

Postracial Mestizaje: Richard Rodriguez's Racial Imagination in an America Where Everyone Is Beginning to Melt

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And it seemed to me that the larger questions about America that the color raised is the fact that we are, all of us, in our various colors, our various hues, melting into each other and creating a brown nation. I tried to write a brown book, that is, brownly, by engaging contradiction and paradox, and rhetorical devices that suggest the way that I experience my own life. That is, for example, as the descendent of a conquistador and the Indian—as a Hispanic.

Richard Rodriguez¹

In recent years, racial formation in the United States has thrived in precipitous tension. Since the social and political tumult of the various freedom struggles from the 1950s to the 1970s and the rise of multiculturalism, explicitly racist discourses and practices have fallen from favor.² Yet as many have noted, the material saliency of race is felt as much as ever. Thus, we are left with a wide array of seeming contradictions that maintain white supremacy and other forms of inequality in the guise of fairness and the protection of rights: ever-rising incarceration rates in communities of color through mandatory sentencing and policies of disparate impact, delegitimization campaigns against the first African American President of the United States through questions of his birthright citizenship, anti-(Latino) immigration policies that respond to the Hispanicization

of America that mark people under “reasonable suspicion” of foreignness, and the targeting and banning of Mexican American Studies curricula by calling for students to be treated as individuals.³ These are but a few examples of the dynamic tension of racial formation in contemporary U.S. culture. It is within this context that I seek to situate Richard Rodriguez’s exploration of race in America in his 2002 book *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*.

Responding in part to Huntingtonian fears of a “clash of civilizations” and a “browning of America,” Rodriguez exalts the impurity of brown as a great American tradition.⁴ For Rodriguez, it is not “Brown, . . . in the sense of pigment, necessarily, but brown because mixed, confused, lumped impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the fluids of generations 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.”⁵

Here one may find common ground between Rodriguez’s “brown” and theorizations of complex personhood by Gloria Anzaldúa and Avery Gordon. Each maps the interactions of multiple, contradictory elements that constitute any individual. For Anzaldúa, this means embracing rejected aspects of the self: the working class, the indigenous, and the queer.⁶ In complementary fashion, Gordon suggests that people are not so easily compartmentalized as either victims or agents of their own destiny.⁷ Together, they articulate the impurity that Rodriguez terms brown. As this article will demonstrate, however, even as Rodriguez seeks to contest notions of purity, racial and otherwise, *Brown* serves the interests of the dominant racial order vis-à-vis its relationship to neoliberal thought and discursive strategies. Through *Brown*, Rodriguez advances a *post-racial 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.

In a Brown Context

The political thrust of Rodriguez’s brown project takes on greater significance when placed in context with his earlier work and its critical response. A child of Mexican immigrants who came of age during the Chicano movement—although certainly not a part of it—Rodriguez is one of the most recognized Latina/o public intellectuals today. Yet his vocal arguments against bilingual education, ethnic studies, and affirmative action have long made him a target of criticism. With the publication of his first memoir, *Hunger for Memory*, and his speaking engagements in conservative circles, Rodriguez advanced a problematic argument of a split between private and public selves. For Rodriguez, his Mexican heritage and the Spanish language were relegated to the private, familial sphere. Because of this argument, Rodriguez became a veritable Hispanic, anti-Chicano boogiemán. Tomás Rivera, Ramón Saldivar, William Nericcio, and others critiqued Rodriguez’s thinking, and sometimes Rodriguez himself, as the result of a colonized mind, blind to history and structural inequalities, and playing the role of a “Mexican” mannequin in the mind of white America.⁸ However, not

all indicted Rodriguez. Juan Bruce-Novoa contended that Rodriguez evidenced the diverse constellation of thought within the Chicana/o community and that his work should be examined as such.⁹

Ultimately the relationship between Rodriguez and Chicana/o studies has seemingly softened over the last two decades with his publication of *Days of Obligation* (1993), *Brown* (2002), and *Darling* (2013).¹⁰ This repositioning may be due to a variety of factors. First, Chicana/o studies has developed significantly as a field since the 1980s, acknowledging and investigating more disparate, complex identity formations.¹¹ Second, while still relying on seemingly metaphysical binaries in his writing, Rodriguez's later work more directly plays on the irony of and inverts these binaries.¹² For instance, Rodriguez recognizes his phenotype and cultural background would have been derided by many of the authors whose writing he loves, yet he embraces them with a cosmopolitan flair, reveling in the irony.¹³ Moreover, Rodriguez's later books wrestle directly with the seeming contradictions of being a gay Catholic Mexican-descent American, a set of intersecting identities that place him in dialog with significant Chicana/o intellectuals such as Gloria Anzaldúa.¹⁴ Finally, while he still actively disparages Chicana/o studies and other fields of struggle, Rodriguez's work now more directly engages the concepts and concerns of Chicana/o studies, from ruminations on the role of Mexico in the U.S. imagination to indigenous ancestry and mestizaje.

Both an extension of and a departure from his previous works, Rodriguez's *Brown* draws upon the Mexican philosophical and cultural discourse of mestizaje, the racial and cultural mixing of disparate peoples. Rodriguez rejects the American myth of purity in hopes of destabilizing the United States' central social organizing concepts such as race. Rodriguez introduces his *Brown* project as such: "I extol impurity. . . . I write about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America."¹⁵ For Rodriguez, brown—a color symbolically charged with disparate meanings—is a needed intervention against the black/white binary.¹⁶ However, he seeks more than adding a third color to the U.S. racial palate.¹⁷ Rather, Rodriguez contends that Hispanics vis-à-vis brown can offer a new understanding of the U.S. past, present, and future: "Brown bleeds through the straight line, unstaunchable—the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or more things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once)."¹⁸ In this way, brown, impurity, and mestizaje become ways of speaking about forbidden (often transracial) desires and their fruits. In terms of race, Rodriguez's reading of the nation's transracial, transgressive legacy of desire—often signified as that between African slave and white master—intervenes against and disrupts the historically rigid racial thinking of hypodescent, the one-drop rule whereby "blood" determines identity, and strict notions of authenticity, which can be used to police an individual's varied possibilities of being.¹⁹

Brown's subtitle—*the Last Discovery of America*—signals the radical potential Rodriguez believes his intervention to be. Brownness-impurity-miscegenation

is not an invention but a discovery because it has long been in existence. Here Rodriguez signifies upon the Columbian “discovery” of the Americas. Yet while impure thoughts, acts, and desires have long existed, American public discourse and social mores have generally forbade their open expression. Describing brown as the *last* discovery underscores its transformative potential. It is the last, not as if there can be no more. Rather, this “last discovery” of brown suggests an epistemic and cultural shift. That is, after confronting and imagining brownness, the United States can no longer be the same, for it will develop language and spaces for its contradictions and reconciliations.

