



الفساد المؤسساتي والاعترا ب الحضري في رواية (دائماً أركض) للكاتب لويز جيه.

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الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة موضوع الفساد الاجتماعي في كتاب "الجري المستمر: فصول من الحياة المجنونة" للكاتب لويس ج. رودريغيز، من خلال تحليل القوى النظامية المتمثلة في العنصرية، والرفض الثقافي، والتهميش الاقتصادي التي شكّلت مسيرة المؤلف. تسرد مذكرات رودريغيز، المستندة إلى تجاربه الحياتية في شرق لوس أنجلوس، صوراً حية للتدهور الاجتماعي الذي يُصيب المجتمعات اللاتينية المهمشة. يبرز النص كيف تسهم هذه الظلم المؤسسي في صعود ثقافة العصابات باعتبارها شكلاً من أشكال التمكين للشباب الذين يواجهون القمع العرقي. ومن خلال سرد رودريغيز، تتناول الورقة البحثية فشل المؤسسات، مثل النظام التعليمي، وتطبيق القانون، والخدمات الاجتماعية، في تقديم الدعم الكافي، الأمر الذي يؤدي إلى ترسخ أعمق للفساد الاجتماعي. كما تُعدّ أدوار الرفض الثقافي والفقر والنظام القضائي الجنائي مركزية لفهم ديناميكيات الفساد الاجتماعي التي يسعى رودريغيز إلى تحديثها.

كلمات مفتاحية : الفساد الاجتماعي ، العنصرية البنيوية ، العنصرية المنهجية ، رفض ثقافي

Systemic Corruption and Urban Alienation in Luis . J. Rodriguez's *Always Running*

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Abstract

This research explores the theme of social corruption in *Always Running: La Vida Loca* by Luis J. Rodriguez, analyzing the systemic forces of racism, cultural rejection, and economic marginalization that shape the author's journey. Rodriguez's memoir, grounded in his lived experiences growing up in East Los Angeles, vividly portrays the social decay affecting disenfranchised Latino communities. The text emphasizes how these systemic injustices contribute to the rise of gang culture as a form of empowerment for youth facing racial oppression. Through Rodriguez's narrative, the research examines the failure of institutions such as the education system, law enforcement, and social services to provide adequate support, which results in further entrenchment of social corruption. The role of cultural rejection, poverty, and the criminal justice system in perpetuating cycles of violence and disenfranchisement is central to understanding the dynamics of social corruption that Rodriguez seeks to challenge.

Keywords : Social corruption, systemic racism, cultural rejection, gang violence, Latino identity, educational failure, , marginalization.



Introduction

Biography Overview of Luis J. Rodriguez

Luis J. Rodriguez, a prominent American poet, novelist, and community activist, was born on July 9, 1954, in El Paso, Texas, to Mexican immigrants. Growing up in a working-class family, Rodriguez experienced the challenges and triumphs of navigating dual identities – Mexican in heritage but American in nationality. This duality became a cornerstone of his later work, influencing his exploration of cultural identity, social justice, and the power of language (Kellogg, 2014, p. 1). While Rodriguez was growing up in the barrios of East Los Angeles, he was exposed to the harsh realities of poverty as well as the systemic challenges that marginalized communities frequently face. It was the dynamic yet challenging environment in which he was raised that played a significant part in shaping his perspective on the world and his determination to advocate for those who are underprivileged. The cultural tapestry of his neighborhood, which included its rich

Mexican heritage as well as the intricate interplay of languages, traditions, and customs, served as a rich source of inspiration for his artistic expression. (Kellogg, 2014, p. 1).

Luis J. Rodriguez is a singular act in contemporary American literature. Poet, publisher, essayist, fiction and film writer, music producer, children's author and youth advocate, and founder of performing arts centers in Chicago and Los Angeles," He is also one of the busiest people in the business. Just in 2002, Rodriguez did a lot of public performances, published a book of short stories and a nonfiction account of his longtime work with youth, put out a CD of spoken-word poetry, and opened Tia Chucha's Café Cultural in his new home in the northeast San Fernando Valley (Biggers, 2003, p. 1)

In the 1960s, when he was 11, he joined his first street gang in San Gabriel Valley. During his 15th year, he quit high school, was kicked out of his house, and lost his way. His mother made it clear that he could go back home, but he had to live in the family garage, which didn't have running water or heat, and use a can to go to urinate (Elvira, 2011, p. 1).

