Dear Author,

1. **Please check these proofs carefully.** It is the responsibility of the corresponding author to check these and approve or amend them. A second proof is not normally provided. Taylor & Francis cannot be held responsible for uncorrected errors, even if introduced during the production process. Once your corrections have been added to the article, it will be considered ready for publication.

Please limit changes at this stage to the correction of errors. You should not make insignificant changes, improve prose style, add new material, or delete existing material at this stage. Making a large number of small, non-essential corrections can lead to errors being introduced. We therefore reserve the right not to make such corrections.

For detailed guidance on how to check your proofs, please see [http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/production/checkingproofs.asp](http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/production/checkingproofs.asp).

2. **Please review the table of contributors below and confirm that the first and last names are structured correctly and that the authors are listed in the correct order of contribution.** This check is to ensure that your name will appear correctly online and when the article is indexed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Given name(s)</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Suffix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michael Nieto</td>
<td>Garcia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Queries are marked in the margins of the proofs.

AUTHOR QUERIES

General query: You have warranted that you have secured the necessary written permission from the appropriate copyright owner for the reproduction of any text, illustration, or other material in your article. (Please see http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/preparation/permission.asp.) Please check that any required acknowledgements have been included to reflect this.

Q1 Please confirm which one is correct.
Q2 Reference Bona and Maini (2006) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q3 Reference Cutter (September 2009) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q4 Reference Gonzales (2009) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q5 Reference Palumbo-Liu (1995) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q6 Reference Payne (1992) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q7 Please provide page no. for the referred article title in the reference [Rodriguez, 2003].
Q8 Reference Singh et al. (1996) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q9 Reference Stavans et al. (2011) is provided in the list but not cited in the text. Please supply citation details or delete the reference from the reference list.
Q10 Please confirm the addition of end quote.
Michael Nieto Garcia

THE INAUTHENTIC ETHNIC
Richard Rodriguez's Brown and Resisting Essentialist Narratives of Ethnic Identity

This essay explores Richard Rodriguez's resistance to narratives of “ethnic authenticity” through a reconsideration of how we read Rodriguez's texts subsequent to the radical message of cultural and racial miscegenation celebrated in Brown (2002). Rodriguez’s meditations on identity in Brown resonate with Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of mestizaje, and trouble the waters of any monolithic notion of ethnic identity. A close reading of Rodriguez’s critique of ethnic authenticity illuminates his underlying philosophical worldview as well as why he takes — notoriously so for his critics — some of the stances that he does. An analysis of both its eternal recurrence and the logic by which it operates helps scholars to understand how and why lingering traces of ethnic authenticity can creep into conceptualizations of even such ostensibly anti-essentialist theorizations of identity as hybridity. Whether resistant or revisionist in spirit, rereading Rodriguez acknowledges the irredeemable complexity of identity — intersubjective, contradiction-laden, and brown.

Keywords Richard Rodriguez; autobiography; identity; ethnicity; Chicana/o; Literature; ethnic studies

Perhaps the word most often invoked in describing Richard Rodriguez is provocative. The early Rodriguez was especially provocative (invoking, here, the full euphemistic sense with which the epithet is often applied to Rodriguez) to Chicana/o scholars. Having struggled through and beyond the Civil Rights era to affirm the value of a minority identity, Chicana/o scholars were particularly troubled by the assimilationist arguments in Rodriguez's first book, Hunger of Memory (1982).1 To critics who did not self-identify as Chicana or Chicano, the tone of the criticism directed at Rodriguez suggested the vitriol of a family quarrel, the deep sources of which would always be beyond full comprehension by outsiders.2 Criticism of this timbre leveled at Rodriguez seemed to be more about identity politics than about the specific contours of Rodriguez’s oppositional stance to affirmative action and bilingual education programs — not, that is, about how best to achieve assimilation and social integration for minorities, but about which communities and community-defined identities one is to assimilate to, and who is to define those communities and identities.3 To the many critics who framed Rodriguez’s texts primarily in terms of political identification, attaching a political label to Rodriguez seemed an indispensable cognitive heuristic with which to equip other readers approaching his texts. Early critics often simply referred to Rodriguez as a “conservative minority,” but of late the term “neoconservative” has

