



Do brown people have brown thoughts? Richard Rodriguez's philosophy of race, culture, and identity

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Abstract

Ever since the publication of *Hunger of Memory* in 1982, Richard Rodriguez has been read by scholars almost exclusively through the lens of identity politics. Twenty years later, in *Brown*, Rodriguez sought to reconcile some of the contradictions of identity, at least his own. Ultimately, Rodriguez concludes that the contradictions of identity cannot be reconciled. Our identities are always more complex and nuanced than the boxes we try to fit people in. In expressing his philosophy of identity, Rodriguez reflects on the concept of brownness and “brown thoughts,” invoking brown as a metaphor for cultural miscegenation, and thereby for diversity and genuine inclusion. Rodriguez’s philosophy of race, culture, and identity moves us beyond toxic forms of tribalism and cultural essentialism to an identity politics that unites rather than excluding and dividing.

Keywords Richard Rodriguez · Identity politics · Cultural essentialism · Ethnic authenticity · Diversity · Pluralism

Personas “brown” con pensamientos “brown”: La filosofía de raza, cultura e identidad de Richard Rodriguez

Resumen

Desde la publicación de *Hunger of Memory* en 1982, la academia ha leído la obra de Richard Rodriguez casi exclusivamente a través del lente de la política de la identidad. Veinte años después, con *Brown*, Rodriguez procura reconciliar algunas de las contradicciones de la identidad, o por lo menos la propia. Al final, el autor concluye que las contradicciones de identidad no se pueden reconciliar. Nuestras identidades siempre son más complejas y matizadas que las casillas en las que tratamos de encajar a las personas. Al expresar esta filosofía de identidad, Rodriguez reflexiona sobre el

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concepto de "brown" y "pensamiento brown", e invoca ese color como una metáfora del mestizaje cultural y por consiguiente de la diversidad y la verdadera inclusión. La filosofía de raza, cultura e identidad de Rodríguez nos lleva más allá de las formas tóxicas del tribalismo y el esencialismo cultural para identificar una política que nos une en lugar de excluirnos y dividirnos.

Palabras clave Richard Rodríguez · Política de la identidad · Esencialismo cultural · Autenticidad étnica · Diversidad · Pluralismo

Despite displaying a protean and complex identity, Richard Rodríguez tends to be viewed quite one-dimensionally in academic circles. This is largely because Rodríguez has been read by scholars almost exclusively through the lens of identity politics, particularly since the publication of *Hunger for Memory* in 1982. Twenty years later, Rodríguez published his third collection of autobiographical essays, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. In *Brown*, Rodríguez sought to reconcile some of the contradictions of identity, at least his own. Ultimately, Rodríguez concludes that the contradictions of identity cannot be reconciled. Our identities are always more complex and nuanced than the boxes we try to fit people in. By embracing the contradictions and paradoxes of identity, Rodríguez resists overdetermining aspects of identity politics, but without sacrificing awareness of his racial and ethnic situatedness.

In expressing his philosophy of identity, Rodríguez reflects on the concept of brownness and "brown thoughts," invoking brown as a metaphor for cultural miscegenation and, thereby, for diversity and genuine inclusion. Those emphasizing cultural separatism frame ethnic identity as oppositional to mainstream culture. Rodríguez, in contrast, emphasizes the extent to which mainstream culture is shaped and influenced by ethnic and other minority cultures. In its celebration of racial, ethnic, and cultural miscegenation—as well as its transgression of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural borders—Rodríguez's brown philosophy is not so different from Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of *mestizaje*. As I argue, Rodríguez's philosophy of race, culture, and identity moves us beyond toxic forms of tribalism and cultural essentialism to an identity politics that unites rather than excluding and dividing.

This essay is dedicated to further drawing out Rodríguez's philosophy of race, culture, and identity as expressed in his 2002 book, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. In the next section, "A brown writer," I explore Rodríguez's embrace of the inherent contradictions of ethnic identity. The subsequent section traces a brief intellectual history of identity politics in relation to Rodríguez ("Identity politics and Rodríguez") as conceptual backdrop to how we try to understand ethnic identity in all its complexity, which is the topic of the section that follows that intellectual tracing, "The complexity of ethnic lives." The sections titled "On performativity and ethnic authenticity" and "Identity puritanism and cultural essentialism" examine Rodríguez's playful critique of essentialist narratives of race and ethnicity (identity puritanism) through the leitmotif of puritanism and its



objection to a countervailing theatrical impulse (performativity). In two remaining sections (“Cultural miscegenation” and “On fluid cultures and fixed identities”), I delve into Rodriguez’s arguments about the porosity of cultures and the fluidity of identity, both of which imply the inevitability of cultural miscegenation. In the penultimate section, “On fluid cultures and fixed identities,” I distill the argument down to the central distinction between fixed and fluid traits, and draw on two Latino theorists of brownness and Latinx identity (José Esteban Muñoz and Ralph E. Rodriguez) as comparison and counterpoint to Rodriguez’s philosophy of identity. They offer conceptions of brownness and Latinx identity that are supported by underlying beliefs that contrast with Rodriguez in significant ways—and which also differ from each other. Nevertheless, common ground can be found. I conclude by summarizing some key takeaways and implications with as much clarity as I can muster, and by taking up Rodriguez’s call to embrace “brown thoughts” in a pluralist society of diverse peoples, cultures, and views.

A brown writer

Rodriguez’s brown philosophy of identity is one that even his sharpest critics can find much to agree with. But it isn’t easy, because it comes from Rodriguez, who also takes aim at some of the most cherished notions in Latino studies circles. Nevertheless, where critics disagree with Rodriguez, it is important to hear him out: to read him, and strive to understand his point of view. It is important precisely because Rodriguez challenges our thinking and critiques reigning orthodoxies in the field. It is important also because for more than four decades Rodriguez has stood as arguably the most recognizable and widely read Hispanic writer and public intellectual in the country—regardless of how critical or uneasy his reception among Latina/o academics.

And it is important because in a democracy we must find common ground with those we disagree with on important issues. If we are to understand where others are coming from, and where lies the common ground, we must engage with ideas that at first blush we find objectionable. By listening, with an open mind, to criticisms of our own cherished beliefs and assumptions we can discover our blind spots, correct flaws in our thinking, and refine our beliefs and mental concepts. Rodriguez’s wariness of the pitfalls, fallacies, and hazards into which identity politics can slip is particularly helpful in this regard. Given the very real danger of sliding into toxic or pernicious forms of identity politics (such as white nationalism), we must be continually vigilant against the ways that identity politics can go wrong. By avoiding those pitfalls and fallacies we avoid falling into counterproductive forms of identity politics (such as racial essentialism and ethno-nationalism) that undermine our true objectives. If the social justice goals of our identity politics are indeed aimed at greater equality, opportunity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging, then understanding Rodriguez and his philosophy of identity is a good place to start.