At the same time, Luis got involved in politics through the Chicano Movement and was a part of the famous student walkouts that called for equal rights in schools. People knew about Luis's work in organizing the community, especially when he was 18 years old and faced a six-year prison sentence. They wrote letters of support for him. It was at that point that he decided to spend the rest of his life working for the Mexican American people. "His first book of poetry *poems across the pavement* was published in 1989 at the age of 35. Now he has fourteen published books in memoir, fiction, nonfiction, children's



literature, and poetry (Elvira, 2011, p. 1).” Rodriguez has never really known a simpler life. Carted across the “Bridge of Americas” at El Paso, Texas, in 1954, he spent his first two years in Ciudad Juarez, until his ostracized school-teaching father and beleaguered mother left Mexico for a new life in Los Angeles, settling first in South Central L.A. and then in the San Gabriel Valley, as his early life if discussed by Biggers (2003):

By the time he reached his teens, Rodriguez had joined a gang embroiled in the barrio wars, picked up a drug habit, and been arrested for numerous offenses, including attempted murder; he spent a brief period on the streets as a homeless youth.” Rodriguez got caught up in a web of crime and punishment, even though he went back to school and became a student leader in the antiwar and Chicano movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. At age 18, he faced a possible six-year prison sentence. People in the community spoke up for Rodriguez, which got him a lighter sentence in the county jail and helped him finally quit using drugs. “It was during this period that he had a “calling,” as noted in one of his early poems, to become a writer. (p. 1)

From then on, Rodriguez never looked back, working four years in Maywood, and doing off-hour jobs as a truck driver, carpenter, janitor, and bus driver while pursuing his writing and social activism (Biggers, 2003, p. 1) A stocky man with intense eyes whose body is still marked by crude gang tattoos, Rodriguez can exude an intimidating presence. At the same time, he is a soft-spoken, gentle person, someone able to quote classic literature or gang slang as easily as he can switch a conversation from English to Spanish.” Although he left much of the gang life behind when he left jail, he reveals in “It Calls You Back” that giving up heroin, booze and brawling was far more difficult (Rogers, 2011, p. 1) But even then, Rodriguez had a special connection to the arts. “What saved me was ... I used to do graffiti art, and then I started painting murals,” he says. “And I loved books.... I would be a gangbanger walking around libraries, with librarians walking around me to make sure I wasn't doing anything. Books were my saving grace.” (Moore, 2009, p. 1)

Literary Life

“My writing is meant to be a beacon of hope, insight, challenge, and vision — from the prism of one man’s life and dreams to the life of our world and its dreams.” (Biggers, 2003, p. 2)

His work is rooted among the fraying margins of the underclass and dispossessed, with a backdrop of prayerful immigrant parents and their American children’s bewildering attempts to straddle the contrary roads of opportunity and denial, despair and success, and affliction and joy.” Unlike Selby and many other urban chroniclers, however, Rodriguez’ underlying



themes are girded by hope, renewal, and a biting sense of humor. (Biggers, 2003,p. 1)

Luis J. Rodriguez has published a total of 17 books, including poetry, short stories, young adult literature, testimonio, anthologies, and a novel. His contributions to Chicano literature have earned him the title of "a superhero in Chicano literature." Additionally, Rodriguez played a role in establishing Tía Chucha's Cultural Center in southern California, serving as a catalyst for writers, activists, and community members. His achievements and ongoing activism have led to critical acclaim, and he received the "Unsung Hero of Compassion" award from the Dalai Lama. Despite his extensive contributions, the passage notes that the complexity and diversity of Rodriguez's life and work have yet to be fully assessed (Metcalf & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 158).

Rodriguez's personal background, vividly portrayed in his memoir *"Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A."*, adds depth to his legacy. His own experiences with drugs and gangs during his youth form the spine of this cautionary tale, highlighting the challenges faced by many in Los Angeles. The memoir, along with its sequel *"It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addictions, Revolutions, and Healing,"* reflects Rodriguez's profound storytelling ability and his unwavering belief in the power of literature to inspire change (ELVIRA, 2011, p. 1).

A pivotal aspect of Rodriguez's impact lies in his emphasis on literature, particularly poetry, as a gateway for disenfranchised readers. His tireless efforts in

education, engaging with libraries and schools, demonstrate a commitment to empowering individuals through the written word. By framing his laureate tenure through the lens of education, Rodriguez aimed to instill a sense of recognition and

voice, fostering an awareness that every individual counts (ELVIRA, 2011, p. 1).