While Rodriguez’s vision draws upon the Mexican and Chicano traditions, it simultaneously recharges mestizaje with the politics of the dominant racial ideology of the post–civil rights United States. Taking direction from Paula Moya, this article reads Rodriguez not simply against earlier iterations of mestizaje rooted in Mexican and Chicano sociopolitical contexts.²⁰ Thus, I suggest that Rodriguez’s brown vision may best be described as a postracial mestizaje. Here a seeming contradiction must be recognized: Mestizaje has long been deployed to consolidate racial and national consciousness, whereas postracialism is the epitome of denying the power and effects of race in the contemporary era. This apparent incompatibility is not to be dismissed. I deploy the term with a mixture of caution, purpose, and cynicism. I find “postracial” a useful modifier for Rodriguez’s vision of mestizaje in three ways. First, Rodriguez actively works at the intersection of conflicting identity categories beyond race. Indeed, sexuality and religion are central components of the conflict and communion he explores. Second, postracial signals the post–civil rights racial ideology that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has termed colorblindness. As Bonilla-Silva has so forcefully contended, after the fall of Jim Crow through the efforts of the civil rights struggles, a new racial logic of colorblindness took its place, supporting the old racial hierarchy under a seemingly race-neutral discursive frame.²¹ While the Jim Crow system secured racial power through force and overt, racial-realist discrimination, colorblindness maintains and justifies racial inequality through abstract liberalism, historical amnesia, and other strategies.²² Finally, I deploy postracial with more than a bit of irony. In an era of Birtherism, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino legislation, growing income inequality, and astounding levels of incarceration within communities of color, the palpable inescapability of race should be self-evident. It is with this critical eye that I turn to the internal contradiction of postracial mestizaje as a key to understanding Rodriguez’s racial imagination and its relationship to the neoliberal project.²³ Rodriguez’s *Brown* rearticulates a mestizaje that embraces mixture and contradiction to refute the cultural nationalism of the Chicano movement and other freedom struggles. Embedded within and serving the needs of neoliberalism, *Brown* prizes individuality and erases key aspects of history in order to forestall accountability and imagine a new American exceptionalism.

The Intellectual and Political Roots of Postracial Mestizaje

Prior to tracing the dynamics of Rodríguez's postracial mestizaje, an intellectual foundation must be laid, exploring previous theorizations of mestizaje. In 1925 Secretary of Public Education and eventual candidate for the presidency of Mexico José Vasconcelos published his philosophical treatise *La raza cósmica* (The Cosmic People/The Cosmic Race), which would become the intellectual cornerstone of Mexico's postrevolutionary state-making project. While much of the text delves into the historical positioning of Latin American peoples, *La raza cósmica* could be more accurately described as a prophecy for a future age, a manifest destiny for mixed race peoples. For Vasconcelos, the world had seen the emergence and decline of four pure-raced civilizations—Indian, Black, Asian, and European. Looking to the future, Vasconcelos imagined the creation of a new fifth civilization, la raza cósmica, characterized by interracial unions based on love and beauty.²⁴ Vasconcelos contended that the history of mestizaje in Latin America opens a unique role for mestizos in the making of this new era. Here mestizos are not a raza cósmica but its potential foundation. Vasconcelos's racial vision is a strong counterpoint to other racial worldviews at the time: namely, white supremacy and social Darwinism manifested in eugenics.²⁵ While these thought systems advanced whites through the exclusion and extermination of other peoples, Vasconcelos sought to imagine a future of radical racial inclusion. That is, of course, not to suggest that Vasconcelos's project was racially unproblematic. To the contrary, Vasconcelos's ideas operated through a racial hierarchy, contending at various points that Indians, Blacks, and Asians were fallen civilizations that would be elevated beyond their past glories through the cosmic race.²⁶ Moreover, as Josefina Saldaña-Portillo contends, Vasconcelos's work became the rhetorical and ideological cornerstone of the Mexican nationalist project and its own form of racial domination, for the construction of mestizos as ideal citizen subjects relegated the indigenous peoples to the distant past and worked to silence contemporary Mexican Indians.²⁷ Indeed, one may consider mestizaje of the Mexican national project as an early manifestation of colorblindness, suggesting that "if all are mestizos and thus indigenous, then there really is no race or racism."

In the 1960s, mestizaje gained currency with Chicanas/os engaged in civil rights struggles in the United States. While Saldaña-Portillo is right in noting the potential limitations of Chicano emphases on the indigenous past and hindrances of connection to Native peoples in the present, the Chicano deployment of mestizaje must also be read against its dominant discursive contexts: white supremacy and adherence to racial purity. Read in this way, Chicano articulations of mestizaje provided a least three valuable functions. First, it treated with value that which had been devalued. In a society that has long esteemed white racial purity, Chicanos did not deny mixed and indigenous ancestry—like had been done with the Spanish myth.²⁸ Rather, they charged this mixed heritage as a source of pride. Second, mestizaje allowed Chicanos to embrace heretofore

conflicting aspects of identity—indigenous and conqueror—and forge a synthesis. For example, the well-known poem *Yo Soy Joaquín* articulated an identity based on a history that is marked as deriving from both “Aztec prince and Christian Christ.”²⁹ Finally, as Rafael Pérez-Torres has suggested, this critical mestizaje works to disrupt notions of racial purity in the dominant society. For Pérez-Torres, mestizaje foregrounds the socially constructed nature of race instead of acquiescing to a model of distinct humanities. Moreover, critical mestizaje must always recognize the violence and the union that brought mestizaje into being.³⁰

Scholars have been divided over Rodríguez’s writings on mestizaje and its political potential. Importantly, this divide stems from the cultural work of mestizaje and which traditions scholars see Rodríguez fitting into. Responding to his *Days of Obligation* in her influential “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán?” Saldaña-Portillo reads Rodríguez against Mexican and Chicana/o articulations of mestizaje, simultaneously recognizing an indigenous past and subordinating the voices and concerns of contemporary Indians. Read against this formation, Saldaña-Portillo contends that Rodríguez creates spaces for acknowledging indigenous peoples in the present.³¹ In contrast, Pérez-Torres situates Rodríguez’s mestizaje beside and against Chicana/o articulations that claimed mixed heritage against a white supremacy that relied on the notion of racial purity and Melting Pot assimilation. For Pérez-Torres, Rodríguez’s move from racial impurity to a more general impurity empties mestizaje of its critical potential.³² In partial contrast, Claudia Arias also reads Rodríguez in the Chicana/o intellectual tradition, yet she claims a common ground between Rodríguez and Gloria Anzaldúa and identifies a liberationist potential in his brown vision.³³

Central to this scholarly endeavor, however, Rodríguez’s political imagination, his brown project, must not simply be read within the contexts of Mexican nationalism and Chicana/o civil rights struggles. Rather, Rodríguez’s articulation of an American mestizaje must be examined through the current U.S. discourse of colorblindness. Contemporary manifestations of U.S. colorblindness have at least two points of origin. Bonilla-Silva and numerous other scholars have argued that colorblindness emerged in response to the freedom struggles that rocked the United States for much of the twentieth century. In this view, overt expressions of racism and racial thought are not socially acceptable. Thus, a new racism of coded language and dog whistles has taken the place of formerly overt racist expression. Yet colorblindness can also trace origins to the economic and social ideology of neoliberalism that began to take root as the mass mobilization of the freedom struggles dissipated.³⁴ As David Harvey and others have noted, neoliberalism advances the radical deregulation of markets and embraces access to markets as the key to individual freedom and upward mobility. Neoliberalism also exalts the autonomous individual subject. According to Harvey, “A contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other.”³⁵ This romance of individualism diminishes strong collectivities and replaces them with “weak voluntary associations.”³⁶ Critical to this article, the collective life that neoliberal-

ism dismantles has been fundamental for freedom struggles that seek to identify collective grievances and collective forms of redress. While the post–civil rights roots of colorblindness help explain how Rodriguez may be read as a response to Chicano movement politics, neoliberalism exposes key ideological precepts that undergird Rodriguez’s postracial mestizaje, allowing him to fashion a political vision that eschews accountability for historic and contemporary inequality as it simultaneously imagines a new American exceptionalism.