Rodriguez's philosophy is not presented as a "philosophy" in the strict sense, however. Rather than strictly analytical, the form of Rodriguez's essays is literary. He does not write the type of forensic or expository essays that present a formal argument through the orderly presentation of premises and propositions. Though he can be direct—he is crystal clear on his stance against affirmative action and bilingual education—Rodriguez ultimately eschews straightforward political analysis by refusing to present his position, where he has one, in a consistently literal fashion. He is more interested in the artistic and formal features of his essays (such as a lapidary prose style) than the systematic presentation of evidence and reasons for taking those positions. Nor does he address significant counterarguments in a systematic way. Rather, Rodriguez prioritizes aesthetic and narrative considerations in his writing, and frequently expresses his "arguments" through metaphors (such as the titular trope of *Brown*), dramatic tableaux, and anecdotal evidence (usually drawn from his own life). His essays, such as the "Poor Richard" chapter in *Brown*, are often playful meditations on a theme, rather than rigorous disquisitions on a topic. Rodriguez is also prone to elliptical passages and cryptic allusions, which he, like Nabokov, plants for the "discerning reader" to pick up on and appreciate—though many readers may entirely miss the allusion or inside joke. (Consider, for example, Rodriguez's queer sensibility—including in *Hunger for Memory*, before he had come out publicly—and his many allusions to musicals, theater, and vintage films.) He sometimes even adopts the playful mode of ironists such as Richard Rorty: "I eulogize a literature that is suffused with brown, with allusion, irony, paradox" (Rodriguez 2002, p. xi). In short, Rodriguez is a belletristic writer. Thus, sometimes Rodriguez's point is that not every passage in a literary essay has to have a point, or even a clearly expressed idea or argument. He aims to write timeless literature, rather than timely ephemera.

More specifically, in Rodriguez's own characterization, he writes personal essays that use his private life to explore the public aspect of our lives and to raise larger social questions. But he is not "doing sociology," which Rodriguez scrupulously avoids: "Today when our habit is to willfully confuse literature with sociology, with sorting, with trading in skins, we imagine the point of a 'life' is to address some sort of numerical average, common obstacle, or persecution. Here is a book 'about' teenaged Chinese-American girls. So it is shelved" (Rodriguez 2002, pp. 10–11). Rather than giving us a sociological analysis (which must necessarily generalize), Rodriguez does just the opposite: he pushes against reductive accounts of ethnic identity, always striving to capture and convey the complexity of actual Latino lives—even when doing so reveals more contradictions than consistencies.

That real lives are full of contradictions and paradoxes constitutes a major theme in *Brown*: "You will often find brown in this book as the cement between leaves of paradox" (p. xi). True to his literary mode of using his private life to explore public life, Rodriguez underscores the contradictions in his own life: "The tension I have come to depend upon. That is what I mean by brown. The answer is that I cannot reconcile. I was born a Catholic. Is homosexuality, then, a conversion experience? No. I was born gay" (2002, p. 224).



Identity politics and Rodriguez: A brief intellectual history

It is important to start with an appreciation of Rodriguez's contradictions and paradoxes—and our own—because Rodriguez's early positions on the wedge issues of bilingual education, affirmative action, and assimilation can make it hard for those invested in ethnic studies or identity politics to keep an open mind to anything else he has to say. What is more, political polarization, partisan sorting, divisive framings, and the historical evolution of identity politics have a way of casting Rodriguez and Chicano/a scholars on opposing sides of partisan debates and political wedge issues. However, there is more nuance and progressivism to Rodriguez's philosophy than he is typically given credit for, and even the most radicalized Chicano or Latino studies scholar can find much common ground through an open-minded reading of Rodriguez's *Brown*.

That common ground includes shared social values around larger objectives, such as the desire to replace or reform harmful and antirealist varieties of identity politics with more beneficial and reality-based versions; an interest in the human flourishing of all Latinos, which must include feeling integrated and accepted within the larger society while simultaneously recognizing and advancing the common humanity of other ethnic groups; the shared objective of increasing opportunity and access for the truly disadvantaged; and a commitment to genuine diversity and inclusion. Another version of those shared values and larger social objectives is articulated by Michael Hames-García in his description of a “post-positivist realist theory of identity”: “It acknowledges the possibility of more and less objective knowledge of universal needs and interests, like the need for self-determination and freedom from gender, racial, and economic slavery, of the interest in being a whole and multiple self” (2000, p. 127). That common ground, and those shared values, cannot be stressed enough.

One of the challenges of discussing identity politics is that people imagine different things when hearing the term. An activist, social-justice-oriented definition of identity politics would stress the salience of social identities and the pursuit of a strategic political agenda in order to claim equality, opportunity, inclusion, and belonging for marginalized persons. Indeed, it is common for scholars in the field to proclaim that activism is integral to their scholarship, with some even asserting that activism should take primacy over any attempt at objective scholarly inquiry. The most influential accounts of identity in academic circles revolve around power differentials and social location, including its epistemic dimension. By way of a working definition of identity politics for the purposes of this essay, I offer that of Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty in their “Introduction” to the landmark collection, *Identity Politics Reconsidered*: “Like identities, identity politics in itself is neither positive nor negative. At its minimum, it is a claim that identities are politically relevant, an irrefutable fact. Identities are the locus and nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced, and sometimes challenged” (Alcoff et al. 2006, p. 7).

A similar conceptualization is articulated by Rosaura Sánchez (in the same volume), who draws a distinction between identity and identification: “Identification



is, then, a discursive process that can serve to signal a group's isolation, uniqueness, segregation, rejection, subordination, domination, or difference vis-à-vis others; it can involve a defensive or exclusionary mechanism, but, as noted earlier, it can also serve as a rallying call for recognition and the redress of grievances" (Alcoff et al. 2006, p. 40). Linking epistemology and consciousness-raising to activism, Sánchez adds, "Identity equips one discursively to relate to the world, to make sense of one's social positioning, or to further a particular agenda at a particular moment" (2006, p. 42).

It should be added that the political agendas of any given identity group are regularly contested from within and that, because "experience is mediated," people of the same race, gender, or ethnicity will often interpret similar experiences differently (Sánchez 2006, p. 39). And so, we cannot appeal to the authority of experience alone in any attempt to characterize Latino thought—and certainly not as adhering to particular political views or policy positions, despite the temptation to do so in the service of political expediency. Put more forcefully, racial experience does not determine thought, though it may certainly color it in particular ways. As Rodríguez concludes, in *Brown*, "In the case of brown thought, though, I suppose experience becomes the pigment, the grounds, the *mise-en-scène*, the medium of refraction, the impeded passage of otherwise pure thought" (2002, p. 34).

Criticism of identity politics revolves around the question of whether identity politics stands in opposition to moral universalism, such as by putting the special interests and moral imperatives of the identity group above equal rights and civil liberties for all. The identity politics of white supremacy and Christian nationalism (or any attempt to impose a single group's ideology or religion on others), for example, must be rejected on these grounds. Additional criticisms argue that a focus on identity-based politics can lead to democracy-threatening factionalism, seeks group advantage over the common good, and overemphasizes "difference and identity at the expense of unity" (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, pp. 2–3). The focus of Rodríguez's criticisms, as addressed in this essay, are essentialist, mystical, and identity-purist (such as ethnic authenticity) claims, tendencies, and sentiments in identity politics as it is commonly conceptualized or practiced. Also addressed—and all too common—is the conflation of culture with race.

In partial response to some of the above criticisms of identity politics, it is important to historicize identity politics and its various manifestations. Given that identity politics evolved as a response to entrenched racial discrimination, and with the social objective of overcoming it, one can understand the appeal and frequent recurrence of strategic essentialism, as John J. Su points out: "The hope for achieving greater social objectivity ironically guarantees that essence will continue to be a haunting presence in academic scholarship" (2009, p. 380). Likewise, given the extent that ethnicity is racialized and otherwise visible in society, the post-civil rights turn from race to a broader concern with cultural identity (and gender, sexuality, disability, and other highly visible varieties of social identity) seemed almost inevitable. That cultural turn prompted scholarly inquiry on the epistemic status of cultural identity itself. As Satya P. Mohanty writes, "Our views about cultural identity always involve theoretical presuppositions" (2000, p. 29). One such theoretical supposition revolves around the epistemic status of intersectionality, which came



to be understood as, among other things, an epistemic tool for understanding the compound effects of multiple systems of marginalization and oppression. (I offer a second sense of identity intersectionality later in the essay.) Mohanty concludes, “The most basic questions about identity call for a more general reexamination of the relation between personal experience and public meanings—subjective choices and evaluations, on the one hand, and objective social location, on the other” (2000, pp. 29–30). And so we arrive at the present moment in identity politics.

