ll see.” For Rodriguez, the contrast between Mexican and Californian sensibilities symbolizes the tensions in himself and in American life between Catholicism and Protestantism, communalism and individualism, cynicism and optimism, past and future, age and youth—in his own life and in history—to which he and the reader must attend.

Ultimately, however, Rodriguez is more committed to the truth as he discovers it than to any political orthodoxy or agenda. Though deeply conditioned by Mexican and Catholic values, Rodriguez dramatizes how alien he feels when he actually travels in Mexico; and he asserts that “we are all bandits,” for if the United States stole California from Mexicans, the Mexicans had stolen it from Spaniard, who had originally stolen it from the Indians.

Written in a boldly mercurial and allusive style, *DAYS OF OBLIGATION* provides both a brilliant reexamination of multicultural issues and an exhilarating reading experience.

Sources for Further Study

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