Brown Snowflakes, or Individuality and Mestizaje

Rodriguez’s exploration of brown locates mixedness both within the collective and the individual. This makes sense within a historically Mexican paradigm of mestizaje wherein the conflict and coming together of social forces occurred through and within individual bodies. For Rodriguez, however, brownness is not simply Mexican but American as well.³⁷ This brown mixedness can be seen as Rodriguez ruminates on the ways Hispanics and Asians have influenced the United States. Rodriguez asserts that this is more than a single-point intersection: “America is fated to recognize itself as intersection—no, nothing so plain as intersection—as coil, pretzel, Gordian knot with a wagging tail.”³⁸ Here Rodriguez invokes the Gordian knot as a useful trope for imagining of the United States. According to legend, the Gordian knot was constituted of individual strips of cornel bark tied together and creating a unified whole. Unable to be simply untied, Alexander the Great was able to solve this challenge by striking the knot with his sword and splitting it asunder. Seeking to find the metaphor for American mixedness, Rodriguez rightly and playfully mixes his metaphor by noting the “Gordian knot with a wagging tail.” Notably, Rodriguez does not invoke the United States’ famous analog to mestizaje: the Melting Pot. The difference between the Gordian knot and the Melting Pot is striking. While the Gordian knot holds together both the autonomous individual and the collective, the Melting Pot requires difference and impurity to be burned away. In this way, casting the United States as a bound yet unfinished mixture of constituent parts signals the recognition of a post–civil rights movement United States where some forms of difference are acknowledged. Here a critical question arises to which the analysis will later return: what purpose does acknowledging difference in the formulation of the United States serve?

Rodriguez’s project also locates mestizaje as brownness within the individual. Perhaps this should be unsurprising considering how mestizaje has been used to articulate and mediate conflicting aspects of the self in the Mexican and Chicano traditions. Consider the epigraph in which Rodriguez names this contradiction within himself: “as the descendent of a conquistador and the Indian—as a Hispanic.”³⁹ Drawing upon another metaphor for unresolved brownness, Rodriguez also imagines Cubism as a model for complex personhood where multiple aspects of the self are simultaneously represented, for the Cubist tradition seeks to depict “All present at once as several points of view.”⁴⁰ Here the simultane-

ous presence of competing aspects of identity invokes the complex personhood Anzaldúa sought to describe. Moreover, this gesture toward visual representation may find an unexpected and uneasy common ground with Anzaldúa's deployment of the indigenous goddess Coatlicue. While her discussion of the Coatlicue State offers a process for working through internal and socially embedded conflicts, it is also important to recognize that duality, complexity, conflict, and communion are represented in the visual depiction of Coatlicue as well.

Significantly Rodriguez does not simply explore his individual brownness through an ethnoracial paradigm. Rather, in a postracial vein, he also examines how being both gay and Catholic—and the dynamic tension between the two—is a form of brownness: “what if one ‘I’ is Roman Catholic and one ‘I’ is gay?” Yet those constituent parts cannot be reduced—held together by a dynamic tension, the “I” of Rodriguez's American *mestizaje* “cannot reconcile.”⁴¹ Again Rodriguez's work finds common ground with Anzaldúa. As with Anzaldúa, Rodriguez's rejection of purity and embrace of brown moves well beyond cultural and racial aspects of identity. Brown gives language to Rodriguez's warring aspects of self that rely on notions of purity. Nowhere is this clearer than the final pages of *Brown*. Lying in bed in the early morning hours, Rodriguez contemplates his Catholic faith and his love for his partner beside him:

How can I protect this . . . ?

My church teaches me I cannot. And I believe it. I turn the pillow to its cool side. Then rage fills me, against the cubist necessity of having to arrange myself comically against orthodoxy, against having to wonder if I will offend, against theology that devises that my feeling for him, more than for myself, is a vanity. My brown paradox: The church that taught me to understand love, the church that taught me well to believe love breathes—also tells me it is not love I feel, at four in the morning, in the dark, even before the birds cry.⁴²

Rodriguez's embrace of impurity allows him to work through this contradiction, to be at peace with it. In this way, his postracial *mestizaje* provides a conceptual mapping of liberation akin to Anzaldúa. Whereas Anzaldúa forged a *mestiza* consciousness to work through the multiple contradictions that constituted her self, Rodriguez names the consciousness that emerges from contradiction “brown.” Indeed, in an interview, Rodriguez suggests connections in the way they each seek to mediate contradictions and identity: “With *Brown*, I can accept my contradiction—the gringo I became, the Mexican I remain. Like Anzaldúa, I think those of us in the United States who are related to Mexico bring the great gift of confusion. We violate straight narrative lines, again and again.”⁴³ Reminiscent of Anzaldúa, Rodriguez believes that coming to terms with one's contradictions—signified through brownness, impurity, *mestizaje*—is the needed salvation for individuals as well as the collectivity of the United States.

The emphasis upon and romance of the individual places Rodriguez's project apart from Chicano movement deployments of mestizaje. One cannot overlook Rodriguez's use of "brown" as signifying upon the Chicano nationalist tradition. Particularly during the movement years, Chicano nationalist discourse claimed mestizaje, bronze, and brownness to galvanize and mobilize a social movement community.⁴⁴ For Rodriguez and others, many Chicano nationalist articulations replicated the homogenizing impulses of the dominant society. They undergird the logics that have declared him "Not brown enough" and that have allowed others to identify "exhibitions of ethnic self-hatred" in his writing.⁴⁵ That is, while brownness and brown pride became a source of empowerment, Chicano cultural nationalism simultaneously helped imagine a community of struggle through articulating a strategic essentialism that elided the heterogeneity of Chicana/o experiences and excluded those deemed inauthentic. At various points, Chicana feminists, gay and lesbian Chicanas/os, and those who challenged the political orthodoxy of the movement were scripted as Malinches, vendidas (sellouts), Tio Tacos, or coconuts.⁴⁶ Such policing of identity suggests that there were recognized "right" and "wrong" ways to be brown. Thus, with palpable irony and devious parody, Rodriguez deploys "brown" as he writes against and with disdain for the practices of those who had also seen it as an empowering symbol. Himself a target of such injurious hails, Rodriguez deploys brown for his own purposes. He moves brown from a racial and cultural paradigm that contested and at times replicated racial hegemony to a discourse that explores competing aspects of the individual. Within his project, Rodriguez—the once seeming anti-Chicano—becomes the embodiment of brown, not because of his skin color or cultural attachments but because of his contradictions.

Of critical importance, Rodriguez's rendering of a brown individualism offers tremendous empowerment as it creates an ideological and discursive escape route from the homogenizing essentialism of ethnoracial expectations. Previously scholars have critiqued Rodriguez's claims on being a public individual as part and parcel of a rejection of "private" cultural community.⁴⁷ While Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* has certainly given validity to this critique, Rodriguez's assertion of individuality, as found in *Brown*, should be recognized not as a wholesale rejection of everything Mexican for a white public self. Fittingly, Rodriguez's intellectual project in *Brown* is messier, impure, and blurred. For example, in *Brown*, Rodriguez contends that he wants the freedom of white people for others: "What I want for African Americans is white freedom. The same as I wanted for myself."⁴⁸ This is not the same as wanting to be phenotypically white. Rather, his claim finds resonance with Peggy McIntosh and many other critical whiteness studies scholars who suggest that one of the key ideological components of whiteness is to be racialized in a way as to be unable to see one's self as part of a group and only as an individual.⁴⁹ Importantly, McIntosh delineates two forms of white privilege: those that need to be extinguished and those that must be extended to all.⁵⁰ Arguably, without embracing the problematic logics of abstract liberalism, the right to be seen as an individual and not be measured by

the authenticity tape of one's racialized community is one that ideally should be extended. In other words, setting aside needs for strategic essentialism, shouldn't Latinos and members of other minoritized communities enjoy the freedom of difference? Just as many have called for white folk to recognize their group racialization, Rodriguez makes a claim on a crucial form of white privilege, seeking to extend it to all. Here his ideas intersect with the character of Aurora Esperanza from Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park* when she tells of her love of the English singer Morrissey: "I never understood why when a white person likes a musician who's not white, they're cool, but if a person who isn't white likes a musician who is, they're a freak or, worse, a sellout."⁵¹