In relation to his positioning in identity politics debates, Rodriguez has been cast, variously, as a neoconservative, reactionary, and just plain conservative—or otherwise irredeemably linked to the political right by his critics. While there is some utility to such labels, they tend to be more distorting than illuminating of Rodriguez and his thought, particularly when the intention or effect is to associate him with “Them” or “the other side.” Of course, any writer who dares to take a public position on prominent wedge issues (such as affirmative action and bilingual education) is unlikely to escape the polarized framing of that issue, no matter how subtle and complex their treatment of the topic.

To be sure, criticism of Rodriguez centers around his positions on affirmative action and bilingual education and, more fundamentally, on his assimilationist views. In *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, distinguished Chicano scholar Ramón Saldivar incisively articulates the assimilationist charge and suggests that Rodriguez is the victim of false consciousness: “Rodriguez chooses to assimilate without ever considering whether he acted by will or merely submitted to an unquestioned grander scheme of political ideology” (1990, p. 158). Similarly, Petra Fachinger faults Rodriguez for making “mainstream culture the center of perception” (2001, p. 124). Renowned Chicana scholar Norma Alarcón describes Rodriguez as a “neoconservative” engaged in a “hyperindividualized project,” and criticizes his “refusal of ethnicity, except as a private phenomenon” (1995, pp. 150–151, 143–144). In her astute *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*, Paula Moya crystallizes the root concern from which the assimilationist and individualist charges stem by critiquing Rodriguez for his refusal of a “collective racial identity” (2002, p. 103). Moya also takes up and develops the neoconservative label to characterize Rodriguez’s views in general, underscoring the political dichotomies that frame criticism of Rodriguez.

More recent scholarship on Rodriguez has been more receptive, a general trend that began with the publication of his second book, *Days of Obligation*, in 1992. By then Rodriguez had revealed his gay identity, prompting Randy A. Rodriguez to argue that “Rodriguez’s Americanness can be read as a trope for a queer sensibility and aesthetic practice more fully developed in *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* that challenges unitary Chicano/a, gay, and American identities and sensibilities” (1998, p. 39). Distinguished cultural studies scholar José E. Limón, who served as guest editor for the 1998 *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* issue in which Randy Rodriguez’s oft-cited article appeared, also argues for “a reconsideration of this interesting and important American public intellectual in our time” (1998, p. 394). Likewise, Juan E. de Castro cites Rodriguez as “a defender of immigrant and gay rights” in a 2001 article, further arguing that “Rodriguez’s writings question ... what is ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ within the Chicano



community” (p. 101). As the title of essay—“Richard Rodriguez in ‘Borderland’: The Ambiguity of Hybridity”—suggests, de Castro also credits Rodriguez as a “theorist of the borderlands,” comparing (and contrasting) Rodriguez’s “celebration of hybridity” to that of Gloria Anzaldúa and José Saldívar (de Castro 2001, pp. 102, 116).

Following the publication of *Brown*, scholarship on Rodriguez expanded to ever broader perspectives and responses to his writing, such as that by Christopher Rivera arguing for a “more nuanced reconsideration of Rodriguez’s contributions” and for us to “revisit Rodriguez with a focus on the ways that he as a character and as an author has accomplished something with a strong American precedent: the declaration of his postcolonial and queer self as an independent, empowered subject imbued with agency” (2012, pp. 241, 244). Expanding on the scholarly convergence of themes (agency, queer sensibility, nonbinary hybridity, and intersectional *mestizaje*) in Rodriguez scholarship, Frederick Luis Aldama wrote, in *Brown on Brown*, “Rodriguez re-visions himself neither simply as *activo* nor *pasivo*, *gringo* nor *hispano*, *Chicano* nor *Indio*—but as a confluence of existing identities” (2005, p. 78). Rubén Martínez, Nidesh Lawtoo, Kevin McNamara, Martha Cutter, and Claudia Milian Arias have also called for a reappraisal of Rodriguez’s writings, each in their own way.¹

In a slightly more critical vein, Jeehyun Lim holds that “the structural similarities between Rodriguez’s tropes of the third language and brown show that the non-racial reference of the third language is actually closely related to the structural configuration of US race relations” (2010, p. 521). Even more critically, political theorist Cristina Beltrán argues that, “despite its emphasis on creative forms of self-individuation, Rodriguez’s queering of assimilation continues to link freedom to an aesthetic invested in whiteness” (2012, p. 60). Also, “Rodriguez’s affective and aesthetic logics remain unable to imagine forms of pleasurable or creative theatricality that are more historically situated and/or linked to a politics of racial identification or social grievance” (2012, p. 41).

The themes identified above—Rodriguez’s hybridity, queer sensibility, third man positionality, aesthetic framing, creative theatricality, and his conversion of “white freedom” into ethnic agency—will be engaged over the course of this article. Before doing so, however, it would be instructive to turn to one last scholar—Lee Bebout—who remains trenchantly critical of the post-*Brown* Rodriguez. Bebout contends that, “through *Brown*, Rodriguez advances a “postracial *mestizaje*,” an embrace of mixture and contradiction that seeks to subvert the social construct of race and yet simultaneously acquiesces to the logics that undergird current inequalities” (2015, p. 90). The argument requires some unpacking. The chief “logics” in question are “colorblindness and neoliberalism” (p. 99). Bebout’s prepositive collocation of the word “postracial” in front of “*mestizaje*” (to characterize Rodriguez’s *Brown*) rhetorically embeds both charges. As explained by Bebout, “postracial signals the

¹ For extended engagement with the above scholars, and additional scholarly criticism on Rodriguez, see Michael Nieto Garcia (2014), *Autobiography in Black and Brown: Ethnic Identity in Richard Wright and Richard Rodriguez*.



post-civil rights racial ideology that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has termed colorblindness” (2015, p. 92). That is the first charge: that Rodriguez endorses colorblindness. However, as we shall see, Rodriguez is very attuned to the visibility of race: “Race is America’s theme—not freedom, not democracy” (Rodriguez 2002, p. 136). Not only is race the thematic focus of *Brown*, but the introductory chapter of the book foregrounds the historical formation of race relations in America, underscoring the extent to which “African Americans remain at the center of the moral imagination of America” (2002, p. 30).

Bebout’s second charge—acquiescence to neoliberalism—centers around the characterization of Rodriguez as an individualist or, more precisely, acquiescence to “abstract liberalism and the concept of the autonomous individual subject” (2015, p. 109). This I will touch on briefly (soon) when addressing Rodriguez’s critique of “Protestant” individualism, and more in depth (in the “Fluid cultures” section) when emphasizing Rodriguez’s critique of “the American *ideology* of individualism” (Rodriguez 1992, pp. 163–164).² Here, however, I wish to highlight the underlying concern that Bebout is expressing: namely, that “individualism diminishes strong collectivities,” a strategic concern and widespread sentiment that runs deep in Latino studies, and which animates much debate in the field as well as in identity politics more broadly (Bebout 2015, p. 94). Likewise, heterodox political views (including classical liberalism) within the ethnic group are often seen as an obstacle to group solidarity, collective action, and social justice objectives. We saw this concern expressed in Alarcón’s critique of Rodriguez almost three decades prior, and also in Moya’s pre-*Brown* critique of Rodriguez. To be clear, this deeply entrenched suspicion of individualism and heterodox views within the group stems from an even more fundamental concern with current inequalities and exclusion in society. Rodriguez shares that concern: “The notion of African Americans as a minority is one born of a distinct and terrible history of exclusion ... lasting through generations” (Rodriguez 2002, p. 127). That is, any disagreement between Rodriguez and scholars such as Alarcón, Moya, and Bebout is not over those fundamental concerns about racial inequality and marginalized minorities. Where they disagree is on a more proximal level: how to go about the project of reducing social inequality and securing the blessings of diversity, inclusion, and the pursuit of belonging.

