

TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS, DEEP MAPS AND THE SIXTO RODRIGUEZ PHENOMENA

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Abstract: The text focuses on a series of transnational flows and polylocal agencies marking the art of the American folk musician and performer Sixto Rodriguez. After issuing two albums in the seventies, he was quickly forgotten in the USA but luckily not outside of it. His first album, *Cold Fact* (1970), became the unofficial anthem for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the seventies and the performer was paradoxically rediscovered due to a hoax with the help of enduring South-African, Botswanan, Zimbabwean, Australian and New Zealander fans and through the research of the Swedish-Algerian filmmaker Malik Bendjelloul, who made and directed *Searching for Sugarman* (2012), an Oscar-winning documentary film. The quest for Rodriguez's global itineraries still goes on through his official webpage and the release of a book in 2015 with performer-activist Rodriguez becoming in the context of global discourses and Deep Maps strategy a transnational figure rather than just an American singer.

Keywords: Sixto Rodriguez, Anti-Apartheid, Social Activist, Transnational, *Searching for Sugarman*, Academy Awards, Deep Maps.

*"I'm only halfway up the stairs
Not up or down."* (Sixto Rodriguez)

The article focuses on the representation of inter-American and transnational encounters present in a number of global discourses developing mostly on the internet around the American performer and activist Sixto Rodriguez and the cultural phenomenon known as the musical "Sugar Man" with special regard to the challenges this phenomenon poses to mainstream approaches inhabiting current American Studies scholarship.

The method of introspection into the Rodriguez phenomenon adapts Shelley Fisher Fishkin's Digital Palimpsest Mapping Project (DPMP or Deep Maps). The former president of the American Studies Association developed this pragmatic project that was published in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies (JTAS)* in 2011 describing Deep Maps as a palimpsest work allowing multiple versions of "events and phenomena to be written over each other and still have all layers visible" making possible the construction of "a mapping, a gateway into any topic that links the text, fact, phenomenon, event with the location that produced it, that responded to it, or that is connected to it in some way, in an open-ended collaborative works in progress" (Fisher Fishkin, 2011). The Deep Maps idea originates in Mike Pearson's and Michael Shanks's book *Theatre/Archeology*

(2001), which challenged the disciplinary boundaries of an archeologist and a theater person. According to these researchers, by

[R]eflecting eighteenth-century antiquarian approaches to place which included history, folklore, natural history and hearsay, the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place. The term was coined in relation to William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieEarth* (1991), an account of Chase County in the American Midwest which conflates oral testimony, history, topographic details, local folklore, travel anthology, geography, journalism, memoir, natural history, autobiography and everything you needed to know about Kansas (Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 64-65).

In the sense described above, the critical context of Deep Maps seems more than fit for an accurate 'archeology' of the so-called Rodriguez phenomena, which involved a less known American artist-performer and the impact of his art in the US and beyond. But who is Sixto Rodriguez?

Rodriguez is an American musician, songwriter, urban poet, social activist and performer born in 1942 in Detroit as Sixto Diaz Rodriguez in a second generation Mexican American working-class, immigrant family. According to the Rodriguez webpage, in most of his songs "he takes a political stance on the cruelties facing the inner city poor" ("Rodriguez") with his activism starting early on due to financial reasons. His straightforward, talk-singing style depicts a world which is the "complete opposite of the hippie peace-and-love sentiment" (Chiu, 2019). Moreover, along his "realistic portraits of street life and the underprivileged," Rodriguez encapsulates "the sense of exhaustion and disillusionment in post 1960s-America" (Chiu, 2019) in what the singer described as the cultural force of the "musico-politico" (Rodriguez qtd. in Chiu, 2019). The American singer dropped out of high-school to work in demolition and production lines where he saw the social problems of the people around him. Besides everyday construction work, he was active mostly on the musical scene of his own neighborhood. Nevertheless, his talent made it to the head of the Sussex Records and Rodriguez was able to issue two albums entitled *Cold Fact* (1970) and *Coming from Reality* (1971), with the company at the beginning of the 1970s. Nevertheless, after mixed reviews and low album sales, he was dropped from the label; moreover, after failing to make an impact with his music in the US and in North America, he gave up his career as a professional musician ("Rodriguez webpage") and returned to his previous work on local building sites.

