woman" (paragraph 4), but also the other narratives embedded in the essay. What knowledge might she hope her audience will absorb from each of the narratives (paragraph 2)? Discuss the overall function — and effects — of Morrison's use of narrative.

2. Although Morrison is best known for her novels, she is also a respected literary and cultural critic. Discuss the function of interpretation in this essay. What are the possible interpretations of the bird in the young visitors' hands? In what specific ways are the different interpretations mutually exclusive, or do they work together to create a larger meaning? How do you interpret the significance of the final reference to the bird: "I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it" (paragraph 39)? What has led up to this riddle-like insight? Attentive readers interpret not only the words on the page but also the spaces. How do you read the space between paragraphs 25 and 26? Compare and contrast what comes before and after that space.
3. This is a difficult essay because not all the meaning lies readily accessible on the surface. Choose the paragraph that you found most perplexing, and read it carefully, several times, making a comment or observation in the margins about every phrase. You might start by making sure you can identify the basics, such as the referents to each pronoun. Then move on to matters related to the writer's presence. What kinds of verbs does she use? What adjectives? What kinds of images? Are there patterns among the words and phrases you have marked, and do these patterns repeat in other parts of the essay? With what effect(s)?

Rodriguez, Richard. "Toward an American Language." The Writer's Presence: A Pool of Essays. Ed. Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997. 554-559 Print.

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Richard Rodriguez

Toward an American Language

Richard Rodriguez (b. 1944) has contributed articles to many magazines and newspapers, including Harper's, American Scholar, *the* Los Angeles Times, *and the* New York Times, *in which "Toward an American Language" (published under a different title) appeared in 1989. His most sensational literary accomplishment, however, is his autobiography,* Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez *(1987). In it, Rodriguez outlines his positions on issues such as bilingualism, affirmative action, and assimilation, and concludes that current policies in these areas are misguided and only serve to reinforce current social inequalities. Currently, he works as an education consultant, lecturer, and freelance writer. His most recent book is* Days of Obligations: An Argument with My Mexican Father *(1992).*

About the experience of writing his autobiography, Rodriguez comments, "By finding public words to describe one's feelings, one can describe oneself to oneself. . . . I have come to think of myself as engaged in writing graffiti."

For a hundred years Americans have resorted to Huckleberry Finn's American summer for refreshment. As much as Huck, Americans resist the coming of fall, the chill in the woods, the starched shirt, the inimical expectation of the schoolmarm. All city ways. Individualism is the source of America, the source of our greatness. But America is a city now and individualism has become our national dilemma.

America's individualism derives from low-church Protestantism. They taught us well, those old Puritans. Distrust the tyranny of the plural. Seek God with a singular pronoun. They didn't stop there. Puritans advised fences. Build a fence around what you hold dear and respect other fences.

TO SUIT ANY TASTE

The antisocial inclination of eighteenth-century Puritans paradoxically allowed for the immigrant America of the nineteenth century. Lacking a communal sense of itself — there was no "we" here — how could America resist the coming of strangers? America became a multiracial, multireligious society because a small band of Puritans didn't want the world.

The outsider is not the exception to America, rather the outsider is the archetypal citizen. In him, and only in him, in her — suitcase in hand, foreign-speaking, bewildered by the crowd — can Americans recognize ourselves. We recognize the stranger in us. For we are a nation of immigrants, we are accustomed to remind ourselves. We see ourselves as strangers to one another, all of us bewildered by the city.

Immigrants may be appalled by the individualism they find when they get here — skateboards; slang; disrespect; Daisy Miller; Deadheads — it's all the same. But this same individualism allows the immigrant to purchase a new life. Each new immigrant has a stake in the perpetuation of American individualism. Here the immigrant is freed from the collective fate of his village. Once here, the immigrant has already eluded the destiny of his father. 5

The limits of American generosity are the limits of Puritan individualism. We accept the stranger, sure we do, but we are suspicious of any assimilationist insinuation such as that the stranger might eventually change us: Two in their meeting are changed.

With the exception of the army, the classroom is the most subversive

institution of America. The classroom works against our historical inclination by chipping away at any tangible distance between us. In the classroom, children are taught that they belong to a group. Children are taught that there is a national culture, a public language, a plural pronoun implied by the singular assertion of the Pledge of Allegiance.