---

become current when trying to categorize Rodriguez’s politics. Distinguished Chicana scholar Norma Alarcón seems to have originated the use of this political label when arguing in a 1995 essay that “Rodriguez demonstrates that neoconservative liberal cynicism knows no bounds” (150). Paula Moya cemented the use of the term in her rigorously identity-focused 2002 examination of Rodriguez, stating in précis form that “Richard Rodriguez exemplifies the situation of the neoconservative intellectual in the United States” (101–2). Both Alarcón and Moya invoke the neoconservative classification to emphasize Rodriguez’s political individualism, specifically what might be called his “ethnic individualism”: Rodriguez’s “hyperindividualized citizen-subject,” his resistance to “collective racial identities,” and his “refusal of ethnicity, except as a private phenomenon” (Alarcón 143; Moya 103; Alarcón 142). Given the politically unconventional combination of Rodriguez’s liberalism with his contrarian stance on the highly politicized minority issues of affirmative action and bilingual education—a stance which, particularly in the midst of the culture wars of the 1980s, seemed to dovetail with a conservative political platform that sometimes used race as a wedge issue—one can see why Alarcón, Moya, and other scholars found the neoconservative tag so convenient: Rodriguez confounded conventional political identities by refusing to reconcile the contradictions of a complex ethnic identity—classifying him as a neoconservative affixed a pre-existing (and therefore epistemically useful) identity marker to Rodriguez, allowing critics to more easily conceptualize his politics.

The popularity of the term “neoconservative” as applied to Rodriguez raises interesting questions. First, among these, is whether conceptualizing Rodriguez as a neoconservative focalizes more than it distorts our understanding of Rodriguez, his thought, and his texts. Even a resistant reading of Rodriguez’s three autobiographical books offers a multitude of examples that complicate the categorization of the author as a conservative of any stripe. To the textual evidence, one must add Rodriguez’s open support of gay marriage and the liberalness of his Catholicism. What’s more, Rodriguez himself publicly identifies as “left of center” (quoted in Gillespie and Postrel). Adding to the confusion is the dominant sense of the term “neoconservative” today. Namely, as a designation for a person or position that advocates an activist, unilateral, and militaristic foreign policy, as in the neocons William Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz and the neoconservative ideology that helped sway the Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003. By this definition, thinking of Rodriguez as a neoconservative—when his “foreign policy” might best be described as cosmopolitan, and though he is a sharp critic of America’s us-versus-them racial and cultural logic—would seem to cloud our conception of his views more than to clarify them.

A second, and related, question is whether our present understanding of Rodriguez’s texts justifies the neoconservative label. Much has changed over the intervening decades since Rodriguez’s first book appeared. In his two subsequent autobiographical books, Rodriguez’s notions of ethnic American identity widened and became more multidimensional, as did those of the ever-more inclusive Chicano, then Chicano/a, and now Latino community. Not either-or, but both . . . and more. Of the evolution of Rodriguez’s own thought, it is important, first, to note that Rodriguez’s political views do not take the characteristic forms of political activism. What Rodriguez expresses in his books and in public appearances is, at most, qualified advocacy greatly nuanced by irony and ambiguity. More than anything else, Rodriguez is a reflective, peripatetic essayist, in the tradition of Montaigne—more interested in exploring the contours of
theme than in (despite his polemical bravado) didactic conclusions. And like Montaigne, Rodriguez’s essays – pensive and poignant – scintillate with the prismatic refraction of complex thought, tacking one direction and then another in a style that resists a literalist reading. In his essays, many of which approach the status of prose-poems, Rodriguez frequently, and readily, acknowledges personal and political contradictions. Paradoxes tumble from the page: “you will often find brown in this book as the cement between leaves of paradox” (Brown xi). What’s more, assimilationist sentiments conveyed in Hunger of Memory are substantially revised in Days of Obligation (1992) and Brown (2002).

In those two later texts, Rodriguez reorients his own thinking to reflect the evolution of race relations and American culture over the two-decade time span since the publication of Hunger in 1982. In his most recent book, Rodriguez cuts across the grain of the conventional notion of assimilation (as a one-way march toward a static and monolithic mainstream culture) to, instead, underscore the fluid, mestizo nature of the “mainstream,” and to herald the triumph of the interpenetration of cultures, for which the very title, Brown, is a metaphor. Brown is cultural impurity. It is, to invoke the image offered by Rodriguez at speaking engagements, the color you get when all the crayons melt together in the sun.

