

In conversation: "We resist, but we also create"

Roberto Rodríguez & Fenn Stewart

On August 10, 2018 I spoke to Roberto Rodríguez (known as Dr. Cintli to his students) about his journalism and scholarship on Mexican American history, migration, and the Trump administration. During our conversation we make several references to Rodríguez's 2014 book Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother: Indigeneity and Belonging in the Americas. As Rodríguez explains in the book, after being told by elders to "follow the maíz" in the course of his research, he came to understand Mexican Americans as "people of the corn, connected through a seven-thousand-year old maíz culture to other Indigenous inhabitants of the continent."

Fenn Stewart: I've been following your journalism this summer on the events in the States, specifically the writing that you've done around family separation and the Trump administration. I was really interested in the way that you connected these moments this summer with the larger context of the separation of Indigenous children and their families in colonialism. I was hoping you could speak a little bit about that for us.

Roberto Rodríguez: Well, I think I represent part of a worldview. Some people call it a "cosmovision," meaning it's a way of looking at the world. The world that I see, that I'm talking about... I see the world and this continent, specifically, I see, minimum, 7,000 years of history. I'm from Mexico. I grew up in the US, and I was taught to look at the world in different ways. One way was that somehow I was a "wetback"—that is, somebody who was illegal, who didn't belong. I remember asking my father; I go, "How come people call us 'wetbacks'?" He told me, "Don't worry about that because we didn't swim across an ocean to get here." I was five years old when he told me that. I might've been six years old. He guided me, perhaps consciously and possibly unconsciously, to have this worldview that I was part of something that was here, that's always been here. Then, through the years, in different ways, I've come to that idea that

we are from here, and we are part of maíz culture, and maíz culture is minimally 7,000 years. Once you're grounded with that idea and that belief and knowing that reality, everything else falls into place.

One of my friends—her name is Gabrielle—she was talking about that, how come the Native nations in the US don't simply grant asylum [to migrants], make them citizens of each nation?

I'm not one to minimize the president or this administration. He has to be held to account. This person represents that ideation, this false belief that this country needs to be protected from savages. That's very much what's at the heart of this. I think a lot of the past administrations have believed that also. They just didn't say it. But here we have somebody who's very vocal. He is giving voice to those white nationalists, those supremacists, to crawl out of their holes and speak publicly, act publicly in a very racial manner. It isn't just race, as you know. He's given voice to misogynists.

The very initial idea when Europeans got here was, Who were the people that were here? Who did they bring in chains? Who were they? [The colonizers] actually had a theological debate as to whether people were human or not, whether they had souls or not. Officially, we won, so to speak, you know? But I don't really believe that people... Put it this way: even the people that battled for our side, they were wrong. That is, the only reason that they had an interest into whether we had souls or not was to be able to Christianize us. That was the battle. It wasn't like, "I respect you as a full human being, regardless of what you may believe, how you live, and your credences." That never has happened in this society that people accept it that way. In the 1970s, maybe it changed because they passed that one law, respecting Indigenous religions and all that, but that may be window dressing, too.

The point is that the most fundamental idea is that of being human. Are we or are we not human? That's the key. Are we treated as full human beings by all sectors of society? At the core we're still not treated in that manner.

Now, we're not like inanimate objects. That is, we have always fought back, always. I'm not sure if you know this, but the very first time Columbus tried to land, he was met by arrows, so he didn't land where he was going to land. In other words, I believe that that resistance has happened from that very first day to the present. We can't begin our way of thinking with the arrival of three ships.

Our existence precedes that by thousands and thousands of years. Again, I don't want people to think that's simply who we are—we resist. Of course we resist, but we also create, and we've been creating for thousands of years and continue to do both.

FS: When I was reading your book *Our Sacred Maíz*, I was thinking about how you're tracking some of those relationships and those histories between Indigenous peoples long, long, long before colonialism in North America, and following the maíz. As you say, it's an archive of those relationships between peoples. Of course, there are many Indigenous nations in what is sometimes called "Canada" that also practice maíz cultures.

RR: Right, right. The only place that maíz was not known was in the frozen regions, the coldest places. Canada is very much a part of maíz culture, just as people from South America.