Rodriguez's assertion of brown individualism takes on particular significance against those early and pervasive critiques of his writing as the product of a colonized mind or not adequately Chicano. Rodriguez's resistance to the limitations of group identification emerges in one of his common laments about the identity-based categorization of literature: "The liberal-hearted who run the newspapers and the university English departments and organize the bookstores have turned literature into well meaning sociology."⁵² This complaint is not just about the conflation of disciplinary inquiries and epistemologies. Rather, he is pushing back against what it means to be categorized as a Chicana/o or Hispanic author—here recognition of complex personhood functions as a critical tool to resist the erasures of collectivity. Rodriguez's writing, as is the case with all writing, cannot be so easily compartmentalized by "racial or sexual identification. In either case I must be shelved Brown. . . . 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."⁵³ Notably reveling in contradiction, Rodriguez both resists his too-easy classification as Hispanic, as his writing is often shelved, and recognizes such identifications have aided his publication and professional success. Akin to those who dismiss affirmative action and other forms of historical redress in the name of fairness and equality, Rodriguez derides identitarian categorization that has fostered his readership. Yet unlike those blind to the historically structured and arbitrary nature of their privilege, Rodriguez recognizes the irony.⁵⁴ However, while he rightly resists the compartmentalization of U.S. ethnic literatures, he fails to mark whiteness as a group identity.

Significantly, Rodriguez's articulation of individuality and contradiction allows him to foster such transracial connections. In the telling of his life and the fashioning of his self, Rodriguez repeatedly touches on the influence of non-Latino writers—Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, Malcolm X, and Richard Nixon are but a few. Rodriguez claims to find the "universal" in "dis-similarity."⁵⁵ The freedom of individuality that white people enjoy becomes the key to Rodriguez's connection to this intellectual lineage. This freedom does not allow him to simply find common ground with white people but with disparate peoples across a constellation of experiences. While his articulation of univer-

sality seems simplistic, one cannot deny the potential of transracial (seemingly transidentitarian) identification.

Despite Rodriguez's deployment of brown to claim the right of peoples of color to be diverse individuals and not be measured against limiting notions of authenticity, he also reinstatiates a central aspect of whiteness: the belief that what is white is both individuality and universal. As scholars have noted, white people are racialized to see themselves as individuals and not part of a group.⁵⁶ Because they are blinded to their own group affiliation, those invested in whiteness ultimately see white as both the norm and the universal. As Charles Mills has demonstrated, this dynamic is rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, wherein European man is constructed as a rational individual and universal model for humanity against the uncivilized and unassimilable other.⁵⁷ This claim of white privilege's individuality and freedom of difference for all people proves troubling in its logical effects. Writing of his rejection of black literature as somehow "theirs," Rodriguez contends that he "trusted white literature, because I was able to attribute universality to white literature, because it did not seem to be written for me."⁵⁸ Here Rodriguez tropes upon Enlightenment philosophy. Rodriguez, however, does not recognize the problematic nature of asserting whiteness as universal. Rather, as Paula Moya has suggested with Rodriguez's earlier writings, he accepts conflation of whiteness and universality at face value.⁵⁹ For Rodriguez, just as white literature is universal, Chicana/o, African American, and Asian American literatures are those apart, group-centered, somehow particular and less-than, in need of transcendence. Even as one can find power in Rodriguez's desire to disrupt and subvert rigid identitarian classification, his project is limited in that it fails to make whiteness and its social construction visible. The truth is that white people are part of a group.⁶⁰ Individuality and universality are but the masks of power; indeed, they are the masks that make power function through invisibility. For his vision of a postracial mestizaje to undermine race as he claims, Rodriguez must recognize and subvert the racialization of whites, something that he fails to do.

Accepting the conflation of whiteness, universality, and individualism roots the logics of Rodriguez's brown vision in the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness and neoliberalism. Wherein previous eras white supremacy was explicitly articulated, today it is often encoded in silence and the seeming race-neutral discourse of abstract liberalism wherein calls for fairness and equality are used to maintain structural inequality and inoculate the privileged from redress.⁶¹ Here an example is useful. The recent dismantling of Mexican American Studies in Tucson, Arizona, relied upon the same logics. State Superintendent Huppenthal contended that no curriculum should be taught based on race, and that all students must be treated as (seemingly raceless) individuals. Significantly, Rodriguez has made similarly specious arguments that U.S. education compartmentalizes and divides cultural curriculum based on race and ethnicity, as if Chicana/o studies neither involves the histories of other peoples nor has anything to offer them.⁶² Like Rodriguez's and other expressions of abstract liberalism, Huppenthal

juxtaposes a particularity of racialized community to fashion the universality of whiteness as a standard. Read in this context, the postracial nature of Rodriguez's work becomes manifest. Rodriguez rightly claims for people of color the white freedom to be different yet he simultaneously reinforces whiteness as an invisible norm against which all others may be judged. Such a move has significant logical aftershocks: if brown individualism is based upon the white freedom from *recognized* group racialization, then Rodriguez's project fails to recognize a world of collective privileges and collective grievances. If we are all atomized brown snowflakes, how does one imagine a world of accountability beyond the individual? As Harvey has suggested, social justice struggles require meaningful collectivities while neoliberalism forecloses such possibilities through its exaltation of the individual. This emphasis on brown individualism and failure to conceive of collective accountability gives shape to Rodriguez's construction of a brown American history.

Brown Memories, White Amnesia

Although Rodriguez romances the potential of a brown individualism, he also imagines and advances a national collectivity. Unsurprisingly, while cloaked in brown, this is far from a Chicana/o nationalism. Rather, Rodriguez crafts a multicultural U.S. nationalism by exploring the multiracial origins of the country, forging a usable past for his contemporary postracial *mestizaje*. At first glance, such an effort seems to write back against the long tradition of Anglo-centric U.S. histories. Importantly, however, histories are always more than a series of events plotted across pages and time. Every history requires a process of forgetting. Rodriguez's elisions forestall meaningful collectivities formed around social justice. But before these erasures can be addressed, one must explore Rodriguez's brown origins of the United States.

Rodriguez opens *Brown* by drawing upon and responding to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, one of the earliest writings on political theory to address race in the United States.⁶³ Here, very much in the vein of critical multiculturalism, Rodriguez seeks to dislodge the white male, his gaze, and interpretive perspective from its central positioning in the U.S. imaginary. While walking through the Alabama forest, Tocqueville comes upon representatives of the American racial triad: an Indian woman, "a Negress," and "a little white girl of five or six years."⁶⁴ This encounter triggers Tocqueville's postulation on race and citizenship in the United States. For Tocqueville, in the words of Rodriguez, "The Indian refuses civilization; the African slave is rendered unfit for it."⁶⁵ Across time and space, Rodriguez responds to Tocqueville, "But cher Monsieur: You saw the Indian sitting beside the African on a drape of baize. They were easy together. The sight of them together does not lead you to wonder about a history in which you are not the narrator?"⁶⁶ Reading Tocqueville against the grain, Rodriguez seizes upon the possibility that the representatives of the U.S. racial triad "were easy together." In this case, Rodriguez suggests that from

other, nondominant perspectives, the history and intercultural relationships of the United States may look quite different. Desire, intimacy, and caring may unfold between these inhabitants, opening new, dynamic ways of understanding the past and, more importantly for Rodriguez, greater potentialities for the future.