It may be tempting to focus on points of political disagreement and thereby dismiss Rodriguez as anti-progressive or some similar epithet. Doing so, however, would misrepresent the reality. Rodriguez, like many Latinos, holds views that cross the political divide. He is progressive on cultural issues such as support for same-sex marriage and his concern with economic inequality. But he is also conservative in his nostalgia for the Latin Mass (especially for the shared culture, tradition, and rituals it provided) and in his critique of “Protestant” individualism for having led to the

² See “The Communally Derived Ethnic Self in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 28, no. 1 (2013): 64–85, a version of which can also be found in Chapter 3 of Garcia, *Autobiography in Black and Brown* (2014).



loss of an American sense of community.³ In short, Rodriguez embodies the brown philosophy that he extols: “Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once)” (Rodriguez 2002, p. xi).

The complexity of ethnic lives, and the entanglement of class and culture

Though it is easy to dismiss Rodriguez as a conservative or reactionary (and to some degree he is) his criticism of identity politics comes from the progressive left.⁴ “I think of myself as left of center,” Rodriguez plainly states in a 1994 interview (Gillespie and Postrel 1994). This claim goes beyond mere words, as evidenced—on the “cultural issues” front—by his support for same-sex marriage at a time when most Californians voted to ban it in a 2008 referendum. In respect to social and economic inequality, Rodriguez’s progressive agenda is to better define who is disadvantaged and who is not, so that we can most effectively increase access, opportunity, and social mobility for those who are truly disadvantaged. To fulfill its objectives of increasing access and social mobility, a progressive account of social justice cannot use race and ethnicity as sole stand-ins for disadvantage. It must also consider class, and its attendant cultural dimensions. Citing his own middle-class privilege (economic and cultural) as example, Rodriguez illustrates the anti-progressive undercurrent of using race as a proxy for disadvantage. Namely, that it directs resources toward those, such as himself, who are least disadvantaged—and thus directs resources away from the truly disadvantaged. It also leads to the fallacious conclusion that disadvantage is a necessarily permanent condition. This is an essentialist understanding of disadvantage and social location, in which one can never

³ As point of clarification, traditional conservatism puts an emphasis on duty and obligation to tradition and the culture that precedes us, all of which place constraints on individualism. Identity politics on the ethnic Left also places constraints on individualism, but for different reasons: namely, in the service of a collective identity and promoting minority group interests. Libertarianism, in contrast to both, tends to favor individual freedom over the constraints of society, tradition, or groups. George Will makes a further distinction by contrasting “European conservatism” with “American conservatism”: “The latter emphasizes the traditional and dutiful, with duties defined as obligations to a settled collectivity, the community. Because American conservatism is about individual liberty, it cultivates spontaneous social order and hence encourages novelty” (2019, p. xxvii). While Will places American conservatism on the libertarian end of the spectrum, Rodriguez is critical of excessive individualism for diminishing the sense of a “communal reality” (1992, p. 163).

⁴ In *The Shipwrecked Mind*, Mark Lilla describes the typical reactionary narrative as follows: “[The] story begins with a happy, well-ordered state where people who know their place live in harmony and submit to tradition and their God (2016, pp. xii–xiii).” The reactionary sees this idealized past as under threat from modernity, change, or other “alien ideas” that threaten the harmony and social order and believes that “Whether the society reverses direction or rushes to its doom depends entirely on their resistance” (2016, p. xiii). Rodriguez is nostalgic for the past, but also celebrates “alien ideas” and cultural miscegenation. Unlike activist, religious reactionaries, he does not attempt to impose his religious views on the rest of society.



overcome their disadvantage, but is instead permanently marginalized or victimized by virtue of their race or ethnicity alone.

Nor can one discount the tremendous advantages of an education, which gives lie to any static account of identity or social location. Rodriguez himself entered school speaking only a handful of English words, and came out the other side a middle-class man, no longer disadvantaged by the cultural and linguistic barriers encountered by his childhood self. Education, as Rodriguez puts it, “requires radical self-reformation” and changes the previously disadvantaged status of its beneficiary to one of relative privilege, even if that privilege is complicated by the intersectionality of their lives (Rodriguez 1983, p. 67).

In Rodriguez’s brown philosophy, the intersectionality of our lives is one of multiple identities and identifications, which are often contradictory rather than necessarily compounding, and with interaction effects that can change given the situation or context. It is precisely that kind of *identity intersectionality* (the second sense of the term, which I promised earlier) that Rodriguez revels in. His essays often make a point of providing the missing context or interpersonal dimension in which the social identities ascribed to him are interpreted—as in the “Middle-Class Pastoral” and “Complexion” chapters of *Hunger of Memory*, both of which depict the ways in which sociocultural fluency and situational context dramatically alter the dynamics of racialization. Rodriguez shows himself grappling not just with overlapping social identities (brown + male = macho expectations) but also with personal identifications (“a queer Catholic”) that cannot be reconciled with other aspects of his identity (Rodriguez 2002, p. 35). Reflecting the complexity of his life, Rodriguez’s essays prompt us to in turn inject greater nuance and complexity into our account of ethnic identity.

That kind of nuance and complexity is also reflected in Rodriguez’s account of class, which is about more than just economic status. In his *A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams offers three senses of class: group (objective “social or economic category”), rank (“relative social position”); and formation (“perceived economic relationship”) (1976, p. 59). Emphasizing the latter, E. P. Thompson famously argued, “class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born” (1963, p. 136). As such, class is “an historical phenomenon” that “entails the notion of historical relationship” (p. 136). And “class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, values, system, ideas, and institutional forms” (Thompson 2003, p. 136).

By extension, as Rodriguez underscores, meaningful class mobility entails cultural aspects, such as acquiring an education, cultural capital, and sociolinguistic fluency. Is Rodriguez implying, then, that the class or culture one is born into doesn’t matter? Of course not. The hard fact of the matter is that there is too little upward mobility in America, or as Rodriguez puts it “Harvard College will always beat Whittier College in America. The game is fixed” (Rodriguez 2002, p. 88). And race or ethnicity—also formations of historical relationships—can tip the scales.

The embodiedness of our various identities, historical formations, and avenues of agency cannot be cleaved from the person. Race and ethnicity do not exist wholly independent of class formation. Agency exists alongside determining aspects of the



social environment. These are the complex realities and apparent paradoxes that a robust account of ethnic identity must strive to capture and do full justice to. Rodriguez's account of race, ethnicity, and class is shot through with intersectionality, complexity, and nuance because such are the actual lives, experiences, and thoughts of ethnic subjects: "I defy anyone who tries to unblend me or to say what is appropriate to my voice" (Rodriguez 2002, p. xi).

