

CALL AND RESPONSE: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ CASTS NEW LIGHT ON *BROWN* AS A “FRUITY TEXT” ON IDENTITY POLITICS¹

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In a brown future, the most dangerous actor might likely be the cosmopolite, conversant in alternative currents, literatures, computer programs. The cosmopolite may come to hate his brownness, his facility, his indistinction, his mixture; the cosmopolite may yearn for a thorough religion, ideology, tribe.

Richard Rodriguez, *Brown*

Identities make ethical claims because—and this is just a fact about the world we human beings have created—we make our lives *as men and as women, as gay and as straight people, as Ghanaians and as Americans, as blacks and as whites*. Immediately, conundrums start to assemble. Do identities represent a curb on autonomy, or do they provide its contours? What claims, if any, can identity groups as such justly make upon the state?

Kwame A. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*

KEYWORDS: Richard Rodriguez – *Brown* – Ethnic Relations – Identity politics – metaphor – Hybridity

¹ It is only very rarely that we, scholars, enjoy the advantage—and privilege—of having the author we are discussing in our presentations among the members of our audience. This happened to me in April 2011, during the biannual SAAS Conference held in Alcalá, in which Richard Rodriguez turned out to be one of the keynote speakers. Not only was he present at the panel in which I delivered my paper on *Brown*, but he kindly accepted to add some comments to a number of the issues I raised in it. Eventually, the piece has taken the form of a “Call and Response” exercise, instead of the more conventional scholarly article.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Richard Rodriguez – *Brown* – Relaciones interétnicas – Política identitaria – metáfora – hibridación cultural

ABSTRACT

Chicano writer Richard Rodriguez has often been perceived as a strange fish in the field of minority literatures because he has repeatedly made a plea for individualism (in religious, sexual, ethnic, political and other affairs), instead of aligning with specific collectivities. Rodriguez's latest work, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, makes evident that, rather than choosing to be entirely one or the other—the Chicano writer or the mainstream scholar, the gay or the Catholic—, he prefers the liminal state of being many things at once. This article offers both an analysis of the complex and quite often “fruity” metaphors that Rodriguez employs in this work to grapple with the difficult positions into which his diverse allegiances bring him, and a conversation with the author in which he briefly elaborates on the significance of some of those metaphors.

RESUMEN

El escritor de ascendencia mexicana Richard Rodriguez es percibido en el ámbito de las literaturas minoritarias como una especie de perro verde ya que siempre ha mostrado un talante muy individualista (en lo religioso, lo étnico, lo político y lo sexual), en lugar de hacer frente común con diferentes colectivos. Su último trabajo, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, pone en evidencia que, más que elegir entre distintas opciones — escritor chicano frente a intelectual cosmopolita, homosexual frente a católico — él prefiere ese estado liminal en el que uno puede ser varias cosas, en apariencia irreconciliables, al mismo tiempo. Este artículo ofrece tanto un análisis de las complejas y a menudo “afrutadas” metáforas que Rodriguez emplea en su obra para abordar las difíciles situaciones en que sus distintos afectos le colocan, como un diálogo con el autor en el que nos ofrece breves reflexiones sobre la significación de esas metáforas en su obra.

Both Appiah and Rodriguez seem to be fully aware of the dilemmas that assail liberal societies such as our own, which have come to delve into identity issues to figure out how they should be structured and what goals they should pursue. There is little doubt that in the past three decades much attention has been paid to collective identities that are constituted according to gender, ethnic, racial, religious or sexual categories. This is particularly apparent in societies in which certain social groups—women, Hispanics, Catholics or gays—have been deprived of the rights and opportunities that other groups have enjoyed for a long time. It is evident that, as Woodward and others have argued,

Globalization, however, produces different outcomes for identity. The cultural homogeneity promoted by global marketing could lead to the detachment of identity from community and place. Alternatively, it could also lead to resistance, which could

strengthen and reaffirm some national and local identities or lead to the emergence of new identity positions. (Woodward 16)

Thus, a divide has become evident between theorists who support what could be called a “cosmopolitan paradigm” that sees the world as socially and culturally diverse and, therefore, takes that diversity as a precondition for identity-formation and self-creation, and those others who believe that freedom and personal autonomy are much more important than those ties linking us to specific social contingents. Appiah notes that “cosmopolitanism values human variety for what it makes possible for human agency, and some kinds of cultural variety constrain more than they enable” (268). In fact, in this author’s opinion, the emphasis on diversity is justified only when it contributes to the respect for human dignity and individual freedom that is crucial for a meaningful human life. As will be seen below, Rodriguez’s *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002) is a meditation on how being the subject of a generally contradictory variety of allegiances can in fact help a person to become his/her singular self. Despite the vertigo that the cosmopolite may feel as a result of being many things at once—Mexican and American, homosexual and Catholic, scholar and private individual—s/he has to resist the constant temptation to define himself/herself entirely as one thing or the other.

