

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Aria **from Hunger of Memory:** **The Education of Richard Rodriguez**

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Page | 1

*This selection considers the poignant case of children of immigrants, caught between two worlds: public life conducted in English and private intimacy conducted in the language of the home. In his memoir, *Hunger of Memory* (1981), writer and cultural critic Richard Rodriguez (b. 1944) presents a thoughtful account of his journey from “minority student,” who began school knowing but fifty words of English, to accomplished student of English literature and published author. Rodriguez makes vivid the price he has paid for his successful assimilation: a painful alienation from his origins, his family, and the immediate intimacies of his Spanish-speaking home. At the same time, he celebrates his Americanization and insists that the gain of a place in our public life has been worth the price and pain.*

What is the difference between “public language” and “private language”? How is that distinction related to the difference, emphasized by Rodriguez, between listening to sounds and listening to words—and why, given this difference, might Rodriguez call this chapter “Aria”? What is the relation between language and the possibility of intimacy? Of citizenship? Is Rodriguez right about bilingual education in schools (or bilingualism in voting and other civic activities)? If you were an immigrant parent, would you regard the Americanization of your child more with pride or with sorrow?

I remember to start with that day in Sacramento—a California now nearly thirty years past—when I first entered a classroom, able to understand some fifty stray English words.

Read the essay online at NPR: www.npr.org/books/titles/137933998/hunger-of-memory-the-education-of-richard-rodriguez#excerpt.