On performativity and ethnic authenticity

Richard Rodriguez writes "The Prince and I" essay (chapter 3 of *Brown* 2002) around the trope of playing Indian. As is his wont, Rodriguez often uses a central trope to explore a larger topic, touch on related themes, and, sometimes, to make unexpected connections or striking juxtapositions. Rodriguez is also wont to present the reader with a dramatic tableau, in this case, the unfolding drama of the Stanford mascot, Prince Lightfoot. Rodriguez wryly points out the ironies of the real-life story: Timm Williams, who played Prince Lightfoot, was "a Yurok Indian," and though Prince Lightfoot was supposedly a California Indian, he wore a Plains head-dress. "The puritan truth" of the story is that in 1972 Timm Williams was "banned from playing the role," and thus his "theatrical invention of himself," and his attempt "to portray his true self to himself by playing the Indian publicly," was shuttered (Rodriguez 2002, pp. 73, 57). Through the mascot story and its denouement, Rodriguez highlights the performative aspect of identity, while also commenting on the limitations of performativity.

Performativity bumps up against expectations of authenticity. There are two senses of authenticity here: private and public. Private authenticity meets with few constraints. You can be "authentic to [your] private yearning," whoever or whatever you imagine your true self to be (Rodriguez 2002, p. 71). In contrast, public authenticity—the perceived authenticity of the public self—is constrained by the logic of social expectations predicated on the visibility of one's ethnicity, gender, race, and so on. When Timm Williams played out his indigenous fantasy on a public stage, its authenticity was almost certain to be challenged. And so it was that when Native American students at Stanford objected to Williams's public performance as romanticizing a "heroic Indian symbol," the Prince Lightfoot rendition of indigeneity was shut down (Rodriguez 2002, p. 73).

It is no wonder that the Prince Lightfoot saga should fascinate Rodriguez. Rodriguez is a performative writer. He adopts many different personas. He is hard to pin down. In a final touch, Rodriguez anticipates that some might read the Prince Lightfoot tale as "a parable for my own life," after which Rodriguez emphatically states, "Do not, for a moment, think you know what an Indian is" (2002, p. 78). And thus, in his signature style, Rodriguez uses the Prince Lightfoot tableau to dramatize the performative aspects of identity while complicating the notion of performativity at the same time. That complication, to be clear, is the irrepressible race consciousness of Americans.

"I write about race in America," Rodriguez announces, on the very first page of *Brown*, "in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America" (2002, p. xi).



Undermine, not erase. Race cannot be erased, because “Race is America’s theme—not freedom, not democracy” (p. 136). Thus Rodriguez acknowledges the power of racial narratives in society. Indeed, it is precisely because he is so clear-eyed about the visibility of race and the reality of racial discrimination that Rodriguez hopes to undermine the notion of race.

To that end, Rodriguez announces, “I celebrate the browning of America” (2002, p. xiii). However, even as notions of race are increasingly undermined by the mixing of the races, countervailing forces seek to reinforce notions of race. One of those forces is America’s continued obsession with racial differences, or at least the ascribed identities, assumed characteristics, and disadvantageous stereotypes that flow from the hyper-visibility of racial differences. The other force is identity essentialism, including the substitution of racial differences for assertions of *fixed* cultural differences: “Black now is a culture (in the fated sense) imposed by blacks” (Rodriguez 2002, p. 141). Similar expectations about ethnicity, of course, are imposed on Latinos, a fate that Rodriguez forcefully resists in Chapter 6 of *Brown*, “The Third Man”: “There was not another noun in my childhood Spanish vocabulary that made me more uneasy than the word ‘*cultura*’ (which was always used against me, but as indistinguishable from me—something I had betrayed)” (2002, p. 129). Latino-ness, in short, now is a culture (in the fated sense) imposed by other Latinos.

Put another way, though being born Latino follows its own one-drop rule and racial logic, Latino authenticity is often predicated on another, nonbiological, logic: that of culturally essentialist claims coming from within the ethnic group. (More on this anon.) For that reason, Rodriguez rails against the Puritans of identity politics, identity purists who enforce a narrow notion of ethnicity from *within* the ethnic community. The identity purists would shut down the theatrical aspect of identity, in the name of “ethnic authenticity.” They do not like performances against type. In the name of ethnic authenticity, they denounce Latinos who “act white,” deeming them guilty of “a life of inauthenticity” (Rodriguez 2002, p. 130).

I have slipped from race into ethnicity here, and at points throughout the essay, for reasons that will soon become readily apparent. As justification for doing so it is hard to imagine a more eloquent and philosophically rigorous expression on the matter than Linda Martín Alcoff’s *Visible Identities*: “At times I will address race/ethnicity and sex/gender as if these each represent a common entity. This is because, as I shall argue, race and ethnicity often slip into one another’s shoes, as some ethnicities (or cultural identities) are perpetually and relentlessly raced even as race (as bodily entity) is made to stand in for ethnicity” (2005, p. 10).⁵ The reality is that one’s (racialized) visibility in society is often as much about ethnic characteristics (such as having an accent or Spanish surname) as about one’s race. Thus, ethnicity refers to both racial and cultural characteristics. What is more, Latino is not strictly a racial category given that Latinos comprise many different races (a shibboleth in need of constant repetition), and are arguably the most racially mixed ethnic group

⁵ See also Clara E. Rodriguez, who, in her study of the historical constructions of race and census gathering, notes that “even dictionary definitions of race reveal the overlap between race and ethnicity” (2000, p. 43).



(*la raza cósmica*, as christened by José Vasconcelos). That said, it can be conceptually useful to think of race (if not racialization) as exclusively referring to biological differences while ethnicity strictly refers to cultural characteristics. To avoid charges of rhetorical sleight of hand, I have scrupulously endeavored to avoid any instances of eliding that crucial distinction where it matters. More to the point, the distinction between *fixed* (e.g., biological) and *fluid* (e.g., cultural) traits is central to my argument in this essay.⁶

Identity puritanism and cultural essentialism

Rodríguez depicts the identity purists as the iconic Shakespearean character, Malvolio, whose puritanism is the object of ridicule in *Twelfth Night*: ““You are idle shallow things. I am not of your element,’ Malvolio shrieks to the pit, to the beggars and molls in the pit” (Rodríguez 2002, p. 50). The identity Puritans that Rodríguez critiques through the Malvolio proxy could likewise be “shamed by a tricked vanity,” at least to the extent that they promulgate a narrow view of ethnic identity which they claim as superior to the diversity of views held by the actual ethnic subjects they claim to speak for.

But Rodríguez cannot be too uncharitable in his critique of identity puritanism, because he recognizes that he, too, is a puritan: “And yet I remain as much a puritan as any American. I remember, as a boy, being perplexed by a real-estate agent (a neighbor) wearing a red fez and riding a miniature motorcycle in the Shriners’ parade” (2002, p. 66). The point is, Rodríguez recognizes this same puritanical instinct in himself. Namely, the very human (but not unproblematic) impulse to impose social expectations on others based on their visible appearance and our perceptions about them.

Rodríguez sums up: “I only mean to suggest we live in a nation whose every other impulse is theatrical, but whose every other impulse is to insist upon ‘authenticity’” (2002, p. 67). Rodríguez’s assessment gets right to the fundamental tension at the heart of identity, particularly ethnic and other social identities: the desire to express an “authentic” individual self (including the multiple sides of the self) *in conflict with* stereotypes and external expectations (including from within the ethnic group) that minorities perform an “authentic” collective identity. The first sense of authenticity promises complete liberation (the emancipatory freedom to “be who you are,” including the freedom to adopt identities one was not born into), while the latter pressures minorities to conform to stereotypes and monolithic narratives about ethnic or racial identity. Each sense presents a distinct hazard, the Scylla and Charybdis of authenticity. An overemphasis on self-identification risks denying the embodied

⁶ See Michael Nieto Garcia on the related concepts of “referentiality” and “revisability,” and for a deep dive into the ontology, epistemology, and conceptualization of ethnic identity and ethnic autobiography (Garcia 2014, pp. 2, 7–22). Namely, “Referentiality acknowledges the embodiedness of the self while resisting essentialist positions; revisability acknowledges the narrative nature of identity, but without going so far as to claim that the self is therefore completely constructed” (2014, p. 7).



nature of identity and social location. At the same time, conformity-enforcing collective identities risk denying minorities their full humanity and personhood, and intimidate minorities with threat of being dubbed an inauthentic ethnic.