As David Horovitz (2013) noted, the life-course of this artist reminds one of a modern Cinderella story. According to the webpage of the artist, while Rodriguez

remained “relatively unknown in his home country, by the mid-’70s his albums were starting to gain airplay in South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.” There, through a number of imported copies of Sussex albums, he actually achieved cult status—a fact of which Rodriguez was unaware for a long time. The artist toured in Australia at the end of the 1970s but the real success of his albums was achieved mostly in the African countries, which included South Africa and also Zimbabwe and Botswana. Nevertheless, the Australian tour for him seemed to mean the end of his career as a performer; afterwards he returned to work and even went to university to study. According to the information on the Rodriguez webpage,

[T]wo shows from the tour were later released on the Australian-only album *Alive*—the title being a play on the rumors caused by his public obscurity that he had died years ago. After the ’79 tour, he returned to Australia for a final tour in 1981 with *Midnight Oil* before quietly slipping back into normal life, gaining a degree in philosophy while working as a demolition man. He earned a bachelor of arts in philosophy from Wayne State University’s Monteith College in 1981 (“Rodriguez”).

In the 1980s, Rodriguez was listened to by almost everyone in South Africa. Stephen Segerman, one of the fans who ‘rediscovered’ him in the 1990s, said that not only the progressives and the anti-apartheid activists of the country, but also “the fascists” and the “the security police” were also listening in secret to the songs of Rodriguez’s albums because his music was truly powerful, while it was “simple, intelligent and beautifully made” (Segerman qtd. in Horovitz, 2013). Stephen Bantu Biko (1946-1977), the anti-apartheid activist and student leader was also “into Rodriguez,” (Anthony, 2014), who was then considered the Nelson Mandela of music (Horovitz, 2013). As South African Rebecca Davis recollects in the section “Maverick Life” of the *Daily Maverick*,

[I]n South Africa, of course, we’ve known the story for ages. The songs of Rodriguez have been woven into the cultural fabric of South African life for decades. It is rare to find a white liberal of a certain age who has never owned a copy of *Cold Fact*, his first album... how his music became a rallying point for young, mainly white South Africans frustrated by the injustices of apartheid, the conservatism of the regime and the demands of military service (Davis, 2012).

Moreover, as Jessica Rae Lawrence’s pointed out, since Rodriguez himself was never seen on stage there, he became synonymous with his music and lyrics, which were anthems for change and artworks of internal resistance, encouraging South Africans to stand up against the oppressive regime of the apartheid. In this sense Lawrence recalled that

[E]ven though South Africans had never seen Rodriguez in person (and knew little to nothing about his personal life), this lack of information seemed to increase the appeal of his star image: he became a mysterious and godlike figure. The fact that several of Rodriguez's songs were censored by the South African government only increased his ideological potential. Using Rodriguez as an ideological jumping point, protestors could resist the establishment in more ways than one: by simply listening to his music (since it was against the law) and putting his lyrics into action. With his poetic lyrics and simple chords, Rodriguez embodied the South African quest for peace and basic human rights (2013).

One of Rodriguez's signature songs famous not only in South Africa but throughout Australia and New Zealand as well was "This Is Not a Song, It's an Outburst or The Establishment Blues" from the *Cold Fact* album that shed light to various problematic areas society faced with the following lyrics: "Garbage ain't collected, women ain't protected / Politicians using people, they've been abusing / The mafia's getting bigger, like pollution in the river / And you tell me that this is where it's at." The power of his songs and lyrics transcended borders and nations making his inter-American art a transnational one.

While in South Africa he was more famous than Elvis Presley, by the 1980s Rodriguez was quickly forgotten in the US. What is more, he was even thought to be dead, with rumors and even a hoax stating the news about his presumed onstage suicide and a letter to the *Q Magazine* appealing for "any information about US singer Rodriguez, who wrote all his work in prison and shot himself onstage after quoting from his song 'Thanks for Your Time'" (Petridis, 2005).

In 1997, two Capetonian amateur 'detectives,' the journalist, freelance writer working in advertising, Craig Bartholomew-Strydom, and music writer, co-owner of the iconic record store Mabu Vinyl, Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman, set up "The Great Rodriguez Hunt" website with the global mission to track down the enigmatic artist that seemed to have totally and mysteriously disappeared from the American music scene. According to the official website of the artist, in the same year Brian Currin also set up a tribute site entitled "Climb Up On My Music," an internet realm dedicated to Rodriguez's music besides the one founded by Segerman and Bartholomew-Strydom. Meanwhile, the latter were feverishly looking for the American poet-singer on the net. Then, as Segerman recalls the magic moments, Craig

