

Dr. Jorge Rodriguez

My name is Jorge Rodriguez. I'm an assistant professor here at Chapman University, specifically in the Integrated Educational Studies program.

I live in the city of Santa Ana. I was born and raised in the city of Santa Ana. I was born on the South Side of Santa Ana. I've lived there all my life. I was away for about 11 years to get my education, so I was in UW Madison in Wisconsin, and just recently came back about, kind of approaching two (2) years now.

It feels completely different coming back here versus when I first lived here. Being raised in Santa Ana, it's home to me. I know the context here. I know the youth here. I have lots of friends and relationships and organizations that I've been working with. Never really lost contact. I was always connected to them, but to be away for 11 years and only be here over summers and over breaks, there is a little bit more of a distance. So coming back, it's like these past two years have basically been me reconnecting to all of the social movements, all the organizations, all the relationships. What's cool is we never really lost touch, but still. You're coming back as a new person. And my identity as Jorge as a student, as an organizer in the community, as an activist in the community is still there, but now I have a new identity, which is a professional identity. You have to negotiate that. You find a balance between that. It's been really nice because also all the family is here, so that's cool. Esmeralda and I have recently had a baby, so that's even added on to the whole experience here, with family and with communities and all of that stuff. Good things.

When I describe myself, I always think in terms of community and my students. I would say that I'm from Santa Ana. In Spanish, you would call me a Santanero. It's a term that we all kind of orient ourselves to. I was born and raised in Santa Ana, so that's a huge part of my identity. I was educated here. I'm a product of the education system in Santa Ana, and I say that proudly, and I also say that critically at the same time. I didn't have the best educational experience in the city of Santa Ana, and at the same time, received my education outside of the school context. That defines who I am. It defines my reality. I was really connected to cultural movements here in Santa Ana, really through an organizing network that worked with immigrant-based communities. I would say that I am a partner to Esmeralda, my partner. I am a son to an immigrant-based family. That's why I have that experience of immigration, of first generation going through school. I am a brown male, so my identity as a whole. I have a mentor. Her name is Cima Kapani, and she says, 'Wherever you go, there you are.' She says that in a way to explain that our identities are always front and center, so before I even speak, before I even engage, how I look and how I engage. It's how they perceive me. I'm a brown male body from the city of Santa Ana, first generation, so that's part of my experience. I'm a friend. I'm also a professional, an up-and-coming young professional. I am a community member. I am from a really specific community. I'm a teacher. My relationship with my students is one that I take lots of time to develop. It's what I do. It's my passion. I love to engage the classroom and connect with my students in ways that we all learn, so it's not just me teaching, but that we're all constantly learning. As I've done in our class, I love bringing up these big concepts and conversations for us to engage that often we don't have very many spaces in this world to be able to do that. I love doing that. That's what I do. That adds to my identity, too, of who I am. So I'm an educator, but then I'm also a provocateur. I want to push. An activist, an advocate. Part of my identity as a teacher and as an educator is not just to teach or to create spaces of learning, but it's

also to create spaces of unlearning. We, as a society, have been accustomed, in our socializations, to be a certain way. I see my task as an educator to provide spaces where maybe we could take a step back and reflect upon those things that we've learned and maybe those things that we have to unlearn. I love doing that.

Orange County is a really interesting place to me. It's one that is familiar. It's familial, so familiar and familial. My family is here, and I mean my community-based family and also my actual family. It's a part of my context. For example, when I drive around Santa Ana, it's home to me. The streets make sense to me. The people that are out and shopping, eating tacos, going to the grocery store, speaking Spanish, downtown Santa Ana. Santa Ana has history, like Fourth Street. My parents were on Fourth Street way before what it is now. The very first place that my parents actually went to when they came to the US in '87 was, they went to Fourth Street, a thrift store, to buy clothes for their children. There's that immigrant-based experience on Fourth Street that is home to me. Broadway and Main Street and Bristol. As a young kid, we used to cruise down Bristol. These are all things. I went to college at Santa Ana College. Fairview, Santa Ana High School, Saddleback High School. This is home to me. Beyond Santa Ana, it's still home to me, but there's more of a distance. It's not as familiar to me as Santa Ana is. There's this Chicano-based author by the name of Rudy Acuña, and he has this term that he calls counties like Orange County donut counties. He says because the poor people live in the hole, and the rich people live in the dough. And Orange County has that dynamic. Santa Ana is where the labor lives, so the cooks, the maids, people that mow the lawns, people of the service sector of Orange County. That's where they live. That was my family. That's what they did. The folks around there, the rich Orange County like Newport Beach, Huntington Beach, all the beach cities, Yorba Linda, Anaheim Hills, all of those sectors. There's a mutual labor relationship between those and very different demographics, so all of Orange County is home to me. There are pockets. That's always been a struggle, and it's interesting to see how that even plays out. We just recently wrote a chapter, so one of the first projects I did when I came back to Orange County was reconnect with the youth, with the high school students of Santa Ana. And they did a YPAR project with their teachers, and YPAR means Youth Participative Action Research. So they did a research study based off of how educators perceived them, how their school perceives them, and they came to the conclusion that a lot of the perception as to how administrators and educators in Santa Ana perceive youth is based off of this deficit-based model. I got together with these high school students, and we wrote a chapter for a book that's coming out next year on youth voice. It's so powerful to see, powerful and kind of alarming and emotional for me, that my same perspectives as to how I thought educators perceived me in Santa Ana is how students are still feeling. Yet, now we're starting to take power into our own hands, and it's years later. It's actually really cool that we're able to document this feeling.

