



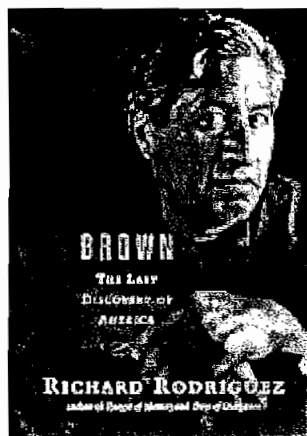
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Brown: The Last Discovery of America

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In April 1996, *Harper's* magazine ran a spirited debate on "Our Next Race Question" between philosopher Cornel West and Berkeley anthropologist Klor de Alva. De Alva argued that traditional American racial categories of black and white are simplistic, disregarding cultural, linguistic and ethnic aspects of identity, and that African Americans are not "black," but actually Anglos whose ancestors came from Africa. The Harper's discussion provoked much public debate and eventually resulted in a book on Black-Latino relations.

But the debate didn't get truly poetic until now. In *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, social critic Richard Rodriguez engages these issues, challenging American racial labels, but with charm and subtlety, in prose both lyrical and teasing.

Rodriguez is gay, a Republican, the Yale-educated Catholic son of working-class Mexican immigrants. His contradictions make him particularly American. His first book, *Hunger for Memory*, was the start of a three-volume memoir, of which *Brown* is the final installment. The second volume, *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father*, came out in 1992. But to call these books memoirs is a vast understatement of what they do.

If the first two volumes mused, respectively, on class and ethnicity, *Brown* is a meditation on race in America, a celebration of hybridity, and a call to blur, broaden or do away with American racial categories. "I write of blood that is blended," says Rodriguez. "I extol impurity...I write about race in

America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America."

America, Rodriguez begins, is the historical and cultural product of "the meeting of the Indian, the African, and the European in colonial America. Red. Black. White. The founding palette." That conversation between red, black and white continues to this day, and is invigorated by waves of immigration, leading to a "browning" of America. In particular, it is Hispanics who "brown an America that traditionally sees itself as black and white," shifting the axis along which America defines itself from East-to-West to North-to-South, and make the traditional racial categories of Black and White (and the more recent ones of Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander) obsolete.

Although the book is about race — and includes an anecdote about Rodriguez, as a youngster, cutting his elbow with a razor to see if the "brown" would come out — the focus is not on skin tone. Brown is not meant "in the sense of pigmentation, necessarily, but brown because mixed, confused, lumped, impure, unpasteurized, as motives are mixed, and the 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."

So, if "brown" connotes mixing and multiplicity, Rodriguez's book lives up to its title. The nine chapters touch on a plethora of issues, ideas and cultural figures: affirmative action, English, the American novel, hip hop, the American West, immigration, gay life, James Baldwin, Octavio Paz, Malcolm X, Herman Melville, Richard Nixon, JFK, LBJ — a heady brew of ideas and personalities central to Rodriguez's life and worldview. All become fodder to drive home his point about the "brownness" of American lives, and the limiting and culturally damaging character of our racial discourse.

"I think of the nation entire — all Americans — as my people," he writes. "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."

Black and White may have defined our past, but the future is brown, predicts Rodriguez. He writes that he is thrilled by "brown children," and fondly lists the ethnic mixtures — and their cute new labels — he has encountered, from a Mexican/African American girl who says she's "Blaxican," to the young "Hinjews" (Hindu-Jewish) and "Negropinos" (Black-Filipino) he's met. Echoing de Alva and other Latino thinkers' impatience with American racial categories, Rodriguez underlines the inconsistency of a system that sees Italian- and Russian-Americans as "white" and part of the majority, but Argentines and Colombians of East European descent as "Latino," "Hispanic," "persons of color" and therefore minority. Rodriguez contests the label Hispanic (which came into currency under his hero, Nixon) because it is reductionist, conflating an ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage.

Rodriguez raises eyebrows with his condemnation of Halle Berry's describing herself as black ("Halle Berry is not black, not by any definition that I understand," he told *The Boston Globe*. "Halle Berry describing herself as black is...a holdover from Jim Crow and a Protestant inability to realize how intermarried we are.") and support of Tiger Woods, who he says is reading for "a freedom from color — an idea of no boundary," which is an exclusively "white freedom."

The final frontier, according to Rodriguez, will be "the freedom of the African-American to admit brown. To speak freely of ancestors, of Indians and Scots and German and plantation owner. To speak the truth of themselves. That is the great advantage I can see for blacks in the rise of the so-called Hispanics." Brown-ness is liberating.

What then of blackness? Rodriguez does not hide debt to and admiration for black culture, which he says is the defining culture of America. He notes the irony of how whites hunger for black culture, "which they see curiously see as freedom of expression, glamour of transcendence." Rodriguez expresses his admiration for the African Americans who transformed the English language: "I cannot imagine myself a writer...without the example of African slaves stealing the English language, learning to read against the law...the African-American took the paper-white English and remade it...making it idiosyncratically glamorous, making it impossible for any American to use English henceforward without remembering them, making English so cool, so jet, so festival, that children only want it that way."

Any criticism of *Brown* will undoubtedly involve the author's alleged naiveté or inexperience with racism, and the claim that as long as racism exists, the label "black" must be adhered to for solidarity and political mobilization. Cornel West responded to de Alva's criticism of the label with his now-famous Boom! Explanation: "There have been some black people in America who fundamentally believed that they were wholeheartedly, full-fledged American. They have been mistaken. They tried to pursue that option - Boom! Jim Crow hit them. They tried to press that option — Boom! Vanilla suburbs didn't allow them in."

But Rodriguez is not naive about racism in America or elsewhere. He notes the persistent color prejudice in Latin America: "watching Telemundo is like watching Swedish TV." And he's not unaware of the Boom! argument. He writes of his friend Darrell, who says he is black "because that is what the white cop sees when he looks at me." Rodriguez responds: "Of course I understand what you're talking about. Race is the sine qua non among American transactions... [But] I believe I do not truly understand... You resort to imprecision to color yourself from another's regard... Do you believe you uphold the one-drop theory by your insistence on black, because that is the way the white cop sees you?"

Black nationalists will probably not be swayed by Rodriguez's cryptic response, but *Brown* is rich and redemptive otherwise, offering a serious reflection on how "brown" Hispanics fit into a black and white world, how traditional labels bury the multiple cultural backgrounds most of us boast. It also sets up a compelling and original way to understand a rapidly changing America, where new boxes are being added to the national census form, and more and more Americans are boasting culturally and ethnically amalgamated identities. Most significantly, Rodriguez presents a refreshing and unapologetic celebration of hybridity, in-betweenness, and cultural and racial miscegenation.

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