struck gold when he spoke to the two guys who had worked on the 'Cold Fact' album, Mike Theodore and Dennis Coffey. They told him that Rodriguez was very much alive and well and living in Detroit, Michigan, and that his name was not Jesus Rodriguez but Sixto Rodriguez. Craig subsequently spoke to Rodriguez on the

phone and told him about his popularity in South Africa and about our website. [...] On Sunday 14th September 1997, I called up my email and found a message from Eva Rodriguez Koller who said she was Rodriguez's daughter and asked me to phone her at her home in Junction City, Kansas. We spoke for quite a while as I told her the whole story and she told me all about her father. She also told me that Rodriguez was somewhat of a recluse and she did not want to give out his phone number. I told her I respected that but would be very grateful if she could ask him to please give me a call sometime. She mentioned that Rodriguez would be willing to discuss the possibility of a tour to South Africa and we agreed that we would liaison with each other over the following few weeks. [...] At 1 a.m. I was getting ready to go to bed when the phone rang. I picked it up and an unmistakable voice asked to speak to me. It was Rodriguez himself. He spoke with a soft American accent and because the line was clear we were able to have a calm conversation despite the fact that I was practically dropping the phone from sheer excitement. I told him about his cult status in South Africa and that all his albums (including his 'Best of' compilation) were available on CD and cassette. He told me that he would love to tour South Africa as he had completed a very successful tour of Australia over 15 years ago. He also told me that he did not own a CD player but still had a reel-to-reel copy of 'Cold Fact.' I promised to send copies of all the CDs to Eva who would get them to him. He was friendly and warm and we chatted like old pals until it was time for him to go (Segerman "Sugar and the Sugar Man").

The Deep Maps-type of transnational search for Rodriguez on the global scene as an "open-ended collaborative work in progress" (Fisher Fishkin, 2011) was soon over and the two websites that were gateways to various information, events and phenomena about the artist leading to a successful endeavor were then combined into a comprehensive, official online source for all information about Rodriguez entitled SugarMan.org. It seems that towards the second millennium "the appearance (and disappearance) of new forms of cultural production that defy the old systems of archival practice" required a "more flexible, dynamic registration in cultural memory" (Dragon, 2015) and that was, in the case of the American performer, the "The Great Rodriguez Hunt" website. Although it was a static online web resource, the star aura of this cryptic singer still managed to attract considerable international traffic that ultimately led to the above-mentioned conversation and to the reappearance of Rodriguez on the American and world scene.

As a result, in 1998 Rodriguez went on his first South African tour, playing six concerts that were documented in a film entitled *Dead Men Don't Tour*, a 1998 TV Documentary directed by Tonia Selley that was first broadcast on South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) 3 on the 5th July 2001. The documentary shows,

among many other intriguing episodes, long minutes of ovations at the end of the Rodriguez concert when he delivers the since famed lines: “Thanks for keeping me alive” (Selley, 1998). After the redemption of Rodriguez and his subsequent tour in South Africa, Segerman and Bartholomew-Strydom wrote and published *Sugar Man: The Life, Death and Resurrection of Sixto Rodriguez* (Penguin Random House, 2015), a book about their transnational quest for this (inter)American artist.

However, before the publication of this book, Rodriguez’s genuine global itinerary was set out by the work of Swedish-Algerian filmmaker and director Malik Bendjelloul (1977-2014). After a trip to Africa, where Bendjelloul was hunting for stories to be filmed, he heard from Segerman about the intriguing race in tracking down Rodriguez. Passionate about this intriguing story, the young director then went on a four-year quest to produce the biopic entitled *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012). Bendjelloul’s documentary film, similar to contemporary multicultural literary works in the US where “the biographical aspect remains emphatic” (Kovács, 2010: 31), was centering heavily on the figure of Rodriguez, resulting in the production of “a story stranger than fiction,” and a film that the director compared to “a Cinderella story”—but one that “has a better soundtrack” (Malik qtd. in Anthony, 2014).

During the process of the filmmaking, which the indie Bendjelloul compared to searching for a Picasso at a flea market, he ran out of money and, as he could no longer afford the Super 8 film, he shot some of the remaining footage on his smartphone using the iPhone app 8mm Vintage Camera. Moreover, inspired by the structure of *Citizen Kane*, Bendjelloul let the story “unfold from the perspective of Segerman and his fellow South Africans;” the point was to show the paradox between how Rodriguez was perceived as “The Famous Star” in South Africa, a situation of which he’d been entirely ignorant, and how he dealt with rejection in his homeland of America (Anthony, 2014).