Charges of ethnic inauthenticity are nothing new. But their eternal recurrence comes with additional baggage: expectations of authenticity tilt toward *ethnic essentialism*. That is, ethnicity becomes equated with fixed traits (or “essences”) that are assumed to be universal for all members of the ethnic group. Essentialist claims are often made by conflating culture (which is fluid) with race (which is fixed), including by conflating cultural heritage with one’s blood heritage.⁷ Claims about authentic Latino identity are particularly prone to essentialist logic of this type since Latinos are a multiracial group, giving less traction to would-be essentialist narratives revolving around racial claims alone.⁸ The new essentialism, in other words, is not biological but *cultural essentialism*: treating cultural artifacts, practices, knowledge, or beliefs as essences universal to all individuals of the same ethnic ancestry. As Rodriguez depicts, the essentialist impulse in respect to race and ethnicity keeps returning us to a fixed notion of ethnic *culture*, which is then substituted as a false synonym or unjustified replacement for race and visible ethnicity.

Under the essentialist logic, all Mexican Americans eat the same ethnically specific foods (forever), have the same level of Spanish-language proficiency (by birth-right), and were raised in the same religion (Catholic). Of course, even identity purists take pains to distance themselves from self-evidently counterfactual claims such as these. Essentialism creeps in, however, with the assumption or expectation that all Latinos will arrive at nearly identical interpretations of their experiences, and thus hold nearly identical social and political views about their ethnic identities. The inherent danger—and political expediency—of essentialist narratives is that they can be deployed to shun and shame, and thus to exclude heterodox views within the ethnic group. In short, the fundamental essentialist assumption, and the cash value of the essentialist turn, is that all Latinos must—if they are “authentic”—subscribe to the same political ideology.

To hold contrary views is to risk being accused of inauthenticity by the identity purists, as happened to Rodriguez when, in *Hunger for Memory*, he poignantly recounts being branded a “coconut” (brown on the outside, white on the inside) while at Berkeley (1983, p. 162). Such criticisms aimed at Rodriguez exposed the assumption, held by some, that sharing a race or ethnicity dictates sharing a partisan, political, or ideological worldview. That, as Rodriguez so eloquently demonstrates in his writing, is a false assumption.

More to the point, one is simply born Latino. There is nothing one can do, think, or say to ever lose the distinction of being a “real” Latino. Race is real in social reality, and so is ethnicity. One’s visible ethnicity significantly determines how others

⁷ *Ethnic heritage* is a rather slippery term and often-muddled concept because there are two distinct senses of the word *heritage*: genetic and cultural.

⁸ For an even more trenchant critique, see Walter Benn Michaels on mystical and essentialist conceptions of “cultural heritage,” in *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, pp. 41–49, esp. p. 44. On “racial memory” see John J. Su, “Ghosts of Essentialism: Racial Memory as Epistemological Claim,” *American Literature* 81, no. 2 (2009): 361–386.



will react to them in public, a fact that is part of our lived experience. So, Rodriguez's point is not to dismiss race or ethnicity as illusions. Rather, Rodriguez's point is to undermine the power of race and ethnicity as essentialist notions, and thus to restore the agency and full humanity of ethnic persons. That is, Rodriguez seeks to free ethnic minorities from the tyranny of overdetermined narratives of race and ethnicity (the underlying basis of racial discrimination) as well as from the prison-house of essentialist versions of identity politics.

Rodriguez's ultimate objective is to gain for racial and ethnic minorities the same "white freedom" that other Americans have: "What I want for African Americans is white freedom. The same as I wanted for myself" (2002, p. 142). Some may object (as Bebout, above) to Rodriguez's use of the phrase "white freedom" to express "universal" ideals. Others may feel that this choice of words privileges whiteness. Partly in anticipation of such criticisms, Rodriguez describes himself as "brown all right—darkish reddish, terra-cotta-ish, dirt-like, burnt Sienna in the manner of the middle Bellini" (2002, p. 126). Yes, Rodriguez's word choice is provocative in the "white freedom" passage, but he is also a bit tongue-in-cheek in his use of the expression. Given that, those who take umbrage at Rodriguez's phrasing might want to extend the principle of charity here, to give Rodriguez the benefit of the doubt. For what Rodriguez means by "white freedom" is nothing less than the democratic, progressive, and emancipatory ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for *all* peoples.

Cultural miscegenation

Rodriguez's alternative to the politics of ethnic authenticity is "brown." Brown is Rodriguez's metaphor for cultural miscegenation, the promiscuous exchange between cultures and peoples. Rather than pitting mainstream culture and minority cultures as oppositional to each other, Rodriguez sees them in dynamic tension—just as with the contradictions within our individual identities: "By brown I mean love" (2002, p. 225). Cultures aren't binary, and neither are identities. American culture is itself the product of cultural miscegenation. Brown, Rodriguez muses, is the color you get when all the crayons melt together in the sun.

Brown comes from cultures rubbing against each other, and unavoidably rubbing off on each other. We respect, honor, and come closer to other cultures and their peoples by tasting their food, sampling their language, and learning to love their ways—and, through that cultural contact, adopting or adapting some of those ways as our own. That is the great advantage to living in a pluralist society rather than an ethnically monolithic one. As noted prior, Rodriguez revels in cultural miscegenation and borrowing: "I celebrate the browning of America (and I do)" (2002, p. xiii). He is naturally skeptical of the opposite impulse, "authenticity, which is the Puritan dilemma" (2002, p. 52).

Identity purism rejects the idea of cultural miscegenation. It turns instead to ways of drawing and reinforcing clear borders between cultures. Sometimes this begins with the best intentions, as with "strategic essentialism" and the desire to preserve



a “distinctive” cultural heritage.⁹ But such impulses can morph into an overly narrow account of ethnic identity that transmogrifies fluid dimensions of identity into supposedly fixed characteristics that artificially divide, or frame as mutually exclusive. By their very nature, essentialized narratives of ethnicity maintain an artificial degree of separateness. In contrast, “brown writers” (and those with a brown conception of ethnic identity) move “‘between’ cultures”—to which Rodriguez adds, “I resist between; I prefer ‘among’ or ‘because of’” (2002, p. 40). Also, culturally separatist narratives exclude minority subjects from full participation in American society, a persistent theme in Rodriguez’s writing.¹⁰ More to the point, such narratives police the views that minorities are allowed to express, entertain, or embrace—at risk of being deemed inauthentic—and do the most harm to the very minorities that a good-faith identity politics is meant to empower and uplift.

An honest version of identity politics, Rodriguez suggests, must reject these new essentialisms and the balkanizing ethnic nationalism they can lead to. It must instead embrace the great diversity of views within the ethnic community and accept the incorrigible fact that ethnic identities are porous and overlapping because cultures are porous and overlapping.

