

**Diversity as Liberation (II):
Introducing a New Understanding
of Diversity**

**A. Rodriguez
Hampton Press
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Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather the refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions, which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (Lorde, 1984, p.115)

Feminist scholar-activist Audre Lorde poignantly speaks of diversity and separation. These two ideas are central tropes in the book, *Diversity as Liberation*, the second volume in Amardo Rodriguez's liberation trilogy. On the first page of the prologue, he italicizes the communicationist posture the monograph intends to convey: "Diversity reflects relations that allow for the communion of differences." These words echo those of Audre Lorde and set the tone for a book that easily can be received as a critical treatise on social transformation, ontic defiance, moral bankruptcy, and the "end of hierarchy" (p. xv). For those of us interested in liberation scholarship, this book is instrumental. It is very rare in

human communication studies to find liberation scholarship outside of the disciplinary rubric of critical or cultural studies. *Diversity as Liberation* is an incisive poststructuralist commentary upon the nature of diversity and separation, humanity and incivility, true multiculturalism and liberal tolerance. This volume is refreshing because of its honesty, heurism, and bold rejection of moral relativism.

The author self-delegates a mammoth task to uncover and critique systematically modes of domination while initiating a "new understanding of diversity" (as the subtitle suggests). Some people have spent their entire lives trying to do this. He attempts it in this second part of his trilogy. In some ways, he does this exceedingly well; in other ways, he appears to be overwhelmed by the task.

The prologue is perhaps the most unmanageable component of the book. Although it is only seven pages long, it is thick with philosophical interrogations and unnecessary tedium. As a critical theorist, I was energized by his theoretic postulations, but I quickly fatigued of them as each sentence seemed to fill a page. A common refrain in the prologue is that human interactants share an "existential and spiritual proclivity and capacity for liberation" (pp. xi-xiii, xv-xvi). This foundational theorem undergirds every chapter and major argument made in the book and is apropos because it is a central theme among many extant liberation efforts,

from afrocentricity to Promise Keepers to abortion rights activism.

In chapter 1, Rodriguez introduces a wide array of perspectives related to the Ebonics referendum promulgated by the Oakland school board in 1996. He admits that he merely uses the public controversy over the proposal as apparatus in order to facilitate the introduction of his "emergent theory of diversity that is drawn from an emergent theory of liberation" (p. 4). These two "theories" essentially suggest that the distrust and competitiveness implicit in hierarchy fosters separation and lack of diversity. Rodriguez maintains that separation causes us to behave in ways that are contrary to our spiritual inclination as human beings to relate harmoniously. He posits that the discussion of liberation, in general, is misguided. The mainstream assumption, he contends, is that liberation efforts are about autonomy rather than the hierarchy of differences. Rodriguez suggests that the Ebonics controversy was not a plea for autonomy. The "hierarchy of differences" motif prevailed. This partially proves his point that "autonomy is a myth" (p. 4) and that the real issue is hierarchy. This chapter provides a nice segue into the discussion of civility.

Again the Ebonics debate is discussed in chapter 2. Two quotes sympathetic to the Oakland School Board's proposal open this chapter and balance the unfavorable quotes that introduce chapter 1. Rodriguez

uses words like distrust, hierarchy, separation, anxiety, and suppression nearly interchangeably to encapsulate the idea that liberation has been eclipsed prematurely. The first half of the chapter retrieves and cleverly analyzes Fromm's corpus of work on freedom, love, and separation. The latter half concentrates on literature suggesting that humans are disciplined by a patriarchy that accents uniformity of ideas, principles, perspectives, and so forth. Rodriguez makes the case that this lends itself to a homogeneous climate, one that is not conducive to difference, though periodically tolerant of it. In Burkean terms, a god-devil agon becomes manufactured, causing a social implosion while everything appears fine on the surface.