About fifteen years ago, I got involved in the national debate over bilingual education. Proponents of bilingual classrooms argued that non-English-speaking children would have an easier time of it in school if they could keep a hold on heritage as a kind of trainer-wheel; if they would be allowed to use their "family language" in classrooms.

What I knew from my own education was that such a scheme would betray public education. There is no way for a child to use her family language in a classroom unless we diminish the notion of public school, unless we confuse the child utterly about what is expected of her. Bilingual classrooms imply we are going to expect less.

BECAUSE IT'S GOOD FOR YOU

Family language distinguishes one child from all others. Classroom language, on the other hand, is unyielding, impersonal, blind, public — there are rules, there are limits, there are inevitable embarrassments, but there are no exceptions. The child is expected to speak up, to make himself understood to an audience of boys and girls. It is an unsentimental business.

At the time — in the mid-1970s — I took bilingual enthusiasts to be a romantic lot, a fringe of the Ethnic Left. Fifteen years have passed and bilingual education has become a bureaucracy. I still believe that bilingualism is a confused ideology. But I now believe the confusion is willful and characteristically American. Americans have always been at war with the idea of school. We shrink from the idea of uniformity — as our Puritan fathers would shrink — as from the image of the melting pot. We say we want the advantages of public life, but we do not want to relinquish our separateness for it. We want to coexist, not change.

In my mind, bilingual education belongs to those sentimental and violent American years, the sixties, when my generation imagined we had discovered individualism. There was a conveniently dishonorable war to protest. But Americans went to war against the idea of America. We went to war against anyone over thirty, against our parents, against memory. We marched in the name of "the people," exclusive of at least half the population.

The radical sixties were not such an isolated time. In the nineteenth century there were nativist riots against an expanding notion of America, against any idea of a plural pronoun. Should we now, in retrospect, be surprised that the black civil rights movement (the heroic march toward integration) was undermined, finally, by subsequent cries for black separatism? Another example of American ambivalence

We think we are united only by a clean consent, and yet the rest of the world can spot us a mile off. America exists. Americans end up behaving more like each other alive, even in disagreement, than we resemble dead ancestors. There is a discernible culture about us, tangible in the spaces between us, that connects Thomas Jefferson with Martin Luther King, Jr. Trouble is, the lesson of that culture, the indoctrination of that culture in schools, implies that we form a "we." Our professors have lost the conviction of it. A unifying canon — an intellectual line which might implicate us all by virtue of our arrival here — seems an impossibility. Our professors have begun to fish in other streams, seeking alternatives to Western Civ.

In 1989 the majority of immigrants do not come from Europe. Now Americans describe the distance we maintain from one another as "diversity." The problem of our national diversity becomes, with a little choke on logic, the solution to itself. "We should celebrate diversity," teachers, bureaucrats, join to tell us — that is what America means, they say. And they are right.

FAVORITE FLAVORS

Traditionally it has been pragmatism that forced Americans to yield to the fiction of a nation indivisible. War, for example. The U.S. Army took your darling boy, with his allergies and his moles and his favorite flavor and reduced him to a uniform. The workplace is very nearly as unsentimental.

In the nineteenth century, America compromised Puritanism with pragmatism. In order to work, to continue existing as a country, America required some uniform sense of itself.

In the nineteenth century, even as the American city was building, Samuel Clemens romanced the nation with a celebration of the wildness of the American river. But in the redbrick cities, and on streets without trees, the river became an idea, a learned idea, a civilizing idea, taking all to itself. Women, usually women, tireless, overworked women, stood in front of rooms filled with the children of immigrants, teaching those children a common language. For language is not just another classroom skill, as today's bilingualists would have it. Language is the lesson of *grammar* school. And from the schoolmarm's achievement came the possibility of a shared history and a shared future. To my mind, this achievement of the nineteenth century classroom was an honorable one, comparable to the opening of the plains, the building of bridges. Grammar school teachers forged a nation.