In his intervention upon the writing of Tocqueville, Rodriguez is returning to his earlier interpretation of mestizaje as found in *Days of Obligation*. As Norma Alarcón and Josefina Saldaña-Portillo suggest, Rodriguez turns to the gaze of the indigenous in understanding the process and long-term effects of racial and cultural mixture and survival in Mexico.⁶⁷ Rather than assuming the inherent dominance of the Spanish over indigenous peoples, Rodriguez recognizes that the Native peoples of Mexico may have adapted, but they have also survived and thrived in the contemporary era, pushing the dominant Spanish to melt into the larger Native population over time. Here, as Alarcón notes, Rodriguez plays upon the Mexican idiom “Comérselo con los ojos,” wherein the indigenous peoples consumed the conquistadors with their eyes.⁶⁸ In *Brown*, Rodriguez returns to this strategy asking how U.S. history and culture would be seen through the eyes of Tocqueville’s racial triad. Importantly, strict racial compartmentalization and the white supremacist logic of hypodescent emerge not from nature but from the position of domination and articulation—in this case Tocqueville as narrator and racial theorist. Thus, while racial intermixture—what Saldaña-Portillo terms a “weapon of the weak”—did not occur in quite the same way or to the degree of Latin America, by turning the gaze away from Tocqueville and calling forth the possibility of other U.S. narratives, Rodriguez redeploys and refashions the Mexican roots of mestizaje northward to the United States. In Rodriguez’s brown history of the United States, the metonyms of the racial triad are not bracketed off from one another as handy representations of disparate racial trajectories. Rather, in Rodriguez’s vision these figures—signifying wholes much larger than the self—are mutually engaged. Once Tocqueville’s gaze is removed, the possibility of an interdependent, brown history emerges.

This intervention against Tocqueville’s central U.S. narrative of race and politics lays the foundation for Rodriguez’s later call for a more complex, impure, brown history. Whereas Tocqueville offers a compartmentalized racial prophecy wherein race is destiny, Rodriguez “wants to speak of such unpursued scenes and lives as constituting brown history.”⁶⁹ Critically, Rodriguez’s brown history is not simply that of interracialism but “for the precedent that made me possible. . . . Any evidence of exception.”⁷⁰ He recalls the examination of photographs:

What is that lone black man doing in the Irish saloon in New York? I noted black faces at FDR’s funeral. I remember an earlier photograph from a book on California—Los Angeles in the 1920s—what looks like a Filipino or Mexican family is standing on the front steps of a small wooden church, within a congregation of African-American women and children.

However hard I peered into that long-forgotten day there was no answer. What are they doing there?⁷¹

Brown history thus becomes a usable past for contemporary divergence, exception, the non-normative, and potentially the queer. Arguably, stories of intermixture and exception undergird Rodriguez's own positioning as a gay Catholic and as a Hispanic public intellectual against bilingual education. Clearly this brown history underscores the individual against the homogenizing forces of collectivity addressed earlier. Rodriguez's vision of a brown history is liberatory in that it offers greater possibilities of being. Rather than compartmentalizing as Tocqueville did or "talk about separate races and distinct ethnicities and the divisions in American social life" as some forms of diversity education would have, Rodriguez seeks a more complicated, browner story of the United States: past, present, and future—one that moves beyond race as the sole means of categorizing social life.⁷² Constructing a brown history resists the homogenizing impulses of narratives that render identity as singular and yet an extension of the collective, for divergence in the past opens greater possibility in the present and future. Importantly, however, Rodriguez's quest for a brown history of divergence and exception is located at the level of the individual: a black man in an Irish saloon, a Filipino or Mexican family in an African American congregation. By constructing a usable past through and for brown individualism, Rodriguez's brown history cannot offer narratives of group experiences—that is, by focusing his lens on the Filipino or Mexican family, Rodriguez fails to question what social and historical conditions may have led the congregation to be otherwise segregated. In this way, stories of collective struggle are rendered unspeakable.

As Rodriguez fashions a brown U.S. narrative, he simultaneously elides significant forms of injustice. At least two intellectual moves undergird this erasure. First, for Rodriguez, African Americans form the ultimate other within the United States, and therefore they bear the most legitimate claim to the term minority: "The notion of African Americans as a minority is one born of a distinct and terrible history of exclusion—the sin of slavery, later decades of segregation, and every conceivable humiliation visited upon a people, lasting through generations."⁷³ Thus, even as he tries to disrupt the compartmentalizing impulses of the black/white binary with claims of cultural influence and shared biological inheritance, Rodriguez's emphasis on African Americans forges a type of black exceptionalism. In this rhetorical frame, the sins of the United States past are written solely onto the experiences of African Americans. Such a move both distracts from contemporary causes of racial grievance and occludes the histories of marginalization of other racialized communities.

Second, throughout his writings, Rodriguez tends to script Latinos as either immigrant or first-generation U.S. citizens, always charged with the potential for upward mobility.⁷⁴ In this way, Rodriguez deploys what Ian Haney López has warned against as the ethnic model for examining the social experiences of Latinos. Responding to Juan Perea's embrace of the ethnic model, Haney López

rightly argues that the ethnic model fails “to address and remedy the social burdens imposed through race-based discrimination.”⁷⁵ Doing so assumes the logic that Latinos are an ethnic group and will assimilate into the mainstream like the Irish and Italians before them. Moreover, framing African Americans as the sole other to white supremacy and Latinos as near immigrants, Rodriguez ignores the historical Latino experiences of inequality. For Rodriguez, Hispanics are not a historically aggrieved community: “To say, today, that Hispanics are becoming America’s largest minority is to mock history, to pervert language, to dilute the noun ‘minority’ until it means little more than a population segment. This is exactly what Hispanics have become—a population segment, an ad-agency target audience, a market share.”⁷⁶ Conceptualizing Hispanics as an ethnic group and “market share” both results from and reinforces his elision of key aspects of U.S. Latino history. For instance, as he claims that he benefitted from the historical mistreatment of African Americans via recompense for slavery and segregation or that the Chicano movement merely copied the African American civil rights struggle, Rodriguez does not mention the segregation of Mexican American children into “Mexican schools,” curricular inequality, the inability to serve on juries in some states, being forbidden to use the same public restrooms or burial grounds as whites, restrictive housing covenants, forced dispossession of lands, and other symbolic and material forms of inequality. This is a lot of history to overlook.

Critically, ignoring this history forestalls articulations of collective grievance and calls for collective accountability. Here the limits of Rodriguez’s brown individualism cannot be ignored. Understandably, these were not Rodriguez’s experiences: He did not go to a Mexican school, he did not encounter a racialized wage scale, and he may not feel the need to receive redress. Such a move relies upon the social atomization of neoliberalism that eschews the need for “meaningful collective life” that Harvey identifies as key to social struggle.⁷⁷ Consider that identity-based social justice struggles have long deployed strategic essentialism to galvanize and mobilize communities. How else does one claim redress and seek accountability for large-scale historical grievances? If individuals are the primary social unit, then systematic group oppression is rescripted as the breach of individuals’ rights. Notably, Rodriguez’s historical erasure is troubling not just in that these policies and practices did have significant impact on the lives of many. Rodriguez’s blindness to past inequalities may well also replicate an inability to see oppression in the present. For instance, without recognizing or understanding the history of school segregation, housing discrimination, and other factors, one may explain away people’s current life situations—poor or rich, free or in jail—as solely the result of the individual choices embedded in abstract liberalism.