Call: *How do you position yourself in the above-mentioned debates between a multicultural/cosmopolitan conception of the self and a more “civic” one?*

Response: *I don't mean to evade your question by answering too brownly, but it does seem to me that the opportunity in this modern age is to move between these alternatives rather than settle permanently on either. (This is the dialectic of our modernity.)*

I am very moved, for example, by newly educated women I meet in the world who are determined to be more than mother, more than wife, more than daughter. And yet their sense of loyalty or love or responsibility (to a stronger degree than males) leads them also to accept being a parent or child.

More precisely, in answer to your question: I do not think of myself as a minority apart from the general society, but as a minority whose identity, as such, depends on the education, the language, the mechanisms (voting, protest, etc.) that the majority society permits. As I say playfully, when I call myself “a Hispanic” I identify myself as living in the United States.

Milian Arias has remarked that *Brown* completes a trilogy that “is among the most incisive reflections and visualizations of the self in relation to the ever-changing U.S. cultural and political landscapes” (274). In order to achieve this

vision, Rodriguez leads us through the idea of brown as a cultural and racial opening that pertains not just to the Hispanic/Latino community in North America:

I write of a color that is not a singular color, not a strict recipe, not an expected result, but a color produced by careless desire, even by accident; by two or several. I write of blood that is blended. I write of brown as complete freedom of substance and narrative. I extol impurity. (*Brown xi*)

As Rodriguez sees it, not only does brown refer to the blending of bloods in himself, coming from European conquistadors and the American Indians but, more broadly, it reveals the way in which different faiths, customs, languages, etc. have come to cross-fertilize each other in America. He argues that a “brown complexity”—of narrative and desire—has defined the experience of the New World because “from the moment the Dutch sailors and African slaves met within the Indian eye” (46), the continent has been built on mixture and mutual contamination. Of course, the notion of a brown America poses serious problems in regard to ideas of belonging and “authenticity”: one begins to wonder what is white, black, red or brown in relation to one’s worldview and what is just performance; in fact, the nation is automatically divided between those who insist upon the need for “authenticity” and those others—with a browner sensibility—who are able to see the allusive/delusive, “polluted,” theatrical impulse in American culture:

You should wonder about the complexity that creates Richard Rodriguez, the centuries that have made this complexity. I am not, in any simple sense, the creature of multiculturalism. I am the creature of something much more radical and that’s the penetration of one culture by another, one race by another. And so I stand here today, and I don’t know which part is the Indian part speaking to you. Which leg is my Indian leg? Which leg is my Spanish leg? (Rodriguez “Remarks”)

But how does one grapple with this complexity? How does one come to grips with the many contradictions and tensions that are embodied in a single individual? For Ferszt, “the wall of conundrum that Rodriguez builds around his *ethos* is likely more the work of defensive strategizing than a true ideological contradiction. Yet, he loves the paradox that he projects” (443). It may be true that Rodriguez sometimes seems to revel in the confusion and perplexity that some of his statements may produce in his readers: “The most important theme of my writing now is impurity. My mestizo boast: As a queer Catholic Indian Spaniard at home in a temperate Chinese city in a fading blond state in a post-Protestant nation, I live up to my sixteenth-century birth” (35). Yet, it is a bit simplistic to think that the ultimate object of his writing is merely to cause bewilderment among his readers or to protect himself from the attacks of those who hold different viewpoints concerning the role that sexual orientation, religion, nation or race should play in the configuration of

one's identity. Even those scholars who have criticized Rodriguez's political and cultural choices have admitted that his essays contain "fine writing and powerful imagery," as well as a "carefully crafted elegance" that allows him to represent parts of himself that would otherwise remain inaccessible (Cf. Paredes 293). While recognizing that Rodriguez's style may occasionally be circuitous—with his unexpected turns, abrupt assertions, and daunting repetitions—it is undeniable that, far from employing those "linguistic contortions" in the service of pure rhetoric, he is seriously and rigorously excavating the enigmas of ethnicity and cultural identity in America. Margo Jefferson rightly remarked in *The New York Times* that "Rodriguez is dedicated to the proposition of letting no one, including himself, take American culture or history at face—and race—value." In this sense, the subtitle of the book seems particularly appropriate because, as this reviewer also notes, he is (re-) discovering "the hypocrisies and ironies of race as America has insisted on defining it; and the ironies and glories of race as America has ended up living it" ("On Writers").