On fluid cultures and fixed identities

In “The Third Man” essay (Chapter 6 of *Brown*), Rodriguez addresses identity purists who accuse him (“Malvolio shrieks to the pit”) of having lost his “*cultura*,” and therefore being inauthentically Hispanic (2002, p. 129). Rodriguez exposes the assumption (that culture is tied to ethnicity in an essentialist way) behind the charge by quipping, “If culture is so fated, how could I have lost it?” (p. 129). The passage is somewhat confusing as Rodriguez also emphatically proclaims (through the use of italics) that “*Hispanicity is culture. Not blood. Not race*” (2002, p. 129). His point is that ethnic identity is *not* fixed, like blood or race, but rather is dynamic, fluid, and always evolving. Rodriguez is not equating ethnicity with culture. Rather, as is clear throughout *Brown*, Rodriguez is critical of the tendency to equate particular notions of ethnic culture with ethnicity and race, which are fixed in the sense that you don’t get to choose your ethnicity or your race. Ethnicity is fixed, but ethnic culture is not, and neither is ethnic identity.¹¹

⁹ On “strategic essentialism” see John J. Su, “Ghosts of Essentialism,” 361–386.

¹⁰ See Danielle Allen’s *Talking to Strangers* on strategies for overcoming “the problem of interracial distrust,” and the need to more broadly develop “citizenly habits that can contend with the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens inevitably produced by political decisions” (2004, p. xxi). Recognizing “a shared life” as Americans, such a project includes “developing the forms of citizenship needed and ... the ideals that are proper to this trust-generating citizenship” (pp. xxi–xxii), which thus provides a path to “the security and self-confidence of full-fledged political agency” (2004, p. 165).

¹¹ To clarify the distinction: *ethnicity* refers to the ethnic status that one is born into (which is fixed, though exceptions to the racial logic of this rule are possible, such as in instances of passing, adoption, or learning new information about one’s ethnic ancestry); *ethnic culture* refers to cultural practices, beliefs, and artifacts, as well as to the cultural identity of the ethnic group (and follows the logic of aggregate phenomena). See also Alcoff, *Visible Identities* (2005), and Mohanty, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity” (2000).



This is not to say that there is no overlap between fixed and fluid traits. Just the opposite: in our actual lives we must always grapple with the entanglement of the two. However, a clear ontological (and epistemic) distinction can be made between fixed and fluid traits, and that distinction is crucial to avoiding essentialist claims and other antirealist notions of identity.

Ethnicity is fixed in that you are *born into* it. Likewise, ethnic labels such as “Latino” and “Asian” are rigid and fixed, even though the lived reality of actual ethnic lives is anything but. To avoid essentialist notions of ethnicity we must make a crucial distinction between those characteristics of ethnic identity that are fixed (such as race or blood heritage) and those characteristics that are fluid and always unfolding (such as ethnic culture and individual experience). The latter are nonessentialist characteristics that permit a great deal of diversity within the ethnic group, including diversity of views.

But even a nonessentialist model of ethnic identity is inherently exclusive: a narrow identity that only those who are born into it can claim or publicly adopt. For that reason, Rodriguez argues, ethnic identities can never unite us as a pluralist society. They can only separate. Rodriguez illustrates the point through an image, the apartheid separation of literature into ethnic literatures starting in the 1960s: “The price of being a published brown author is that one cannot be shelved near those one has loved. The price is segregation” (2002, p. 26). To this he adds, “How a society orders its bookshelves is as telling as the books a society writes and reads. American bookshelves of the twenty-first century describe fractiousness, reduction, hurt” (2002, p. 11). Even more pointedly Rodriguez writes that

when the American university began to approve, then to enforce fracture, and when blood became the authority to speak, I felt myself rejected by black literature and felt myself rejecting black literature as “theirs.”

Neither did I seek brown literature or any other kind. I sought Literature—the deathless impulse to explain and describe (2002, p. 27).

Because seen as rejecting any sense of a “collective racial identity,” Rodriguez is often accused of being an individualist. In fact, Rodriguez has just the opposite impulse. He is critical of “the American *ideology* of individualism,” and argues for identities, “shared experience,” and “a shared culture” that unite us *despite* our ethnic and, yes, ideological differences (1992, pp. 163–164). That shared culture cannot be based on any particular ethnic identity, as ethnic identities are inherently exclusive. It is for this reason that Rodriguez turns to a shared national identity: a wholly inclusive identity that all Americans share, and which must also entail some sort of shared culture as Americans. Under Rodriguez’s conception of “brown,” the mainstream culture associated with a shared national identity is not at all fixed, nor is it mutually exclusive from one’s identity as a minority. Rather, American identity is inherently pluralist, and American culture is a “discernible” river of culture that is always evolving, a “mainstream” that is significantly shaped and influenced by its minority cultures (1992, p. 172): “to argue for a common culture is not to propose an exclusionary culture or a static culture. The classroom is always adding to the common text, because America is a dynamic society” (1992, p. 170).



Two recent formulations of brownness and Latinx identity may help illuminate the distinction between fixed and fluid notions of identity. One is that of José Esteban Muñoz in *The Sense of Brown*. The other is that of Ralph E. Rodriguez in *Latinx Literature Unbound*. I mention them briefly here, in large part because together they crystallize and critique widely held notions of brownness and ethnic identity as conceptualized in the field of Latino studies. The formulations of both theorists invite comparison with that of Rodriguez: in some ways standing as counterpoint, in other ways pointing to common ground.

José Muñoz—a professor of performance studies until his untimely demise in 2013—turns the performative aspect of identity toward the performance of resistance, or “otherwiseness” (2020, p. 113). An insistence on the particularity of brown identities is framed as an act of resistance to homogenizing labels, discourses, and pressures (p. 4). For Muñoz, both the performance and particularity of being brown are rooted in affect, specifically “feeling brown”—hence the *sense* of brown in the book’s title (2020, pp. 8–14, 39). The interrelationship among the three themes that emerge in this conception of brownness—performance, particularity, and feeling—are summed up tidily in Muñoz’s discussion of three specific performance projects in Chapter 11 of the posthumously published book: “In this book, I suggest that the world is brown, albeit a brownness that has been obscured from us. Within the contours of this argument, I suggest that performance is a mode, a protocol, a path toward attunement to the brownness of life and the world” (2020, p. 118). Or, in more capsule form, “The veil of otherwiseness ... insists on another mode of being and feeling in the world” (2020, p. 114).

Muñoz’s emphasis on performance, particularity, and feeling resonate with key themes we have explored in Rodriguez’s *Brown*. However, these points of comparison do not elide important differences in underlying sentiments and ideological commitments, such as those suggested in Muñoz’s call for “a brown commons”: “A brown commons is pivotal to various struggles to imagine and enact a particularity that is always only salient as coterminous with plurality” (2020, p. 4). As with the Chicana/o critics of Rodriguez that we explored earlier in this essay, Muñoz places an emphasis on struggle, solidarity, and relations of power in his framing of ethnic identity.

“Otherwiseness” gestures toward an oppositional identity, as Muñoz makes explicit when offering what has become the de rigueur disclaimer to distance himself from Rodriguez: “The memoirist Richard Rodriguez [*sic*] has used the word as an organizing trope in his book *Brown*. My project differs from Rodriguez’s in several ways. ... When I invoke the concept, it is connected to a historically specific affective particularity” (2020, pp. 39–40). Thus, for Muñoz “particularity” is “not about the formation of atomized brown subjects,” but instead emphasizes what Latinos share in common, despite differences of race, culture, language, and national origin within the group: “Feeling brown is my attempt to frame the particularity of group identification that temporarily displaces terms like ‘Hispanic’ or even ‘Latina/o’” (2020, pp. 2 and 38).¹² More to the point, the “brown commons” is an

¹² See Silvio Torres-Saillant’s (forthcoming) “Problematic Paradigms” (particularly Chapters 8–14), for an insightful exploration of the challenges around articulating Hispanic/Latino identity given the absence of a common race, culture, or national origin. In a reference to Rodriguez, Torres-Saillant argues that



“insurrectionist commons” based on the “shared affect of indignation,” and aimed at achieving “Critical utopianism” (p. 6). Clearly, these are significant differences from Rodríguez’s conception of brownness.