Rodriguez himself identifies the different emphasis of each book as, in chronological order, class, ethnicity, race (Brown xiv). In the first instance, Rodriguez’s class consciousness entails a conception of socioeconomic disadvantage and the possibility for class mobility that acknowledges the role of cultural differences (of socialization by socioeconomic class, such as that described in Annette Lareau’s book Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life) inculcated not only by formal education and the hidden curriculum, but also by print culture. Foregrounding ethnicity in his second book, Days of Obligation, Rodriguez’s reductively binary representation of the cultural differences between Protestant North and Catholic South (the USA and Mexico), serves not only for narrative and rhetorical contrast, but also to strengthen the emphasis on cultural differences over racial ones. In his most recent book, Brown, the much-criticized cultural dichotomies found in Hunger of Memory and Days of Obligation merge into syntheses as Rodriguez emphasizes not so much race as racial and cultural miscegenation. Through his arguments about the profound and irredeemable interpenetration of cultures (racial cultures as well as ethnic ones), Rodriguez hopes to do nothing less than to “undermine[...] the notion of race in America” (Brown xi).

This essay aims to take that hope one step further: to undermine overdetermined notions of “ethnic authenticity.” Rodriguez, I argue, offers an example of resistance to those narratives of ethnic identity that have transmuted into hegemonic discourses of ethnic authenticity. What follows begins with a critique of ethnic authenticity that aims to explain both its eternal recurrence and the logic by which it operates. A subsequent section extends the critique of ethnic authenticity by recapitulating much of Rodriguez’s own decades-long criticism of it and laying the groundwork for understanding his philosophical worldview and why he takes – notoriously so for his detractors – some of the stances that he does. After sketching Rodriguez’s own views, I briefly trace the change in tenor of the critical response to Rodriguez following the publication of his second and third books before turning to a critique of the ways in which lingering traces of ethnic authenticity can creep into conceptualizations of even such ostensibly anti-essentialist theorizations of identity as hybridity.
Against ethnic authenticity

In debates over identity politics and ethnic literature, one finds a persistent return to essentialist notions of identity. While most theorists of identity are rightly wary of the essentialist turn in the form of something like Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*, essentialist notions such as “collective consciousness” and “racial memory” continue to have particular appeal for projects heavily invested in collective ethnic and racial identities. In his essay “Ghosts of Essentialism: Racial Memory as Epistemological Claim,” John S. Su traces the persistence of essentialism in ethnic literature and theories of ethnic identity. Su explains the eternal recurrence of essentialism by noting the enticing appeal of progressive notions such as “strategic essentialism,” concluding that “the hope for achieving greater social objectivity ironically guarantees that essence will continue to be a haunting presence in academic scholarship as well as in ethnic American fiction” (380). While Su is interested in explaining (or explaining away) “racial memory,” this essay is concerned with narratives of ethnic authenticity. Ethnic authenticity transmutes essentialist logic into ethnic terms, trading biological claims for (mostly) cultural ones. Though the fallacy of ethnic authenticity has been called attention to by scholars as prominent as Werner Sollors, and though contrarian critics such as Walter Benn Michaels have noted the trend from biological to cultural essentialism (and denounced it), the tempting expediency of nonbiological essentialist claims ensures their persistence. Such temptation is particularly alluring in any discussion of Latino identity. The minority category of Latino is not a racial categorization, thus categorically excluding claims to either biological or mythical (and mystical) ties following racial lines. But ethnic authenticity readily fills the void for identity claims that would otherwise be staked out through recourse to racial essentialism. The assumption, for example, that Latino identity must be oppositional to American culture serves the political and practical goal of uniting Latinos as a minority community in the absence of any inherent and everlasting essential sameness. But such expectations resurrect the ghost of essentialism by defining (in cultural terms) Latino ethnicity as perpetually and irrevocably opposed to some cultural Other.