Call: *To what extent does your in-depth research into your "brown complexity" depend on a skilful use of the English language? Or, to put it differently, can one get to the bottommost layers of one's identity without turning them into text or narrative?*

Response: *At some level, one must master a tongue to play with it.*

*But more importantly, I intend to frustrate those social scientists who consider the issues that interest me to be "theirs." Race relations, for example. I intend a literary performance around the subject, not a quasi-scientific one; I intend a prose that is brown and intends to confuse or to bewilder, even amuse by pulling hard on the foreskin of words (for the reader's pleasure and for my own). I tell people that the music that inspired my prose when I wrote *Brown was black jazz*—the music of improvisation, strenuous and intellectual, refusing the straight line.*

If one were to pinpoint one aspect of Rodriguez's prose to explain the immense eloquence with which he sets the kind of paradoxes that he is about to tackle in front of the readers' eyes, that would be how keen he is on choosing certain familiar metaphors that have become part and parcel of the cultural baggage of the nation—especially in what concerns race relations and ethnic groups. For instance, he sets out on his long rumination over his own position—or lack of it—in the country by referring to de Tocqueville's well-known tableau of the elusive Native, the fawning slave woman, and the white girl of five or six who is destined to inherit history. As is the case with many other hyphenated writers in the U.S., Rodriguez often resorts to particular dishes and culinary habits to illustrate the possibilities, tensions, and surprising combinations that may come out of the crossing of different traditions.

Indeed, some of these metaphors and images seem to impose themselves on his experience of the nation and himself, since they have been fairly widely adopted to describe the shades of color and texture of the realities he is trying to describe:

Brown, not in the sense of pigment necessarily, but brown because mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and fluids of generation are mixed and emotions are unclear, and the tally of human progress and failure in every generation is mixed, and unaccounted for, missing in plain sight. (197)

Although allusions to ethnic restaurants and cuisines are fairly common in Rodriguez's text—most often to indicate how particular food and dishes have been hybridized and globalized to become part of the mainstream culture—I will focus on how some fruits are directly or indirectly used by the author in his attempt to consider the predicament of the nation through a very detailed analysis of his own experiences. Metaphors related to certain fruits prove especially fruitful—pardon the redundancy—because they capture perfectly his varying responses to the antagonism and ambivalence that have dominated race relations in America since Europeans first reached the New World. As Jefferson points out, while dealing with this topic he can sometimes become really “prickly and defensive”, to turn greatly “charming and sensual” a few lines below (“On Writers”).

Call: *How far does your writing rely on culturally-encoded metaphors and figures of speech to convey your views? What does one gain and/or sacrifice by using these imaginative devices in one's description and dissection of a culture?*

Response: *It is true that there is a great deal of play in my strategy. Partly the impulse in my writing life is to challenge the metaphors, so common in American life, that are meaningless or fictitious. For example, there is the "white" and "black" conundrum in America that admitted no possible miscegenation. As a result of centuries of white racism, many blacks who are as brown as I am (including the brown president, Barack Obama—the son of blond Kansas and black Kenya), are inclined, as an act of racial loyalty, to call themselves "black."*

I meant no disrespect when I wrote (in Newsweek) that the president of the United States is our first brown president. I was only speaking the truth.

Now, what am I to make of the strange metaphors that describe our sexual lives? As a homosexual man, I am supposed to call myself "gay." And less gaily inspired lives, my happily married siblings, for example, are described by the new grammar as "straight." How should I not protest? How should I not arrange my own metaphorical war against such language?