This move to dehistoricize the experiences of Latinos takes on greater significance when read within the context of fashioning a U.S. *mestizaje* for the twenty-first century. Previous iterations of *mestizaje* have been rooted in a sense of pastness. Vasconcelos turned to the colonization of Mexico in the fifteenth

century to fashion a nationalist identity against the global rise of eugenics and notions of racial purity. Alurista, Anzaldúa, and other Chicanas/os drew upon the same cultural narratives to work against the myth of pure Spanish descent and prior rejections of indigenous and mixed heritages. Writing on the work of Chicana/o theologians, John Francis Burke suggests the multiracial history of the southwest offers a U.S. model of *mestizaje* for the future.⁷⁸ Burke rightly recognizes that *mestizaje* is characterized by being both productive and agonal, that is, painful. Here one only need to recall Anzaldúa's image of the bleeding wound: "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."⁷⁹ In contrast to previous explorations of *mestizaje* and pastness, Rodriguez treats Hispanics as newcomers, overlooks the Southwest, and turns his gaze to the East and Tocqueville. While this move seems incompatible with previous articulations of *mestizaje*, stripping *mestizaje* of its historical and agonal component works to make it postracial—that is, eliding the legacy of inequality fashions a seemingly power-neutral model of *mestizaje*, one that fails to acknowledge historic, collective pain and that thus will insidiously support the domination of the status quo.

This dehistoricization is no mere oversight but serves the discursive and ideological context of colorblindness from which *Brown* and brown emerges. Over the past two decades scholars such as Nancy Peterson, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Karyn McKinney have connected American amnesia and the concurrent emplotting of the past to the structuring of the U.S. racial imaginary and power relations.⁸⁰ For instance, Bonilla-Silva and McKinney contend that everyday whiteness of the post-civil rights era engages in rhetorical situations that disconnect past from present. Individuals may say "the past is the past" or "I didn't own any slaves" as a way of evading recognition of contemporary forms of inequality.⁸¹ Rodriguez's telling takes this strategy one further, offering a whitewashed past that never was. As noted earlier, such a dehistoricization firmly positions Rodriguez's effort within the contemporary dominant racial imaginary and away from previous iterations of *mestizaje* that have worked against more blatant forms of white supremacy. Previous articulations of *mestizaje* thrived on evocations of the past; they rooted contemporary mixedness in the violence and erotics of history. Rodriguez charges *mestizaje* with postracial potential by erasing those violences, referring to them in the abstract or casting them as solely erotic.⁸² In doing so, he forges a usable past, but to what end and at what cost?

A New American Exceptionalism, or What Can Brown Do for U.S.?

Rodriguez's fashioning of a usable past and his romance of individualism help repackage a central myth of U.S. nationalism and racial ideology, for Rodriguez's brown vision ultimately serves to revise and replace the concept of the Melting Pot. Here it is necessary to recognize the dual nature of the Melting

Pot. This narrative, which traces its lineage to the eighteenth century, cloaks hierarchy and domination in the guise of equality. Consider the logics of the metaphor. A melting pot, or crucible, may be used to forge a mixture of metals. In this amalgamation model, as copper and tin are melted to become bronze, multiple cultures are forged to become a new American identity. This is a common, romantic, and limited understanding of power-neutral race relations wherein the United States is inheritor of disparate cultural traditions and inequality has no place at the American table. However, drawing upon the phrasing of Walter Dignolo, the Melting Pot has a darker side.⁸³ Crucibles may also be used to purify—unwanted elements may be separated and burned away in the process. For example, iron ore contains a mixture of other elements. Only after the intense heat of the melting pot can one extract pure iron. Arguably, calls for assimilation based on the mythos of the Melting Pot fall into the logic of the second usage. Significantly, the dual logics of the Melting Pot metaphor are not merely incompatible nor mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they are mutually constitutive and interpenetrating. The appearance of power-neutral diverse heritages becoming one in the amalgamation model gives cover, particularly in the post-civil rights era, for the racial hierarchy established in the purification model. Rodriguez's articulation of mestizaje—his efforts to reimagine the United States brownly through the eyes of historically subordinated groups as well as his rumination upon a complex, brown individualism—work against Melting Pot assimilation.

Significantly, Rodriguez's brown challenges both visions of the Melting Pot. While as Paula Moya has illustrated that Rodriguez's earlier works advocated a unidirectional model of assimilation evoked in the purification model of the Melting Pot, *Brown* marks a significant departure.⁸⁴ In this effort, Rodriguez depicts a United States that is now and has always been brown—that is impure. If anything, Rodriguez exalts the United States as the great impurity, indelibly shaped by the erotics of desire and vast cultural interchanges. Thus, the impurities of Melting Pot assimilation will not burn away. Perhaps most importantly, his vision also contests the amalgamation model. The Melting Pot metaphor and its logics result in a static homogenous mixture of constitutive elements. However, as suggested by John Francis Burke, mestizaje requires and produces heterogeneity and dynamism.⁸⁵ This is certainly the case with Rodriguez's brown vision. For Rodriguez, mestizaje-brownness-impurity is not simply a product but an always evolving process. The mestizaje intimated by Tocqueville's racial triad in the past continues today through the influx of Asian and Hispanic peoples and cultures.⁸⁶ Moreover, Rodriguez articulates brownness within individual as well as across the collective. This emphasis on individual impurity and contradiction disrupts the amalgamation model of the Melting Pot at a greater, more particular level. Indeed, Rodriguez exposes the difficult fact that unlike copper, tin, or iron neither white America nor Mexican Americans are reducible to fixed, homogenous, elemental, and pure formations.

Rodriguez's effort to exalt impurity can also be seen in his reclamation of brown as a color with social and political meanings. Perhaps most noticeably,

Rodriguez engages the long, wide stream of American thought that has viewed brown impurity as wholly negative. At the outset, Rodriguez acknowledges that the dominant, white U.S. imaginary renders brown as dirtlike and contaminant: “Apart from stool sample, there is no browner smear in the American imagination than the Rio Grande.”⁸⁷ Renderings of the external and abject—in this case, Mexico—undergird the notion of whiteness (or America as whiteness) as purity and the racial logics of hypodescent, wherein contact with darkness and brownness may potentially make one unwhite and unfit.⁸⁸ Rodriguez takes such treatments of brownness as negative contaminant head-on, seeking to undermine the American mythos of purity. Like Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa, and others, Rodriguez sees the impurities embodied in *mestizaje* not as defilement but as exaltation. He reclaims the brown of the “smear” as he rejects racial, sexual, and philosophical purity. In this way, his writing intersects with Chicana/o deployments of *mestizaje* and brownness that rejected white supremacy.

As noted earlier, Rodriguez’s embrace of impurity is liberating for the individual. However, this impure individuality sets the stage for a nationalist project wherein Rodriguez imagines his postracial *mestizaje* as embodied in the American *mestizo*. Extending his earlier writings, Rodriguez imagines the American *I* of individualism. For Rodriguez, the American *I* contains competing aspects of identity: gay, Catholic, Mexican, and American. However, the *I* remains irreducible;⁸⁹ that is, by embracing the American *I*, one simply cannot be grouped into a collectivity based on his constituent identity markers. He is and refuses to be fixedly Catholic, gay, Mexican, and American as solitary, strategic models of identification. And there is danger in purity, in “a desire for cleansing, of choosing, of being one thing or another. The brown child may grow up to war against himself. To attempt to be singular rather than several. May seek to obliterate a part of himself. May seek to obliterate others.”⁹⁰ Importantly, this intellectual move maps a nationalist project onto the racial project of the Enlightenment. Rodriguez seems to locate the American *I* as the model for humanity. The American *I* is multiply constituted and irreducible, the impure fruit of brown desires and acts. But if the American *I* is postracially *mestizo*, who is its other? Clearly, the other of brown impurity is purity, and its homogenizing impulses, in any form.