FS Could you talk a little bit more about the idea of the maíz as an archive?

RS: From a biological standpoint, I mean, the maíz is all the proof you need about connections. I'll give you an example. I went to Cahokia—that's near St. Louis, by Chicago and there's a massive pyramid there, huge, the same size as the kind in Mexico. There's big ones in Mexico. So, when I went there, I was told by the people that worked there... what do they call them, "park rangers"?

FS: Yeah.

RR: Yeah, the one guy says, "People think that possibly there was a connection between here and the peoples from Mexico, but we know for a fact that that's not true. I mean, it's not true at all." When he was telling me this, we were standing in front of a massive corn field. So, I told him, I said, "You're saying there was no connection, but how did this corn get here?" Of course, the question went by him. In other words, he's looking for perhaps a book or mural that says, "Hey, we have relationships with the people down there." You don't need a book or a mural or something like that to tell you because we know that maíz cannot grow by itself. Maíz was literally created. It didn't exist in nature, prior to it being created. It was mixed. It's hybrid between a wild grass and teosinte, meaning those continue to exist, but when you mix them, that's what makes it edible.

The maíz didn't fly there. A bird didn't bring it there. Once created, it depended on human beings, to this day. Maíz will not grow by itself, so every day, that is, humans have to be part of that. So, it's a technology that was exported. The belief is that maíz was created in southern Mexico, near Central America. So, if you were to find a maíz field, or just even a cob, say, in Tucson... because apparently, in the US, Tucson is the oldest place with a corn field, and it's 4,000 years ago. It came from southern Mexico. So, that's the archive.

When people talk about that—"They're coming from the South. They're coming north." I'm like, "Well, we've been coming north for thousands of years. People have been coming in all directions." So, the fear of people from the South coming north, it's like, "Well, who do you think brought the corn—the corn, the beans, and the squash?"

And, maíz has been found everywhere on the continent, like I said, except the very coldest regions. So, if you're looking for proof of connection, well, what more proof do you need? It's there. Like I said, people, because they have a Western mind, they're looking for a book that says that.

We're talking about living cultures. That's the key. We have living cultures. I come from peoples that... some people use the word "Mestizo"—the people were not mixed, per se, no different than any other people in the world. Everybody mixes, but the concept of Mestizo is the notion that somehow they're not Native.

When you have somebody in the White House that tells them to leave, all of a sudden there's a conscience created. Like, "Wait a minute. We're part of that same culture." I was there for a year, in Yucatán. I just got back a month ago. [Maya] is a living language, and it's a living culture. So, things continue to develop. It's not something frozen in the past.

I have a friend who was a teacher. He was a teacher for 35 years, and he wrote to me and asked me if I had met any Mayans when I was down there. I wasn't sure I was understanding his question. I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "Well, I heard they disappeared." To make a long story short, I said, "Look, there's about five million Mayans all around," but according to the archaeologists and the anthropologists, there's this notion of... They've created a narrative of disappearance, and people actually believe that.

Yeah, let me just leave you with one last thought because one of the last things I

did when I was in Mexico, I went to this place called Teotihuacan, which is very famous worldwide. Those are the biggest pyramids in Mexico. There's two huge ones called the Sun and then the Moon, but there's also a third pyramid, which is as important, if not more so, but less known because of its size. The third site is the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. The entire continent has something similar. They call it "the water serpent, Kukulcan." So, when I was there—and I'm skipping most of the story—but when I was there, I entered into the tunnels and into the caves. That was just recently uncovered—very recent. What they found down there was at least 22,000 offerings. We suspect—I suspect—they come from everywhere because minimally, 4,000 of them come from Guatemala. Apparently, they deposited those offerings when the temple was dedicated. They might be able to trace as to—maybe there's stuff from Canada, maybe from Peru and on and on. We already know the connection was there because of the maíz. At the same time, this might be something more recent, like 2,500 years ago, as opposed to, say, 5,000 years ago. And they also found writing there. They had never seen it before, but they found writing there. I'm actually going to work on a project next summer, a writing project, to see what's been found. But anyway, thank you again for everything.

FS: Thank you so much. I'm really grateful for you taking the time this morning.

RR: All right, thank you, bye.