To take a literary example, we might consider the expectation held by some that the Latino reader’s literary consciousness must necessarily be significantly shaped by Latino Literature, perhaps even to a greater extent than by the disparagingly dubbed (national and international) “dead white male” canon. As such, Rodriguez comes to be thought of as a “coconut” (brown on the outside, but white on the inside) by his Berkeley students when resisting the idea of minority literature as separate from American literature (*Hunger* 161–2). Fortunately, today’s avid ethnic reader resists such dichotomies, as she resists the constraints of ethnic authenticity. She wants both, and rejects neither. She reads Tómas Rivera through Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway – who, in turn, she reads alongside Walt Whitman, Toni Morrison, Sherman Alexie, and Sandra Cisneros. And the literary canon thus becomes more diverse and inclusive as readers read – read widely, read without borders.

Denunciations of ethnic inauthenticity have the opposite effect. Rather than recognize the intransigent heterogeneity of ethnic communities and the complexity of actual minority identities, ethnic authenticity strives for hegemony. This is the first danger of essentialist claims. Expectations about ethnic authenticity impose a single
ethnic narrative on each member of the community, as if everyone had lived the same experiences and interpreted those experiences in the same way.\textsuperscript{15} This is patently not the case and, furthermore, as Satya Mohanty notes: “Simply put, the essentialist view would be that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging, since it is based on the experiences they share” (202).\textsuperscript{16} The second danger of essentialist claims is that, regardless of intentions, they have the unwanted effect of justifying and reifying existing social prejudices that are themselves myths and stereotypes. That is, if you believe in racial memory (an essentialist form of epistemic privilege), for instance, you must also believe that there are significant intellectual differences between the races. And if you believe that the otherwise mythical ties that bind imagined communities together are real and unchanging (and follow ethnic lines), you must also believe that ethnic identities are mutually exclusive rather than overlapping and interpenetrating. What unites the criticism of Rodriguez are (often unspoken) assumptions along similar lines about what it means to be Latino in the USA, assumptions that frequently have the unintended consequence of inherently opposing hybridity, \textit{mestizaje}, in-betweeness, borderland identities, and the interpenetration of cultures.\textsuperscript{17} That criticism of Rodriguez is most heated when directed at his views on assimilation, affirmative action, bilingual education, and the relation of ethnic individuals to the ethnic community – and that these criticisms so often cast Rodriguez as an inauthentic ethnic – attests to the persistence of latent notions of ethnic authenticity. At the same time, a counter-discourse of cultural \textit{mestizaje} has long been central to Latino identity – and, despite their contradictory natures, notions of ethnic authenticity often coexist alongside the notions of cultural interpenetration. It is to Rodriguez’s notion of the interpenetration of cultures, and the changing reception of Rodriguez’s texts in recent scholarship, that the next section turns before returning, in the section that follows it, to the ways in which narratives of ethnic authenticity re-inscribe themselves.

\textbf{Turning the black suit inside out: ethnicity-as-culture}

The “Poor Richard” chapter of \textit{Brown} is a picaresque tale in miniature. Only, there is more than one \textit{pícaro} to the narrative: Rodriguez himself, Richard Nixon, and a black suit. Like other picaresque heroes, the black suit glides from one social milieu to another, offering trenchant social commentary wherever it goes. Rodriguez uses the black suit to drift across the topoi of American society.\textsuperscript{18} It unlocks doors otherwise closed to him and allows him to observe American culture from inside the room. It is sartorial minimum for upward social mobility: “One puts on the black suit. In the distance lies the city – the Ivy League, the lukewarm cocktail; the good, worn carpet; the unwelcoming rich” (\textit{Brown} 87). The black suit is the only attire one can be \textit{seen in} in such social spaces, but it also allows one to go \textit{unseen}: “My black suit made me invisible and that was its point. Respectably shabby, and that was its point. I could go to the opera. I could go to New York” (\textit{Brown} 82). As these two passages suggest, the black suit can be many things. As a metaphor it is intentionally protean, its figurative sense shifting throughout the essay. Like ethnicity and race – which can render one, simultaneously or by turns, both hypervisible and invisible – the meaning of the black suit changes with the social context in which it is worn.
The very image of the black suit recalls the opening scene from *Hunger of Memory*, where Rodriguez notes that “at a cocktail party in Bel Air” he looks “Exotic in a tuxedo,” though he is “dark-skinned” with “Indian features which would pass notice on the page of a *National Geographic*” (*Hunger* 3). A woman at the upscale party is not surprised to hear that he is a writer; someone else suggests the possibility of a modeling job. This first page anecdote introduces the writer — it is Rodriguez’s first book — to the reader by disrupting some of the expectations that the reader may have brought to the text. Though the reader may find the book shelved under “ethnic literature,” its “dark-skinned” author disavows representing any “typical Hispanic-American life” (*Hunger* 7). The photograph of the author on the book cover frames the autobiography as that of a visibly Latino male, but Rodriguez chooses to open the narrative by subverting reader expectations about how their awareness of the author’s race and ethnicity informs their reading of the text. That he looks “exotic in a tuxedo” as an invited guest “at a cocktail party in Bel Air” demonstrates to the reader that the social meaning(s) of his racial features changes with the social landscape. That readers are interested in such features indicates the extent to which readers use what they know about the author, the referent of ethnic autobiography, to interpret the text. And that Rodriguez addresses this impulse reflects his awareness of the visibility of race, gender, and ethnicity in society. His intervention emphasizes the extent to which the meanings imposed on racial, gendered, and ethnic features are always subject to revision — particularly as the social context changes.