Luis J. Rodriguez's distinctive style as a poet and literary activist emerges from his deep connection to the diverse and unconventional narratives of Los Angeles. In his role as the city's poet laureate, Rodriguez infuses his ceremonial position with a unique literary activism, reflecting the city's status as, in his words, "possibly the best poetry town in the country." This sentiment reveals not only a pride in his locale but also an acknowledgment of the city's inherent poetic qualities that shape his artistic expression (Ulin, 2016, p. 1).

Rodriguez's poetic style is influenced by the kaleidoscopic nature of Los Angeles, described as a collage of overlapping communities. He sees the city as a landscape of unlikely juxtapositions, where stories do not always conform to expected narratives. This perspective aligns with his assertion that Los Angeles, with its myriad stories and diverse neighborhoods, is a poem itself. The blurring

from artifice to authenticity and back again in this cityscape serves as a muse for Rodriguez's poetic endeavors (Ulin, 2016, p. 1).

Rodriguez's own literary journey, encapsulated in works like "Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.," contributes to his stylistic identity. The memoir, a cautionary tale born from personal experiences with drugs and gangs, exhibits a raw and compelling narrative style. His storytelling ability extends to other works like the sequel "It Calls You Back: An Odyssey Through Love, Addictions, Revolutions, and Healing," which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography (Ulin, 2016, p. 1).

Furthermore, Rodriguez's commitment to using poetry as a mechanism for creating access and building bridges is evident in his focus on education. His style incorporates a passion for fostering recognition and voice, emphasizing the importance of literature, especially poetry, as a gateway for disenfranchised readers. This commitment manifests in his engagement with libraries and schools, demonstrating a stylistic fusion of literary artistry with a socially conscious agenda (Biggers, 2003:1).

In delving into Luis J. Rodriguez's life and literary contributions, it becomes evident that his memoir, "Always Running," transcends the boundaries of conventional storytelling. Required reading in countless schools and featured on various reading lists, this literary masterpiece offers a rare and unerring account of gang life, encapsulating Rodriguez's profound journey of rebirth and liberation. However, much like the works of Nelson Algren, Rodriguez's narrative has not been immune to controversy, finding itself banned in schools across suburban Chicago and beyond. Yet, it is precisely this controversy that underscores the memoir's vital significance in the contemporary literary landscape (Biggers, 2003:2).

Social Corruption in Always Running

All experience is education for the soul. Always Running by Luis J. Rodriguez depicts the punitive life that most of Latino youths go through in Los Angeles due to unending racism and social-economic factors. Many have the view that gangs offer empowerment against bias and unjust law enforcement. However, being involved in gang groups comes with obvious consequences like substance abuse and violence, and it can cause harm to one's household. Rodriguez, who managed to escape gang life and has managed to inspire some others to disengage themselves with gang groups, has placed the blame on society and the rampant systematic racism as the reasons why he joined the gangs and gives praise to his counsellor, Chente Ramirez, for helping him escape the gang.

Furthermore, the author of the book states that “gang groups are important to some individuals because they help them fulfil their basic needs, which are not met by society. The gangs also help them have a feeling of power,” and the feeling of fitting in with the Latino youth makes them feel good in an environment that disregards them (Wolfson, 2018, p. 26).

Rodriguez describes the hardships that his family encountered as they tried to fit into American society. “He realized that being a black man was associated with the gang lifestyle. At the age of eighteen, most of his friends had lost their lives to suicide, police killings, and gang killings.” Throughout his life, Rodriguez has been faced with overwhelming issues such as discrimination against himself, poverty, racism, and a fight for justice against police brutality. However, as time went by, he was able to defend himself by fighting for his rights as a person. Although his life was filled with a series of unfortunate events and tragedies, he continued a legacy of protesting against injustices in society. By turning to music, writing, and poetry, he also ensured that his voice was heard in the entire world (Metcalf & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 169).

Historical Context

In the years following World War II, there was a sudden influx of immigrants into the United States from Latin American countries, especially Mexico. Particularly in the 1960s, Mexican-Americans entered the United States in record numbers, settling primarily in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California. “Causes of the immigration spike include increased poverty and violence in Mexico, and the relative prosperity of the United States. The consequences of this immigration spike were numerous.” A vibrant Chicano (Mexican-American) culture arose in the Southwestern United States,⁹ and Chicano political activists such as César Chávez and Reies Lopez Tijerina fought for Mexican-American civil rights. Some important political causes for the Chicano civil rights movement included the unionization of farm workers in the central valley of California and the reform of the public school system, which activists argued disadvantaged Latino students (Arn, 2018, p. 1).