Chapters 3 and 4 are approximately twice as long as the other chapters in the book, which may signify something about their centrality to the text. Chapter 3, "The Nature of Language," carefully unpacks the significance of language as a means to achieve diversity rather than promote separation and sustain oppression in hierarchical contexts. Rodriguez discusses the hegemony of the English language and what hegemony does to our perception of culture because language is the lens through which humans see the world. In somewhat of an awkward exposition, the author contrasts human language or his theory of "universal grammar" with animal communication in order to demonstrate that hu-

mans have the capacity for spiritually and morally composed union and liberation. He uses this intellectual exercise to prove that "humans are meant for liberation" (p. 55).

Chapter 4, "Diversity as Life" is a 51-page (about a third of the book) polemic on multiculturalism and the politics of oppression that ends with the hopeful possibility of cohesion. It literally maps the Ebonics controversy in depth. The author obviously enjoyed writing this chapter, and it seemed to be the most fluid, though disturbingly long. As an interdisciplinarian and cultural communicologist, Rodriguez was able to demonstrate his fascinating range of readings on this vast topic area while maintaining the integrity of his arguments. This was perhaps the most well written chapter.

Chapter 5 provides a nice summary of the book and returns to the central thesis that diversity must be understood as more than difference. People can accomplish a spiritual and existential striving only when they are willing to embrace one another, no matter how different they are. This requires acceptance of people for being who they are naturally, just for being human. This means not seeing people as "others," but as another "me." That is not accomplishable with hierarchy. Finally, Rodriguez argues that liberation is about how humans co-create meaning through language and communicative behavior.

Strengths & Limitations

Diversity as Liberation is written in captivating form. The writing is unnecessarily complex at some junctures and easy to follow at others, so an advanced graduate student or expert most likely will understand the arguments best. This is a scholar's book that was probably not written for laypersons and therefore does not read like a popular trade book, but then few university press books do. I think that Rodriguez's work is passionately written, meticulous, and exemplary of thorough research. Although many scholars in the "humanities" speak of humanity, few address it in its purest sense. It is admirable to read a scholarly monograph that genuinely inquires about how one remains human in the midst of inhumanity.

The contemporary example of the Ebonics controversy is a very important thread in the book. He even provides the full Oakland School Board proposal in the appendixes. Rodriguez cogently accents liberation possibilities instead of nihilism. He critiques freedom, autonomy, morality, and liberalism as commonly misunderstood touchstones of American society hindrances to real progress.

Rodriguez's work also has limitations. He affords ample space for examining diversity (and even adds it to the book's title), and his examination of it is highly sophisticated. However, it might have been more useful to our discipline to outline the theory in one place in

the book. If the outline was provided upfront, I think the components of the theory could have been followed more easily throughout the book. Also, there were inconsistencies in terms of how diversity and liberation were connected. In the beginning of the book, the author notes that "diversity is an artifact of liberation" (p. xi). Later in the prologue and throughout the book, it was defined as being equal to liberation. This is not to say that Rodriguez proposes that they are the same, but that they are equally important. This conundrum never gets resolved fully. There were several slippery arguments that emerge, such as not seeing human beings as "others," but then the discussion proceeds to social dialectics. Another slippery point occurs early in the book when Rodriguez states, "The real task is to construct relations that allow us to move beyond our differences to new differences so as to avoid entrapping each other to our race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity and so on" (p. xvi). This is confusing and seemingly counter to his logical stance because difference is not really the problem, hierarchy is. So, arguably, reconstruction of difference will have little to no effect.

Objectives, Approach, and Conclusions

By the end of the book, I am not so sure that Rodriguez was successful in advancing an "emergent theory of diversity that is drawn from an emergent theory of liberation," but

if we substitute the word "approach" instead of "theory," I think this statement would be true. Rodriguez promised to introduce a new understanding of diversity, and he did just that. However, he also took on the task of deconstructing diversity and announcing the end of hierarchy. I do not believe he accomplished this. The book is missing practical solutions that will lead to ending hierarchy. It can and should be read as a treatise because it fits that philosophical mode well.

Significance and Implied Target Market

Diversity as Liberation is a bold and challenging text that would be suitable for a graduate-level course on communication and liberation or ethics and rhetoric. It is most accessible to philosophers and critical theorists. I would recommend it as a primary text for any critical theory course principally concerned with the confluence among diversity, language, and contemporary political/social issues.

Reference

- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.