The Collins Dictionary of the English Language lists up to six different meanings for the word “fruity” which, in most cases, could be fittingly and

effectively used to describe the style of Rodriguez's reflections. To begin with, "fruity" seems a convenient adjective to apply to his work because, like fruit itself, it is usually highly diverse in terms of shape and texture. As he explains in the first pages of the collection, "books should confuse. Literature abhors the typical. Literature flows to the particular, the mundane, the greasiness of paper, the taste of warm beer, the smell of onion and quince" (12). It is true that, as some reviewers have pointed out, *Brown* comes across as a mellow, rich, and compassionate vision of American society at the turn of the 21st century (see Walton "Greater"), but it is also clear that it can become incredibly sour and acid—lemon-like—when he realizes the social and cultural cost that it has supposed for many non-mainstream groups and individuals: "The price of entering white America is an acid bath, a bleaching bath—a transfiguration—that burns away memory. I mean the freedom to become; [...]" (140). Some scholars, however, keep insisting that Rodriguez is "fruity" in a more dangerous way since, behind the ingratiating and sweet tones of his voice—sometimes verging on the unctuous—, there hides an individual too inclined to relinquish his ethnic roots altogether. Marzan and others have accused him of being so obsessed with the idea of entering the "public arena" that he can easily forget where he comes from: "His boasting of his intentional ignorance of 'brown literature' only underscores yet again that, however bombastic-sounding he may be, his objective is not argument but establishing persona, performing theatre" (Marzan 63).

Call: *Do you think of yourself as a "polemicist"? Is your main object in writing to shake your readers' assumptions and expectations? Why is this important to you?*

Response: *The brilliant Lewis Hyde, a literary critic, describes me as a "trickster" (among a distinguished legion of tricksters). I like that notion, more than I like "polemicist." I intend not to argue or to convince the world, but to complicate the world, to mystify the world (and the word), through wit and humor.*

Why should the writer lead the reader to a simple or single conclusion? The higher goal is to introduce the reader, in some measure, to the richness and mystery of the world. If I were an educator, I would encourage students to become like Hamlet—indecisive because too much alert to contrary possibilities.

A more slang usage of the word "fruity" would associate it with some eccentric or irreverent features in the object described, and there have been readers who have certainly found such characteristics in Rodriguez's text. As he noted above, he would be far from satisfied if his writing did not succeed in shaking and unsettling some of the assumptions and popular ideas of his compatriots regarding such momentous topics as family, education, race relations, religion, culture, etc. In an interview with London, he explained: "I don't think writers should be convenient

examples. I don't think we should make people feel settled. I don't try to be a gadfly, but I do think that real ideas are troublesome. There should be something about my work that leaves the reader unsettled. I intend that" ("Crossing Borders"). Finally, one last informal usage of "fruity", in both Britain and America, connects it either with something erotically arousing or with homosexuality. And it is precisely in the territory of sexuality that Rodriguez's border-crossing may seem at once more challenging and compelling, for, as he reiterates several times, he is writing against a tradition heavily marked by Puritanism and straight lines of descent. He states in the closing essay of the book:

Several races and continents converging in the suspicious glance of eyes. Did I read that proximity as erotic? Indeed, I did. I had no other way to read. I was looking for physical inclusion in the world. I was amassing an encyclopaedia of exceptionalism for my own use. What did Negroes infer from the whiny, fiddlelike intonations of mountain men? What, in God's name, had the Kansas Indians been doing in St. Louis? Were some naked? Were all armed? Blanketed? Beaded? Braided? Painted? Tattooed? [...]" (210)

Call: *Would you say that sexuality is still a taboo theme in North America? To what extent has your work intended to raise that "forbidding veil" in your country?*

Response: *Yes, Americans are very wary of sex, despite being sex-obsessed. In the dialectic currently between Canadian multiculturalism and the Mexican mestizaje in the U.S., the popular inclination is to trust the Canadian option. Multiculturalism, the organizing idea of post-modern society first advanced by Pierre Elliott Trudeau, is orderly, respectful, reasonable—the way Canada is orderly, respectful, and reasonable. But it is also socially and sexually diffident. (Let us celebrate the fact that you are not I.) I much prefer the southern alternative, the erotic notion of the Mexican mestizaje—the literal mixing of blood and saliva and memory, lust joined with love, the hairy Spaniards locked in the embrace of the smooth-skinned Indians. By contrast, Canadian multiculturalism, while respectful of strangers, never seems to engage the stranger in a lurid seduction or with a lover's sonnets or toward the resulting birth of a child who looks exactly like none of his grandparents.*

In general, for all the attention given to conflict and war in our histories, we pay almost no attention to the erotic principle, the importance of love or lust for American history.