My biggest struggle. Wow, there's so many. I just recently became a father. So that's been really present in my mind. As I said earlier, a big part of my identity is one of being an educator but being an educator from a context of a person that is of color, a brown body. I'm an educator that has experience in the world, a different kind of experience. I can't help but think that my daughter will be raised in very similar circumstances, and as an educator, I'm constantly thinking, 'How can I best create a world for her that is equitable to her but gives her an opportunity to really advance in the world?' So that's been really present in my mind. She is actually really lucky. She has an amazing mother, strong, powerful mother. Maybe we, together, can create that for her, but it is something that I am thinking of. What else? As a young professional, it's not so much a struggle but much more like a constant challenge of making sure

that I'm connecting with my students, making sure that I'm producing in a way that is equitable for the community and just for the community, but also is accepted and engaged with at institutions like Chapman. So I often feel like I'm navigating two worlds, like community-based settings. What I talk about constantly in my class is in non-profits and the critique on non-profits and the reality of non-profits. In institutions of higher learning, sometimes those worlds don't cross, or they don't like to look at the critiques. In my world, my biggest struggle is really I see myself as constantly trying to build bridges between two worlds so that we can communicate. We can engage, so I think that's an ongoing struggle. Not a bad thing. A good thing, but it is a constant struggle.

Going against the grain is really interesting because if we believe in justice, believe in making sure that we have spaces that are just and loving for us as humans, we sometimes have to push up against systems that are not historically and socially just for us. That's a constant life work.

My greatest joy is hands-down obvious, our baby. Her name is Camila Valentina Rodriguez, and she is beautiful, strong. I wrote in one of my, when I kind of announced that she was coming into the world, and I put her picture and just kind of let folks know that she's here. I said, 'It's the all more of a reason to keep fighting to making this world a better place. Before, we were doing it because of our love for humanity, our love of society, really wanting to make sure that our students that look like us, that engage like us, have an equal opportunity in the world. When she came into the world, it's even much more clear. It's much more specific. There's a reason. It's way more important, way more the conviction to make this world better. It's even more real now that she's here. That's the one thing that I'm grateful for.

I love the richness of Orange County, the diversity of Orange County. I love the resistance of Orange County. I love the push-back of Orange County. I also like the tensions and the complexity that Orange County is. I grew up around the punk movement, and the punk movement for many people may be perceived as messy and chaotic. There's a punk movement of punk rock, so there's a whole entire movement around that that is organizing communities that have this concept of DIYs, like Do it Yourself, so not really relying on anybody to transform your reality for you. You take it on yourself, and the music itself is really reflective of our societies. When I think of punk and I think of the mosh pits and the music, I see Orange County very similar. It may be perceived as organized and set, but internally, there's pushing and pulling and people rubbing up against each other. Sometimes people don't like to speak to those realities, but that's the reality that we live in. It's a welcoming reality because I embrace chaos. I embrace messiness. There's nothing wrong with it. I don't know who says this quote, but the only constant in our lives is change. It's something that I always think about, so things are always evolving. Things are always changing, and I always see Orange County like that.

We should all be striving to get to the Hate-free Orange County. My mentor says we are all walking oblivious and walking wounded, so sometimes, based off of our identities of privilege, we might be engaging our perspectives because we're oblivious. Much of the hate may come from our ignorance of not understanding and not knowing, and I really feel that there's reflection that needs to happen for folks that engage in that. And, also, we may be walking wounded, so all of us are also engaged when we think of our down identities, our oppressed identities, we're also walking wounded and being hurt by people that are oppressive. Sometimes in our identities, we may be both, and we're totally messing up and hurting people in engaging with people. I really feel that Orange County has a lot to learn from indigenous-based communities in regards to self-reflection. Hate is not a human emotion that is healthy,

so I wish we could all strive towards a hate-free Orange County. Before we get there, there needs to be a lot of reflection, a lot of education, a lot of action, and hoping to engage in transformation around that. So I think those four pillars are indigenous principles, so when I think of hate-free, I really hope that our county could engage in these principles of self-reflecting, self-educating ourselves, and then acting upon that education, and then evaluation, evaluating ourselves. I hope we can get there one day, for sure.

The residents of Orange County are a completely diverse-based community. If I was to give advice, what would it be? Solidarity. Let's try to understand what solidarity means. Context matters. Let's always understand that context does matter. People's realities, and I think it stems from this concept of hate. A lot of hate comes from, often not knowing. The more that we know, the more that we educate ourselves, and we understand about people's context. Maybe there will be some more human connection that we can engage. I don't mean to say this in a cliché way, but love is a powerful tool. It's a lens that we could potentially see folks, in how we see folks. Difference should be the starting point, not sameness. That would be something that I would say to Orange County. Can we begin to approach our society from a lens of difference instead of a lens of sameness? That in itself brings in the concept of education, brings in the concept of context matters, looking at people in an appreciative approach, giving the benefit of the doubt. Much of the hate comes from ignorance, so these lenses and these approaches could potentially create a different dynamic.