In Memoriam: Roberto Rodríguez

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Roberto Rodríguez, associate professor emeritus in the Department of Mexican American Studies, died July 31 at the age of 69. Rodríguez, referred to affectionately by his students as Dr. Cintli – the Nahuatl word for “corn” – retired in 2021 after teaching for 14 years at the University.

A renowned Chicano scholar and activist, Rodríguez's research focused on the role of maíz (the Spanish word for corn) in Mexican and Chicano history and culture. In an interview with BorderLore [1] in 2022, Rodríguez said his research "offered a radical, but simple idea … of maíz as our origin."

"People are fascinated with the idea of coming from some great place, a great city, like Mount Olympus," Rodríguez said in the article. "But maíz is not a place. It's simple. It's humbling to relate this way to a crop as opposed to a great city or land."

Rodríguez is being remembered by colleagues as someone who was focused on educating and supporting the next generation of community leaders.

"What he brought to our University was entirely unique. His voice and scope created bridges between communities and upheld ancestral knowledge systems," said Michelle Téllez, associate professor in the Department of Mexican American Studies. "Roberto was a true public intellectual who valued and uplifted emerging scholars, artists and activists."

During his time at the University, Rodríguez was heavily involved in developing and organizing opportunities for fellow researchers as well as students to share their scholarship and strengthen their political voices, Téllez said.

He chaired the Association for Ethnic Studies conference on campus in 2016 and organized the Maya Maíz Roots Conference in 2019, which brought around 20 Mayan scholars to campus to present their research. Rodríguez was also a longtime adviser to the student group M.E.Ch.A. [2], which promotes political activism, leadership and academic achievement among Chicano students.


A prolific writer, Rodríguez authored multiple books, including “Yolqui, A Warrior Summoned from the Spirit World” and "Our Sacred Maíz is our Mother," both published by The University of Arizona Press, as well as "Writing 50 Years (más o menos) Amongst the Gringos," which won the Raul Yzaguirre Best Political/Current Affairs Book award at the 2022 International Latino Book Awards.

Rodríguez is survived by brothers John, David, Alex, Dan and Joe and longtime partner Patricia Gonzales, associate professor in the Department of Mexican American Studies. Services are pending. The Department of Mexican American Studies is planning to hold a memorial in the fall.

Read more about Rodríguez's life, legacy and activism at the University and beyond in articles published by the Tucson Sentinel [4] and the Los Angeles Times [5].

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