Searching for Sugarman turned out to be a huge success. The film received the special Jury Prize at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival for the best international documentary and over the following year went on to win awards across the world, including the BAFTA Prize for Best Documentary and the Academy Award for best Documentary Feature in 2013. The prizes were also part of an even larger open-ended collaborative work, a kind of filmic Deep Maps, ‘resurrecting’ the acclaimed transnational Rodriguez on the domestic, American scene. As Bendjelloul said, many trajectories have intersected in the making of the Rodriguez film—and the story behind it— which continued in the afterlife of the moving image, too, and through other media as well.

Indeed, Rodriguez’s transnational story continues today, too, especially on his official website. One of the most important features of sugarman.org is the Forum section entitled “Talk About Rodriguez,” where devotees can share their experiences and thoughts with other fans all over the world. Moreover, according to the tour dates of the Rodriguez official webpage, his tours after 2010 included many cities in Europe among which was the Glastonbury festival (2013), Zürich, Eisenstadt (Schlosspark Esterházy),

Linz, Prague, London (2016); more currently, Rodriguez toured in the United States (2018) and in Canada (Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal, Toronto, 2019).

The Rodriguez phenomenon represents a moment of celebration over the new possibilities enabled by the demise of apartheid in South Africa at the beginning of the 1990s and the rise of globalization that is, as Irén Annus writes, “inescapable in a description of the complexities of our contemporary realities” by offering “the most dynamic global platform for the constitution, negotiation and contestation of the plurality of meanings and cultures” (Annus, 2012). In this context, Rodriguez can indeed be seen as an artist who transcended borders and served a greater, ideological function by ‘exporting’ the idea of individual freedom and conscious fight for one’s rights and for the rights of oppressed groups. According to Segerman, the Rodriguez story is perceived “as a parable in the United States;” as the Capetonian says, “[I]t’s resonating far beyond the music and the movie. It’s about humility and goodness and looking after your family. He’s becoming a minor prophet” (qtd. in Horovitz, 2013).

The Rodriguez phenomenon is an exquisite example of transnational flows and a most practical example of the so-called transnational turn advocated in the period of Rodriguez’s return to the public scene by theorists of American Studies and exemplified by Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies” Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in November 2004, where Fishkin observed that the US

has always been a transnational crossroads of culture. And that crossroads of cultures that we refer to as “American culture” has itself generated a host of other cultures as it has crossed borders. Reading Thoreau helped inspire Gandhi to develop his own brand of civil disobedience, which crossed the Pacific to inspire the civil rights movements; the idea of dissent through civil disobedience as a particularly American resurfaced in Asia when Tiananmen Square protesters used the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of African, African American, and Eastern European musical traditions met and mixed in the United States to produce jazz, which traveled back to Europe to shape, among other things, a large swath of Czech poetry and the architecture of Le Corbusier (Fishkin, 2005: 43).

The American performer and political activist –similar to his country of origin, who has originally ignored him– has always been a transnational figure. However, his transnational nature became visible only in a transatlantic, international context. A genuine grassroots product of American culture, the art of the inter-American, Mexican American Rodriguez, which was inspired by Jack Kerouac, Charles Bukowski and Carlos Castaneda has crossed various borders and helped inspire anti-apartheid activists of many ethnicities in South Africa and masses in Australia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and New-Zealand alike – who, in turn, inspired, among many others artists and activists, including the Algerian-Swedish filmmaker to produce a film that won prestigious prizes in Utah,

London and Los Angeles, ultimately making Rodriguez's music and poetry finally known to the American public and also widely available for global audiences both through live concerts and in recorded form (his both full-length albums are today freely available on YouTube).

Above, I have only focused on the most important Deep Maps milestones and global connections of the complex phenomenon known as Sixto Rodriguez, which is far from being completed and raises a plethora of further questions –related, for example, to the power of grassroots movements and the influence and role of global music, censorship and political change in music, American performing art and the world internet, inter-American ethnicity and nationality in global context, politics and performing arts, etc.– and serves as a pragmatic example for further quests leading to cold facts on what recent Deep Maps in American Studies and the Americas today can be about if seen in a “transcultural and transnational continuity” (Tóth, 2019: 93) in the context of post-exceptionalist, intercultural, transatlantic and trans-hemispheric studies – not from inside the US (as still many practitioners do) but mostly from outside of it.

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