My own first attempts to read *Huckleberry Finn* ended in defeat. I entered the classroom as a Spanish-speaking boy. I learned English with difficulty, but rightly enough. Huck spoke a dialect English, not the English I learned. ("You don't know about me without you have read. . . .")

dilemma — how he chafed so at school! — a version of my own. And, later still, to discern in him a version of the life of our nation: Huck as the archetypal bilingual child!

My fear is that today Huck Finn would emerge as the simple winner. The schoolmarm would be shown up as a tyrannical supremacist. I tell you the schoolmarm is the hero of America. My suspicion is that many of our children — dropouts and graduates alike — are learning the lesson of communality remedially, from the workplace. At the bank or behind the counter at McDonald's, or in the switch room of the telephone company, people from different parts of town and different parts of the country, and different countries of the world learn that they have one thing or another in common. Initially, a punch clock. A supervisor. A paycheck. A shared irony. A takeout lunch. Some nachos, some bagels, a pizza. And here's a fortune cookie for you: Two in their meeting are changed.

All the while the professors speak limply of diversity, which is truly our strength. But diversity which is not shared is no virtue. Diversity which is not shared is a parody nation.

The river owes its flux and its swell and its entire strength to its tributaries. But America was created in autumn by the schoolmarm, mistress of all she surveyed.

The Reader's Presence

1. The leverage point in Rodriguez's case against bilingualism is his claim: "With the exception of the army, the classroom is the most subversive institution of America" (paragraph 7). What does he see as the principal contributions of the classroom — and of what he calls "the schoolmarm" — to the development of a shared American language? In what respect is the notion of a *public* school central to his argument? Draw on your own experience as a basis for agreeing (or disagreeing) with his assertion that "public school" minimizes diversity and that the nineteenth-century "schoolmarm is the hero of America."
2. Identify the point of view from which Rodriguez speaks. What do you make of his repetition of *our* in the opening paragraph? Explain why you do (or do not) feel comfortable identifying with this use of *our* — and his subsequent use of *us*. What are the principal sources of his diction, metaphors, and allusions? How do you respond to the image of those who view bilingual education as "a kind of trainer-wheel" (paragraph 8)? Consider also what Rodriguez gains (and loses) by opening his argument by alluding to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. In what ways is this moment similar to — and different from — his assertion near the beginning of paragraph 2: "They taught us well, those old Puritans"?

3. Discuss the extent to which you agree with Rodriguez's claim that Puritan values and ethics lie at the center of American society. How does Rodriguez reconcile this notion with his subsequent statement: "The outsider is not the exception to America, rather the outsider is the archetypal citizen" (paragraph 4)? Is Rodriguez's own view of this issue articulated from the vantage point of an outsider? Point to specific words and phrases — as well as to compositional strategies — to validate your response.

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Randy Shilts

Talking AIDS to Death

Author and journalist Randy Shilts (1951–1994) was the leading American reporter on the AIDS epidemic from the early 1980s, when he wrote his first article on the disease, until his death from AIDS-related complications in 1994. A staff reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, *he was one of the first openly gay journalists to work for a major city newspaper. Shilts's familiarity with covering the AIDS epidemic resulted in his highly acclaimed best-seller,* And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic *(1987), which has been translated into six languages and released in fourteen nations. He also wrote* The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk *(1982) and more recently* Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military *(1993). "Talking AIDS to Death" originally appeared in* Esquire.

When Shilts worked at public television station KQED in San Francisco in the late 1970s, he was assigned to cover only gay issues. "It was a real fight to cover that first non-gay story at KQED," Shilts later remembered. Unlike his editor, Shilts refused to believe that our personal identities artificially limit our capacity to write on a range of topics. "I think you can be fair and tell both sides of the story, no matter who you are or what you are writing about. . . . If you just stick to the facts, you are doing the right thing."

I'm talking to my friend Kit Herman when I notice a barely perceptible spot on the left side of his face. Slowly, it grows up his cheekbone, down to his chin, and forward to his mouth. He talks on cheerfully, as if nothing is wrong, and I'm amazed that I'm able to smile and chat on, too, as if nothing were there. His eyes become sunken; his hair turns gray; his ear is turning purple now, swelling into a carcinomatous cauliflower, and still we talk on. He's dying in front of me. He'll be dead soon, if nothing is done.

Dead soon, if nothing is done.