Yet, I argue (perhaps provocatively, to some) that meaningful common ground can be found between the two thinkers, and that the common ground matters more than the differences. Muñoz urges us to “move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are)” and instead understand it as performance (what people do), providing a reinvigorated and nuanced understanding of ethnicity (2020, p. 12). In short, Muñoz rejects fixed notions of ethnicity, recognizes the performative aspect of ethnic identity, and shows a desire to inject much-needed complexity into our understanding of ethnicity—all of which also stand as foundational pillars to Rodríguez’s sense of brown.

In *Latinx Literature Unbound*, Ralph E. Rodríguez delivers similar nuance, complexity, and fluidity in his analysis of Latinx literature as a category. Citing José Muñoz, among others, Ralph Rodríguez notes that Latinx is an “unstable signifier” that “attempts to index a community of people not in the least as homogenous as that group label suggests” (2018, pp. 10–11). Flattening a “complex identity ... into one of the neat boxes the census offers” can also “lead to purity tests” (p. 128). Basing our conception of Latinx literature on fixed or essentialized notions of “racial or ethnic identity” risks, among other things, encouraging “the cult of ethnicity” and forcing people into “narrow, static boxes of cultural authenticity” (2018, pp. 3, 15, 12). Rather, works of literature should be approached as an “aesthetic category” (p. 16). Thus, his aim is “to unbind *Latinx literature* from those identity and thematic strictures and to use the category of genre to understand the literary corpus by authors known as *Latinx*” (2018, p. 18). Of note is the performative aspect that this neo-formalist approach entails, such as writing to or against genre conventions, and through the aesthetic and stylistic choices that authors make.

All three writers—José Muñoz, Ralph Rodríguez, and Richard Rodríguez—write against homogenizing ethnic expectations, proposing a more pluralistic notion of brown in place of ethnic homogenization or essentialism. Muñoz is keen to resist, through “negation” or “erasure,” the homogenizing forces imposed on brown people by “Whiteness [as] a cultural logic” (2020, pp. xxvi, 10). Ralph Rodríguez announces a similar resistance to cultural logics and homogenizing forces in the form of ethnic expectations, as announced in the subtitle of his book, “Undoing Ethnic Expectation.” Joining the chorus singing that tune is Richard Rodríguez, who is likewise keen to resist homogenizing forces and essentialist narratives, but who directs the bulk of his attention to such expectations coming from within the ethnic community.

Footnote 12 (continued)

“Afro-Latinos, by virtue of their unstable ethnoracial location, are ideally positioned to embody ‘public admissions of racial impurity,’ to escape the logic and the legacy of the ‘one-drop-rule,’ subvert the racial imagination, and, as Richard Rodríguez argues, consequently undermine the very ‘notion of race.’” As we have seen, the oft-cited Rodríguez quote is from the first page (2002, p. xi) of *Brown*. The Torres-Saillant quote is from Chapter 14 of a manuscript (forthcoming 2023) that may change before publication.



Most fundamentally, both José Muñoz and Ralph Rodriguez accentuate fluid notions of ethnic identity as opposed to fixed ones. By rejecting fixed notions of identity traits that are in fact fluid, all three theorists of brownness inject much-needed nuance and complexity into our conception of ethnic identity. All three offer a conception of brown as fluid, inclusive, and diverse.

Brown thoughts

Richard Rodriguez's brown sensibility is the antidote to the troubling turn toward fixed notions of identity and culture. National identity cannot be based on fixed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or religion without excluding much of its population. Nor can ethnic identities be based on manufactured notions of fixed separateness (read: essentialism), since identities thus conceived and practiced do not allow for full participation in the civic life of the nation. Our identities, rather, must be fluid and porous enough to reflect the reality of ethnic lives. It is the porosity of cultures that brings Rodriguez to the conclusion that "I cannot imagine myself as a writer, I cannot imagine myself writing these words, without the example of African slaves stealing the English language, learning to read against the law, then transforming the English language into the American tongue, transforming me, rescuing me, with a coruscating nonchalance" (2002, p. 31). Rather than being separated by our distinctive minority cultures, we are connected—in a truly pluralistic society—through their porosity.

Having brown thoughts is Rodriguez's metaphor for a realist account of ethnic identity and diversity, one that reflects the porosity of cultures and the diversity within ethnic groups. He begins Chapter 2 ("In the Brown Study") of *Brown* by posing a question: "AS A BROWN MAN, I THINK./But do we really think that color colors thoughts?" (p. 33). He ends the essay by concluding "I think I probably do. (Have brown thoughts.)" (2020, p. 46). Through the trope of brown thoughts, Rodriguez acknowledges the reality of race while insisting on the diversity of thought that is the birthright of every human being. His thoughts are brown, because brown extols impurity and brown thinkers borrow promiscuously from ideas near and far.

"*Dishonest diversity*," as Irshad Manji argues, "labels people as a substitute for understanding them" (2019, p. 33). And it focuses narrowly or exclusively on characteristics (such as race, sex, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) that are either fixed or largely fixed. White nationalism is dishonest diversity. So is ethnic nationalism. Divisive, zero-sum, and sociopolitically separatist forms of identity politics such as these exclude ethnic people from full participation in society, and pit them against other ethnic groups. Rodriguez's brown philosophy of identity urges us in the other direction: to instead model better, more inclusive forms of identity politics. Through the expression of an ethnic identity (as well as racial, gender, and other social identities) that embraces the multiple sides of ourselves as unique individuals we can stave off both in-group conformity as well as dominance by an ethnic monoculture. The refusal to be defined by a single dimension of one's identity prevents monolithic social identities from either diminishing us (by denying our full humanity) or devolving into toxic factionalism.



“*Honest diversity*,” Manji argues, “moves people beyond prefabricated labels” (2019, p. 33). In contrast, “When liberators cleave to a rigid identity, they contort themselves into bigots. ... For diversity to be honest, diversity’s enthusiasts have to face the purity problem within” (p. 109). Manji’s larger point (and Rodriguez’s) is that our identity politics to date (on both the left and the right) has been incredibly if not willfully blind to the diversity within groups, and not particularly open to the myriad forms of diversity not based on fixed characteristics. Moreover, notions of cultures as impermeable, and identities as fixed, insulate us from having to engage with those who are different from us. Identity separatism tends to foreclose any interest in seeking commonalities with those from other groups, particularly those who hold opposing views. Whereas, “practicing honest diversity, we listen without having to agree; we cultivate common ground even as we stand our ground; we act from a place of grace” (Manji 2019, p. 33).

Rodriguez’s philosophy of brown is honest diversity. Brown celebrates diverse cultures and viewpoints. It rejects rigid identities that lead us down the path to ethnic apartheid and new forms of bigotry. Brown humanizes the other. Despite our diversity of peoples and views, we can, by adopting a brown sensibility, find much common ground with those we differ from or disagree with. As an upcoming majority-minority nation we must actively and continuously seek out commonalities with those who are culturally and politically different from ourselves. Brown is the embodiment of the kind of grace, empathy, compassion, and love—yes, love—that allow that to happen. We rub off on each other. We shape the common narrative together. We have brown thoughts.

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