To begin with the more complex and, somehow, intriguing metaphor that we see emerging in Rodriguez's writing, we should refer to that of the "coconut" which, from the early-1980s, when he published the first installment of his autobiography, has been ever present in his work. Ferszt has described the author as a "sensitive soul hidden behind a prickly structure of purposeful confusion" (443). This image,

combining the idea of a soft and sweet interior surrounded by a hard and context-resistant exterior, seems suitable in, at least, two important ways. On the one hand, it could logically be said to remind us of the double allegiances—or “double consciousness” (Dubois xi)—that minority writers need to develop, if they ever want to play a role in the larger society. As Rodriguez explains, “it is interesting, too, to wonder whether what is white about my thought is impersonation, mistreisy. Is allusion inauthentic, Ms. Interlocutor, when it comes from a white sensibility? My eyes are brown. *Cheeks of tan?*” (35). On the other hand, it would also be useful to explain the defensive attitude that these writers feel compelled to take when they are perceived as “disgraceful” by the different communities they are supposed to represent—be they ethnic, religious or sexual. Rodriguez often presents himself as “a comic victim of two cultures,” since his brown sensibility does not seem to be easily accommodated either in the Chicano tradition within which he is shelved or in the mainstream tradition to which he would like to belong. Of course, predictably enough, he seems to be most angry with those who have contemptuously described him as a “coconut”—that is, brown outside but pure white inside. According to him, this reductive stereotype simply reproduces the widespread inclination in American society to divide people and cultures following clear-cut racial and ethnic categories. As the passage below illustrates, essentialisms and strict categorizations do not depend so much on one’s skin color but, rather, on one’s ability to see the irony and impurity in those “stories that lead [us] off the page” (*Brown* 195) in historical accounts:

I was studying Puritanism and that, too, interested me; not least for its prohibition of impersonation.

At about this time, Malcolm X, an American puritan, discouraged African-American adolescents from hair straighteners and skin lighteners.

At about this time, ethnic studies departments were forming on some campuses. Such quorums would produce the great puritans of my age. The puritans would eventually form opinions about me, and I about them. (49)

Call: *To what extent are hyphenated or minority writers in America doomed to upset—or even offend—part of their readership? Is there a way out of this catch-22?*

Response: *My relations to the Hispanic academic community are so frayed, so tenuous, that I barely know how to answer this question. What gave me my literary voice, in my first book, *Hunger of Memory*, was my dissatisfaction with the strategies of the ethnic left in America. To this day, my reputation is as a political “conservative,” someone who intends to please my white audience rather than accept my Hispanic identity.*

The first essay I wrote, “Aria,” (also the most reprinted of my essays) argues that bilingualism is impossible, that a border of class, of intimacy, exists between

public and private spheres of our lives. It pleases me that the essay was so little understood and much loathed by my critics.

In another review of *Brown*, Villalon has complained about the tendency among Chicano scholars to read Rodriguez's work as a naïve celebration of the "exhilarating self-invention the U.S. offers" ("One Color"), but a celebration that disregards the "burden of history" of his Mexican ancestors. Nevertheless, if Rodriguez's text makes anything plainly clear, it is precisely that at no point does the author forget or avoid dealing with the history of Blacks, Asians or Hispanics in the northern part of the continent. The metaphor of the "coconut"—like that of the fixed borders—does not seem adequate to represent either the nature of the writer, in whom allegiances would be clearly divided between white and colored, or that of the nation, which can no longer be described in terms of black and white bloodlines:

We feel surrounded, that's the thing. Our borders do not hold. National borders do not hold. Ethnic borders. Religious borders. Aesthetic borders, certainly. Sexual borders. Allergenic borders. We live in the "Age of Diversity," in a city of diversity—I do, anyway—so we see what we do not necessarily choose to see: People listing according to internal weathers. [...]" (213)

If the image of the "coconut" retains any interpretative power in describing Rodriguez's text, it would be related to the idea that, in order to preserve his core of optimism and faith in the American Dream, he has needed to grow a thick and resistant shell to protect himself against all kinds of criticism. As Rodriguez explained to Torres (2003: 178) in an interview, it was not the politicians, such as Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon, nor Catholic priests and nuns, nor the historians who wished to cleanse their accounts of any uncertain or confusing turns that made Rodriguez grow resentful and aggressive early in his writing career. It was cultural critics and academics who, by misconstruing who he really was, caused him to retreat behind that hard and prickly structure that his texts often become. One can still hear at several points in *Brown* his protest against the kind of critiques that his work raised especially from his co-ethnics: "By telling you these things, I do not betray 'my people.' I think of the nation entire—all Americans—as my people. Though I call myself Hispanic, I see myself within the history of African Americans and Irish Catholics and American Jews and the Chinese of California" (128).