In this way, brown replaces the Melting Pot as a manifestation of American Exceptionalism. Rodriguez’s postracial American *mestizaje* is juxtaposed to all monocultural others. Through her provocative analysis of race and neoliberalism, Jodi Melamed provides a frame for understanding brown as a racial, nationalist project. Melamed argues that in recent decades, multiculturalism has worked as an alibi to obfuscate the economic agenda of neoliberalism. The result has been “a multiculturalist U.S. exceptionalism”: “According to this logic, multiculturalism in the United States is so singular and successful that the nation embodies the universal, so that U.S. government and military actions are to be understood as being for a supranatural good.”⁹¹ As Melamed demonstrates, the suturing together of neoliberalism and multiculturalism pits the multicultural U.S. global citizens

against monocultural enemies at home and abroad, whether they are Muslim fundamentalist terrorists or “disgruntled immigrants and people of color within Europe and the United States.”⁹²

Rodriguez concludes the book by positioning a multicultural United States against the dangers of monocultural others, casting the United States as potentially vulnerable and innocent. Rodriguez ruminates upon the attacks of September 11, 2001:

On that day, several medieval men in the guise of multicultural American and in the manner of American pop culture, rode dreadnoughts through the sky. These were men from a world of certain, some hours distant—a world where men presume to divine, to enforce, to protectively wear the will of God; a world where men wage incessant war against impurity that lies without (puritans!) and so they mistrust, they wither whatever they touch. . . . These several inauthentic men, of fake I.D., of brutish sentimentality, went missing from U.S. immigration rolls, were presumed lost and assimilated into brown America, these men of certainty refused to be seduced by modernity, postmodernity; by what I have been at pains to describe as brown, as making.⁹³

Here Rodriguez casts as evil those who were willing to kill based on their presumed certainty of purity. While the murder of thousands of people is a clear target to describe as evil, for Rodriguez this violence is but an extension of the logics he locates elsewhere. Importantly, Rodriguez identifies internal and external collectivities that embrace authenticities of difference: Puritans and skinheads, Chicanos and al Qaeda. Indeed, he continues this move in his recent book *Darling*, where he deploys rigid belief in purity to link his discussions of al Qaeda and Chicano nationalism.⁹⁴ Such a move renders Chicanas/os and Muslim fundamentalists as monocultural enemies of a multicultural, postracial world in which the United States serves as model. As suggested by Melamed’s analysis of multiculturalism’s relationship to neoliberalism, the political vision and collective grievances of monocultural enemies, internal and external, are dismissed as backward, destructive, and un-American. Through making mestizaje postracial and reading it onto America’s past, present, and future, Rodriguez simultaneously repackages American exceptionalism in a new form: awash in a sea of corruption, America as idea remains morally pure in part through its cultural impurities. Perhaps without irony, the Melting Pot myth that mestizaje seeks to disrupt is remade anew.

Beware the Brown Promise

It would be unwise to deny the political possibilities offered by Rodríguez's brown project. His exploration of a postracial American mestizaje carves out space for the individuals who do not fit so easily within imagined, homogenized communities. That is, in the vein of Anzaldúa, Gordon, and others, Rodríguez recognizes that most challenging of theoretical concepts: people are complex. Rodríguez's meditation on brown also clearly responds to fears of a browning of America. While Samuel Huntington, Patrick Buchanan, and others have lamented the rising numbers and cultural influence of Latinos within the United States, Rodríguez undercuts this white fear of brownness. Rodríguez imagines the United States as once, currently, and always brown. Moreover, for Rodríguez, the language to describe impurity—brown, mixedness, mestizaje—is the great gift that Latinos can offer the United States.⁹⁵ However, as critics have previously asserted, beware the liberatory promises of neoliberalism and colorblindness. These overlapping ideological and discursive formations promise much in the way of freedom and individuality as they deliver little.

Notably, the Huntingtonian model is not the only way to fear a browning of the United States and its racial order. In his influential *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva posits the potential for the Latin Americanization of race in the United States, yet this is not something to exalt. While Rodríguez sees brown as Latin America's gift to the United States, Bonilla-Silva warns that critics should beware mestizaje's false promise. Not only is there significant racial and economic stratification in Latin America, but mestizaje "has worked as an ideology to help keep race below the social radar and better safeguard white power."⁹⁶ In this way, Rodríguez's brown project may not so much undermine the concept of race in the United States. Rather, *Brown's* postracial mestizaje may obfuscate the ability to make visible the power of race—it may subvert efforts to name racial grievances and take collective action around them.

While much of this article has pushed for reading *Brown* in the context of colorblindness and neoliberalism, here one may conclude how Rodríguez's postracial mestizaje aligns with Mexico's historic deployment of mestizaje as a nation-building project. As Saldaña-Portillo and others have noted about mestizaje's role in consolidating a national racial identity in Mexico by erasing other racial categories, Rodríguez's brown may provide the language to name impurity, but it is also a language that flattens out difference and occludes inequality. Ultimately, Rodríguez's project fails to provide a means for articulating grievances beyond the individual and for building meaningful collectivities for social change. In this way, Rodríguez's postracial mestizaje offers little but a corporate multiculturalism. One that can be commodified and packaged. One that reinforces the social order—America as a diverse, shining melting pot, mixed metaphor and all.

