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Rodríguez Studies America's Image of Cuba and of Itself

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

"It has to do with my emotional DNA—storytelling and maternal love are linked together. I was brought up by women who read to me as a kid. I love storytelling because I associate it with love, and that has carried over tremendously throughout my life." That is how Dr. Rick Rodríguez explains his love for literature.

A native of Havana, Cuba, Rodríguez went on to receive his bachelor's in English from Florida International University and his doctorate, also in English, from the University of Chicago. Today he is an assistant professor in the Department of English of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

Currently, Rodríguez has been concerned mostly with the way Americans who have traveled to Cuba have perceived the country and with how their perceptions played out in the literature. "I have studied the filibustering expeditions of the 1840s and 50s with the American pirates who went to Cuba to try to liberate it, sometimes to install themselves as regional governors or to annex the island to the United States."

From his studies, he came away with an interesting narrative. "The southern Confederacy thought that the conflict with the North was too much, that maybe the southern Confederacy should be relocated to either Central America or maybe Cuba," he said.

Rodríguez has also found out that the Cuban patriot José Martí had a complex relationship with the Confederacy. "Martí was not an apologist for the Confederacy. He was an abolitionist. In no way does he say they were right about anything. But he in a way zooms out and sees the relationship between the North and South and starts to buy into the idea that the Civil War may have been a war of aggression."

Yet Martí loved many aspects of the United States. "He writes beautifully about some of our greatest writers, Emerson, Whitman, Longfellow. But something happened in 1886. It was a time when the United States was looking to expand, and Cuba was a possible site, as were Puerto Rico and



Dr. Rodríguez at his office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

Santo Domingo. Martí began to worry more about the United States than about Spain, because there was going to be a changing of the guard. And he was right."

Rodríguez also studied what had happened with another Caribbean nation: Haiti. "Haiti made possible the Louisiana Purchase, it opened up the West. By 1848, the United States was going to look exactly the way it looks now. That's rapid expansionism made possible by the way that Jefferson saw an opportunity with Napoleon, saying, 'Well, if we don't have Haiti, forget New Orleans,' and that was a boon for the United States."

According to Rodríguez, some of the most important writings about the United States from a historical viewpoint also had an impact among Latin American patriots. "Thomas Paine's Common Sense gets translated into Spanish very quickly, and you can see its influence among Latin American thinkers."

One of the first impressions Americans get when they go to Cuba is that it looks like time stopped in 1959. "You see cars from the '50s and ask yourself why there aren't cars from the '60s and '70s. Both countries love baseball: Fidel Castro might have been recruited by the Washington Senators (the major league baseball team that became the Minnesota Twins in 1961), and we would have had a radically different history."

That explains why there is actually a lot of sympathy between Cubans and Americans as peoples. "Those cultural ties of singular intimacy reveal a great love and appreciation across the board. My grandfather was educated here. He was a lawyer, a judge. Both my parents spoke English when they went to school. I didn't, I learned Spanish and Russian. I'm a product of the Cold War. I'm named after Richard Nixon. I had friends who had these names like Nicolai Gonzalez. My parents, who of course were not sympathetic to the

government, dug in their heels. Out of spite, my name has such baggage attached to it. At the social level, for the average person on the street, there is a great deal of love for American culture."

When it comes to his role as a teacher, he explains his unique approach to teaching American students about Cuba. "I teach a course in twentieth-century Latin American literature, and I teach quite a few texts by Cuban writers: Reinaldo Arenas' wonderful memoir *Before Night Falls*, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*. I put myself in the class; I don't just lecture from the position of the teacher who knows stuff about whatever. I tell them stories about how I came to be named, because these works of the twentieth century are replaying that history. I've become like a cultural informant, a native informant, and I like it. I think those stories draw the student more into the lesson."

Furthermore, in the classroom Rodríguez teaches how to place literature into its historical context. "I think it's important that we do that—become invested personally and make those connections. What's happening in Shakespeare or in Melville or Martí isn't just something that happened a hundred, two hundred, five hundred years ago. The resonances are very much relevant. As Faulkner said, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'"

He has also reflected on the U.S. as a country. "I'm participating in a conversation with other Americanists who are concerned with the idea of America looking at itself from somewhere else. And the somewhere else is North Africa, Haiti, and Cuba. These are three key historical events, moments in the history of the republic, when the United States was confronted by conflict abroad that made it rethink what it thought of itself. I talk with scholars who are rethinking the exceptionalism and isolationist ethos that defines the early republic and continues to inform how we think of ourselves."

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