Call: *Would you say that we, academics, tend to miss any important aspect of the experience of minorities in America? Which are those aspects that we fail to see?*

Response: *My largest unhappiness is with the way various minority categories remain static on a page, when our real lives are in flux. A Central American*

immigrant in Los Angeles today hears music that is black, and perhaps works for a Korean grocer in Compton, and sees movies and television programs (especially on Spanish-language television—from Mexico City and Caracas) that are blonder than Norway. There is no static category of being "Hispanic" that can describe such an impure life. Everything is complexity and confusion. I think academics are put off by the messiness.

If refashioning himself as a different type of “coconut” may have been one of the purposes of *Brown*, the metaphors associated with avocado pears appear to be more narrowly related to Rodriguez’s notion that one does not necessarily need to choose between seemingly contradictory strands of one’s identity. Avocado imagery seems particularly convenient for various reasons. For one thing, although typified as a fruit, avocados are perceived as more multifunctional, since they can be combined with other food and spices to make different specialties. Moreover, because it is a tropical fruit and dark in color, it is also charged with the exotic/erotic connotations of the southern climate. In any case, Rodriguez finds it evocative of his own nature as it is not easy to group it with other fruits due to its rather unusual combination of characteristics:

I am often asked how it is I call myself a gay Catholic. A paradox? Does the question betray a misunderstanding of both states? Not, not really. What are they asking is how can I be an upstanding one and the other. When you slice an avocado, the pit has to go with one side or the other, doesn’t it? Weighing one side or the other. A question about the authenticity of the soul, I suppose. (224)

As is the case in Gloria Anzaldúa’s contemporary classic *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Rodriguez also seems to be in search of that interstitial space where he may enjoy the freedom to be things apparently irreconcilable. The good news is, of course, that the “browning of America” (xii) may be indicative of the dawning of a new day when earlier categorizations are no longer used to stigmatize and exclude individuals. Even avocados, that most strange and indefinite fruit, may find their space in the rather limited dietary patterns of the country. Although religious, sexual, and racial profiling have been among the most injurious practices in North American culture, Rodriguez tries to move beyond the labels others would impose on him in order to show that, in fact, he has history on his side: “Race is not such a terrible word for me. Maybe because I am skeptical by nature. Maybe because my nature is already mixed. The word race encourages me to remember the influence of eroticism on history” (xv). According to Milian Arias, Rodriguez assigns this prominent role to “careless desire” in his re-discovery of America because it is what fostered a crisis in the black-versus-white representation of race relations that had shunned any “space to explore the significance of brownness in everyday life” (2003: 269).

The last essay in *Brown* is entitled “Peter’s Avocado”, and it offers a profound meditation on the dangers and immense potentialities of individual freedom in the U.S.: “Americans are so individualistic, they do not realize that their individualism is a communally derived value” (200). Rodriguez wonders if in fact it is that freedom that may lead Americans to love each other, to form unlikely attachments, and to build a future based on love and reconciliation. Although he sees that signs of the possibility of a browner future are abundant, he often raises a cautionary note in the sense that there are also forces intent on preventing this re-discovery of the nation:

Mixed soul, I suspect, may become, in the twenty-first century, what “mixed blood” was for the eighteenth century. A scandal against straight lines and deciduous family trees. Against patriarchs who do not sufficiently recall that Christ formed an alliance of the moment with the Samaritan woman—some spark of wit, perhaps; some amused recognition or willingness that intrigues us still. Perhaps a smile. [...] The brown theology of syncretism abroad in the land. (203)