Notes

1. Rodriguez and Hanson, "The Browning of America: Interview." A note on terminology: In the fields of American studies and Chicana/o studies, "United States" and "Latina/o" are readily deployed terms. In contrast, Rodriguez's own writing makes use of "America" and "Hispanic," respectively. While I recognize that the connotations of these terms do not make them synonymous, I do engage Rodriguez's chosen terminology when trying to approximate his voice.
2. Roediger, "White Looks," 44; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 2–4.
3. Daniel Hosang Martinez's *Racial Propositions* explores how liberal discourses of fairness and equality have been used to garner support for otherwise inegalitarian measures in California. Arizona's SB 1070 uses the seemingly race-neutral phrase "reasonable suspicion" even as most recognize that the bill will be applied to Latinas/os. Arizona's anti-ethnic studies bill, HB 2281, relies on the discourse of individuality to reject the histories and literatures of aggrieved peoples.
4. Fears of the "browning of America" are exemplified in the writings of Samuel Huntington and Patrick Buchanan. For example, see Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and Buchanan's *State of Emergency*.
5. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 197.
6. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, 214–15.
7. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.
8. Rivera, "Richard Rodriguez," 9; Saldivar, "Ideologies of the Self," 27; Nerccio, *Tex[t]-Mex*, 144, 174–80.
9. Bruce-Novoa, *Retrospace*, 130. Notably, Henry Staten's essay takes up where Bruce-Novoa leaves off, contending that Rodriguez's writing is not so much a rejection of Chicanidad but an embrace of the upwardly mobile middle class. Staten, "Ethnic Authenticity."
10. While I contend that the relationship has softened, Rodriguez remains quite controversial within the field.
11. In part, this development of the field involves the rejection of the internal colonial model, which privileged Chicana/o unity over diversity of experiences. See Saragoza, "Recent Chicano Historiography."
12. For a critique of Rodriguez's construction and deployment of binaries, see Rosaura Sánchez's "Calculated Musings." For a discussion of Rodriguez's use of irony and inversion in these binaries, see Staten. Sánchez, "Calculated Musings," 60. Staten, "Ethnic Authenticity," 104.
13. Consider, for example, that Rodriguez recognizes that the imagined rooms and social world of William Makepeace Thackeray "would not have admitted me." Rodriguez, *Brown*, 13.
14. Indeed, several scholars have sought to create a dialogue between the work of Rodriguez and Anzaldúa, whether through emphasizing their differences or their commonalities. Saenz, "In the Borderlands of Identity There Are Only Fragments"; Saldaña-Portillo, "Who's the Indian in Aztlán?"; Rodriguez and Arias, "Brown Is the Color of Philosophy."
15. Rodriguez, *Brown*, xi.
16. *Ibid.*, 125–26.
17. This intervention against the black/white binary positions Rodriguez's work in a much broader conversation within the field of critical ethnic studies. There is a growing body of work that examines the racialization of Latinas/os within the United States and explores how it may fit within or disrupt the black/white binary.
18. Rodriguez, *Brown*, xi.
19. Significantly, because of the complex legal and social racialization of Latinos in the United States, the concept of hypodecent has historically not always applied to white-Latino relationships.
20. Paula Moya's "Cultural Particularity versus Universal Humanity" reads Rodriguez in the context of other minority neoconservatives. I am drawing on her contextualization, for Moya provides a model for moving Rodriguez's discussion of mestizaje away from previous Mexican and Chicana/o articulations.
21. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 25–52.
22. Importantly, colorblindness shapes white racial identity and allows domination to hide in plain sight, even from the consciousness of its practitioners.
23. While neoliberalism has its roots in laissez-faire economic theory, numerous scholars have noted how its central precepts have shaped the discourses surrounding racial and other justice struggles. As will be explored later in the essay, neoliberalism both marks an exaltation with abstract liberalism and the concept of the autonomous individual subject as well as provides the intellectual grounds for appropriating and commodifying multiculturalism.
24. Vasconcelos, *La raza cosmica*, 38–39.
25. *Ibid.*, 4–5, 30.
26. His argument is not quite *blancamiento*, for he contends whites would also be elevated in the creation of *la raza cosmica*. Rather, he positions whites as the currently ascended civilization. Vasconcelos, *La raza comica*, 4–5.
27. Saldaña-Portillo, "Who's the Indian in Aztlán?" 405–7.

28. The Spanish myth, or the “fantasy heritage” was the claim of pure Spanish ancestry by Mexican Americans as a way to negotiate the racial terrain of white supremacy in the United States. McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, 35–47. Nieto-Phillips, *Language of Blood*.

29. Gonzales, *Yo Soy Joaquín*, 100.

30. Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, 4.

31. Saldaña-Portillo, “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán?” 417–19.

32. Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, 19.

33. Rodríguez and Arias, “Brown Is the Color of Philosophy,” 272–73.

34. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 1.

35. *Ibid.*, 69.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Ultimately, Rodríguez suggests that Mexico and Latin America provide the language to discover and describe the mixture that has long been a part of U.S. history.

38. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 192. While this essay largely contends that one should read Rodríguez’s mestizo vision not against its Mexican and Chicana/o predecessors, one cannot help but note that both Rodríguez and Vasconcelos both draw heavily upon the mythohistorical tradition of Western Civilization to construct their various razas cosmicas. Perhaps these stylistics underscore their potential ideological similarities.

39. Rodríguez and Hanson, “The Browning of America.”

40. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 204.

41. *Ibid.*, 224.

42. *Ibid.*, 230.

43. *Ibid.*, 276.

44. This homogenizing tendency did not conclude with the mass mobilizations of the movement years. Notably, the function of strategic essentialism shaped the Chicano backlash to Rodríguez. Moreover, the homogenizing impulse of many identitarian movements continue today even after forceful critiques have been offered over the years.

45. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 34, 66.

46. Rendón, *Chicano Manifesto*, 96–97; Chabram-Dernersesian, “And, Yes ... the Earth Did Part,” 40–41.

47. Alarcón, “Topology of Hunger,” 142; Moya, “Cultural Particularity versus Universal Humanity,” 82.

48. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 142.

49. McKinney, *Being White*, 3–5; Garner, *Whiteness*, 4.

50. McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 4.

51. Skyhorse, *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, 155.

52. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 39.

53. *Ibid.*, 35.

54. *Ibid.*, 35, 39–40.

55. *Ibid.*, 12.

56. Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*, 3.

57. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 27.

58. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 27.

59. Moya, “Cultural Particularity versus Universal Humanity,” 81.

60. Joel Olson and others have made this point vociferously. While not an ethnic group, whites are a political group and whiteness is a political category. Olson, *Abolition of White Democracy*, xviii–xix.

61. Bonilla Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 30–36; Hosang, *Racial Propositions*, 14–20.

62. Rodríguez deploys the Canadian model of the mosaic for his argument. Notably, he takes the mosaic quite literally in its separation of distinct peoples. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 164.

63. Notably, Joel Olson examines the same scene from Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* to articulate the compatibility of white supremacy and democracy. Olson, *Abolition of White Democracy*, 47–53.

64. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 1. Tocqueville’s chapter on the racial triad can be found in *Democracy in America*, 302–96.

65. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 3.

66. *Ibid.*, 3.

67. Saldaña-Portillo, “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán?” 417.

68. Alarcón, “Topology of Hunger,” 146.

69. Rodríguez, *Brown*, 197.

70. *Ibid.*, 209.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*, 208.

73. *Ibid.*, 127.

74. *Ibid.*, 117, 191.

75. Haney López, “Retaining Race,” 291.

76. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 127.
 77. Harvey, *Brief History*, 69.
 78. Burke, *Mestizo Democracy*, xi.
 79. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.
 80. Peterson, *Against Amnesia*.
 81. McKinney, *Being White*, 125–30; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 77–83.
 82. Here I am not suggesting that there were no interracial erotics of desire, even in the peculiar institution of U.S. slavery, but rather that those erotics—in Rodriguez’s telling—are divorced from power and violence. For instance, while he briefly mentions the potential of rape, shame, and sin, he chooses to focus on power neutral “white-black eroticism”: “We know from the gossip outside books that generations before Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, black female and white male pairings existed, some lasting from youth till death did them part.” In this way Rodriguez’s telling of American mestizaje’s past is marked by historical erasure. By casting interracialism as the result of forbidden desire, he occludes the history of rape as a tactic for domination and the use of sex to reproduce one’s *property*. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 133–34.
 83. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*.
 84. Moya, “Cultural Particularity versus Universal Humanity,” 78.
 85. Burke, *Mestizo Democracy*, 8.
 86. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 191.
 87. *Ibid.*, xii. Notably, Rodriguez’s comparison of the Rio Grande, feces, and brownness could foster an interesting dialogue with Anzaldúa’s often quoted description of the border as “*una herida abierta*.” Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.
 88. Critical to the white supremacist nature of the logics of hypodescent, the inverse does not hold true. That is, a small portion of white ancestry does not make one white. Thus, only whiteness occupies the position of ultimate purity. Importantly, however, Latinos have a historically complicated relationship to white supremacy and the concept of hypodecent in the United States. Indeed, the ability to claim some Spanish ancestry allowed Mexican Americans to claim white legal standing, forming an inversion of the traditional one-drop rule that shaped black/white U.S. race relations.
 89. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 200.
 90. *Ibid.*, 226.
 91. Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 16.
 92. *Ibid.*, 17.
 93. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 226–27.
 94. Rodriguez, *Darling*, 8.
 95. Rodriguez, *Brown*, 142.
 96. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 182.

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