Another consequence of Latino immigration, however, was a surge in gang violence in Los Angeles, among other cities. Especially in the ‘70s and ‘80s, with the rise of the crack epidemic, gang violence increased alarmingly. Two other specific historical events are hugely important to Luis’s memoir: the Watts Rebellion of 1965 and the Los Angeles Riots (or “uprising,” as Rodriguez says) of 1992. On August 11, 1965, a black man named Marquette Frye was arrested by LAPD officers for drunk driving. In the ensuing struggle, Frye was seriously injured, and the officers used excessive force to subdue him. As rumors of the

LAPD's brutality circulated, angry crowds formed to protest the police's racist policies and actions. The California National Guard was called to intervene, supposedly to keep the peace, but over the next six days the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles became a virtual war zone (Wolfson, 2018, p. 26).

Protesters did tens of millions of dollars of property damage, and more than thirty people were killed in the struggle between the protesters and the troops. The Los Angeles Uprising of 1992 began in a similar fashion: a black man named Rodney King was pulled over for speeding, and four police officers brutally beat him. After the four officers were acquitted of any wrongdoing, a riot broke out throughout the city, begun primarily by black and Latino residents of the city. Over the next few days, more than sixty people were killed (Wolfson, 2018, p. 26).

Racism

The history of crime in Los Angeles is not a matter of class alone, nor of race alone— but of the intersections of these two issues. This holds true in Luis Rodriguez's account of "La Vida Loca." Los Angeles is one of the most racially diverse places in America, with large black, Asian, and Latino populations—yet the history of Los Angeles has been tarnished by frequent episodes of violent racism (Arn, 2018, p. 8).

Rodriguez experienced racism firsthand as a teenager from authorities and LAPD officers countless times. According to his narration, he was arrested multiple times as a teenager for no apparent reason. Rodriguez recounts that white police officers would often brag that they like arresting black and Latino youth so that they will have a permanent criminal record, facilitating easier convictions in the future. Rodriguez narrates that the police officers who arrested him used racist slurs, such as a "beaner," demonstrating that the arrest was racially motivated. Furthermore, Rodriguez's experiences with racism extended to his time at school. In elementary school, his teachers disliked him due to his Mexican heritage and his illiteracy in English. As the white kids were learning, Rodriguez was kept busy playing with blocks "I just stayed in the back of the class, building blocks. It got so every morning I would put my lunch and coat away, and walk to my corner where I stayed the whole day long" (Metcalf & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 163).

Rodriguez narrates. Also, Rodriguez narrates that his Latino friends were being punished for speaking Spanish in school. In this autobiography, Rodriguez has perfectly applied the concept of racism. He has documented racism as the root cause of all his suffering. He outlines candid examples of how the LAPD targeted him and his Latino friends on racial grounds. Also, Rodriguez

successfully depicts that there has been deeply rooted systemic racism in Los Angeles, involving disrespect and brutal violence against minority cultures.

The impeccable depiction of racism in his early days has helped shape Rodriguez's journey and transformation into a racial justice advocate. Rodriguez's depiction of racism in Los Angeles demonstrates how it presented a perfect chance for him to fight against this social evil. Ultimately, the concept has played a significant role in developing the narrator's character and how his life has been transformed (Wolfson, 2018, p. 41).

Cultural Rejection and Social Corruption

One of the most glaring forms of social corruption depicted in the book is the failure of institutions to provide adequate support and opportunities for marginalized communities. Rodriguez's early experiences in Mexico and later in America underscore the struggles faced by immigrant families, particularly in impoverished neighborhoods. The deplorable conditions of the school where Rodriguez's father worked in Ciudad Juarez symbolize the neglect and disregard for education and social welfare prevalent in many disadvantaged areas (Mack, 1994, p. 106)

The cultural aspects of Hispanic identity, such as language, customs, and behavior, are overlooked and rejected by the majority. White ethnicity in the school Luis attended. This is demonstrated by the most important school rule: "Don't speak Spanish, don't be Mexican—you don't belong" (Rodriguez, 2005, p. 20). This school rule might appear natural for the majority white population, but it is a sign of cultural rejection for the minority community to which the rule is directed. This is because the school used an ethnocentric view, taking American cultural values as the basis for understanding the cultural values of the Hispanic children. The effect of the ineffective application of ethnocentrism in cultural communication was the rejection of the cultural minority by the majority culture. The reaction of the cultural minority was withdrawal, hatred, and an urge for revenge.