Every time Rodriguez comes across some hopeful evidence that the country has been from its very inception a perfect example of the “postmodern” tendency towards mixture, impurity, and confusion, he also makes himself—and the reader—aware of the tremendous resistance that these steps toward a more syncretic culture met from some of the most powerful institutions. In Villalón’s words, “it is not that this [brownness] would be impossible to accomplish, but that something must be offered in return for this surrendering of a defining, if confining, identity” (2002). Indeed, what we learn from Rodriguez’s ruminations is that, confronting the instances of mixture and reconciliation that he finds all around him in demonstrations, restaurant queues, and marriages, there are still constituencies that would still try to draw clear religious, environmental, ethnic, even dietary borders and boundaries that would make the incorporation and integration of difference more difficult: “As much as I celebrate the browning of America (and I do), I do not propose an easy optimism. The book’s last chapter was completed before the events of September 11, 2001, and now will never be complete” (xiii). Of course, the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers are a blatant example of how concrete identities may sometimes deviate in unexpected and undesirable ways but, on a different level, Peter’s reluctance to eat any food that is not organic could be taken as a sign in the same direction: “Enigmatic Peter lives harmlessly, delicately, behind a screen; is scrupulous; the seminarian son. In Peter’s case, moral scruple has become dietary scruple. But what is it Peter will not swallow? Or what is the sacrament he seeks?” (216)

Call: *Despite the hopeful signs of syncretism and hybridization in U.S. culture, you also perceive some symptoms of new forms of fundamentalism? Which of those new fundamentalisms would you say are going to be most harmful to the country?*

Response: *Let me answer that less as an American but more broadly. I think there is sometimes, maybe often, a fatigue that haunts the brown life. Instead of being many, the self finally wants, like Odysseus, to settle. I keep remembering a photograph of Osama bin Laden, as a teenage boy. He is standing in a crowd of his relatives, on vacation in Sweden. He is wearing bell-bottom pants. He is smiling. He is being educated by his wealthy family to assume the world. And then what? And then something happened to turn this young man of the world into a fighter for a terrorist band of men identical to himself, locked in their caves and shadowy rooms.*

Is this some nightmare version of the aging process? Do we decide to settle for the one rather than the many, as we grow older? The bin Laden story is so troubling that it leads me to believe that the most cosmopolitan people we know in our lives might turn out to be, in some year coming, the least open to variety.

To conclude, perhaps the most convenient fruit to describe Rodriguez's text on racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities is grapes, since they show the multiplicity and variety of shapes and flavors that we have found in his essays. Several reviewers have pointed out that, in fact, it would have been quite impossible to encompass the different types of discourses that he brings into his work—autobiography, history, sociology, art criticism, etc.—in any other form of writing (Jefferson 2002). In order to produce the special vintage that *Brown* turns out to be, one needs to combine grapes of very diverse origins and each one with its own nuances of flavor. Grapes also seem an appropriate metaphor because they are, of course, the fruit of the state of California and *Brown* is by far the book in which Rodriguez proclaims most clearly his devotion for a territory that has become a crucible for different cultures:

Imagine how California must have appeared to those first Europeans—the Spaniards, the English, the Russians—who saw the writing of the continent in reverse, from the perspective of Asia, adjusting their view of the coast through a glass, silent and as predatory as these birds. (185)

In his attempt to reverse and re-discover the myths and history of the continent, replacing the east-to-west axis by the south-to-north movements, Rodriguez manages to subvert and undermine some of the dreadful metaphors guiding the mainstream project: the melting pot and manifest destiny. As he protested in an interview, like grapes being turned into wine, “cultures, when they meet, influence

one another, whether people like it or not. But Americans don't have any way of describing this secret that has been going on for more than two hundred years" (London 1997). If asked to pinpoint the ultimate goal of Rodriguez's *Brown*, I would say that it is precisely to dig out that secret history that has remained invisible for most Americans. That he needs to resort to a rather fruity text to do so is only a sign of the incredibly difficult task he is embarking upon.

Call: *If it were in your hands to decide whether your readers interpret your books as the work of an individual artist or a sort of "representative" for many other Americans, which role would you prefer? Can these two roles be somehow blended?*

Response: *Of course, I would prefer the romantic presumption that I am an "individual artist." But this presumption would be falsely romantic. In fact, I accept my communal identities, but usually not in ways that are convenient to the categories of the moment. For example, I make it a point of stressing that my childhood was "Hispanic"—part Indian, part Spanish—but complicated further by the fact that the women who taught me English were Irish (Catholic nuns), and my dearest uncle was an immigrant from India, and the dentists my father worked for (making false teeth) were Chinese.*

*As I make clear in *Brown*, too, I am Hispanic on the page—i.e., concerned with my relationship to Mexico and Spain—but always I search my tribal or ethnic memory armed with the tongue of the English queen, Elizabeth I (remembering her well-painted lips, blossoming into a smile at the news of the defeat of the Spanish Armada). So the influences in my life are always too social for me to presume a romantic "individuality," and too rich for me to settle for a notion that I represent a particular constituency.*

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