When Rodriguez was young and could do nothing about the impact of ethnocentrism, he withdrew to the corner of the class, where he would sit the whole day and not bother anyone. When he became a youngster, he joined gangs to take revenge, and in adulthood, he took to political activism to right the situation (Metcalf & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 165).

Cultural stereotyping labels all members of a cultural group with some characteristics. In San Gabriel, it was certain that Luis and his ethnic group were seen as second-class citizens. Unlike areas occupied by the majority of whites, the

neighborhood of San Gabriel was run-down and ignored by the municipal authority. However, there was an overrepresentation of the police presence of the LAPD in the neighborhood, suggesting the stereotype that Latinos are criminals. Informed by the stereotyping, Luis became a dangerous gang member in middle school. This is because Latinos in the neighborhood understood that they had to stick together to protect each other from LAPD (Brunner, 2005, p. 59)

Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A. by Luis J. Rodriguez provides a stark portrayal of social corruption entrenched within the fabric of Los Angeles during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Through Rodriguez's vivid narrative, the reader is confronted with the harsh realities of a society plagued by systemic injustices and moral decay (Mack, 1994, p. 106).

Although injustices like racial oppression are present in everyday life, one often cannot fathom how such a large-scale offense can be solved through individual resistance alone. In the graphic memoir *Always Running*, Luis Rodriguez chronicles his methods of tackling societal oppression and racial prejudice, ranging from conformist resistance to transformative resistance. Because Luis grows up in an unforgiving Anglo-dominated world, he believes that the only power he has is in fulfilling his stereotype: the role of criminal or gang member (Jacobson, 2018, p. 1).

The education system, depicted as chaotic and ineffective, also contributes to the perpetuation of social corruption. Schools become battlegrounds where racial tensions escalate, teachers struggle to maintain order, and students are more preoccupied with survival than learning. The lack of resources and support for struggling students, coupled with the prevalence of gang activity within schools, underscores the failure of the education system to address the root causes of social inequality and disempowerment (Mack, 1994, p. 107).

Luis has to make difficult life decisions when faced with various challenges.

When Luis tries to avoid crime and the gang by doing something positive with his life, he is faced with several challenges. First, when he tries doing various odd jobs, such as delivering papers and working as a waiter. However, he is always discriminated against. For instance, while working as a waiter, white customers discriminated against him, and police officers also harassed him. He later decides to stop working, go back to his gang, and continue with the crime. He also faces the same challenge of discrimination when his mother persuades him to go back to school and continue with his education. His literature teacher discriminates against him because he spends most of his time in the library reading literature books written by Mexican writers. Due to these challenges, he is forced to decide to go back to gang life and drugs because that is where he is comfortable. He

says, "there are choices you have to make not just once, but every time they come up" (Mack, 1994, p. 107).

The refrain "This is not your country" is severally echoed in Luis's life. His

parents failed to acquire permanent employment in their government despite their expertise in various fields. Therefore, the Rodriguez family was forced to live under harsh conditions, moving from one place to another. In other instances, ethnicity issues arise, and Luis' family is on the verge of discrimination. Despite the above, Rodriguez finds his niche in learning a different language and identifying with the people around him. He feels rejected at school simply because he comes from a different county, and therefore he can speak in English. He is also discriminated against while at his workplace because police officers are always trying to verify if they are in America legally. Luis is forced to walk around with his birth certificate to show that he is in America legally, but he is still harassed by the police. Eventually, he finds a "safer" pace for belonging in gang culture (Wolfson, 2018, p. 22).

Conclusion

In *Always Running*, Luis J. Rodriguez provides an uncompromising look at the harsh realities faced by Latino youth in Los Angeles, highlighting how systemic corruption breeds cycles of violence, disempowerment, and despair. The memoir serves as both a personal narrative and a social critique, with Rodriguez using his own experiences to expose the deep-rooted issues of racism, cultural rejection, and the failure of institutions to support marginalized communities. The story of his personal transformation—from a gang member to an activist and writer—offers a powerful message of hope, illustrating that resistance to social corruption is possible, though often fraught with challenges. By intertwining his life's struggles with broader societal issues, Rodriguez calls for a more equitable and just society, where the voices of the oppressed can be heard and their dignity restored.

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