Through depicting personal experiences such as the above, Rodriguez resists the essentialization of race, and interrogates notions of what belonging to a particular race means. Racial features may be biological, unchangeable rather than constructed, but interpretations of race are, in John Searle’s terms, *social facts*, the meanings of which are determined in *social reality* (xi–xii). That the social meanings of race are so monolithic compared to the diversity of their billions of biological referents testifies to the constructed and discursive nature of the interpretation of race-as-a-biological-fact. Race, in short, is all too often just a bad story, a narrative too implausible to continue taking seriously in today’s increasingly multiracial world. If race is such a dark and shabby suit it may be time to “lose the black suit” (*Brown* 93).

In the post-Civil Rights era, Rodriguez suggests, culture is of much greater importance than race. It is an argument that Rodriguez has been making from the beginning. Indeed, the thrust of the “Complexion” chapter of *Hunger of Memory* is that class (by which, here, Rodriguez means something more like “middle-class culture” than purely economic class) trumps race in American society. It trumps because culture — and the language through which it is transmitted — shapes consciousness. Culture, that is, colors a person’s thoughts, while race colors only the skin. Contact with another culture can change one’s cultural self-identification, regardless of one’s race. And this holds true despite the power of race and ascribed racial narratives in America. That, at least, is the thrust of the arguments made about race and culture in *Hunger of Memory*, with Rodriguez offering a poignant example of his personal struggle with the power of racial narratives when, in response to the “shame and sexual inferiority I was to feel in later years because of my dark complexion,” the young Rodriguez scrapes a razor over his arms in an attempt “to see if I could get out, somehow lessen, the dark” (*Hunger* 124).
In Brown, however, Rodriguez adds greater nuance and complexity to these views. In Chapter 2 of Brown, “In the Brown Study,” Rodriguez ponders the idea that “color colors thoughts,” concluding that “I think I probably do. (Have brown thoughts)” (Brown 33, 46). The sentiment is bracketed not only by the disclaimer of the subjunctive mood — “probably” — but also through the use of figurative language (starting with the titular trope of the “Brown Study,” a phrase roughly synonymous with melancholy and dating back to at least the sixteenth century).19 A similar mode of assertion/erasure is used to suggest as plausible (rather than staking as a claim) the role of experience in mediating racial and ethnic identities: “In the case of brown thought, though, I suppose experience becomes the pigment, the grounds, the mise-en-scène, the medium of refraction, the impeded passage of otherwise pure thought” (Brown 33–4). The lack of closure, the unwillingness to make an unequivocal pronouncement, is characteristic of Rodriguez’s distinctively nuanced style: figurative, polyvalent, elusive.

Throughout his oeuvre, however, Rodriguez consistently gives more weight to culture than to race in the formation of the ethnic self. But an emphasis on cultural identities rather than racial ones does not, in itself, slip the noose of essentialism. Much of the narrative of race in America has been transferred to ethnicity and culture (or ethnicity-as-culture), maintaining old social divisions and creating new ones. And in characteristic fashion, Rodriguez dissects just what this new development entails: “Whereas whites regarded their Americanization as a freedom from culture, black was fated because black was blood. Blood was essence; black was essence . . . So ‘black,’ once a restriction imposed by whites in defiance of obvious history, black now is a culture (in the fated sense) imposed by blacks” (Brown 141). Such whole cloth models of culture — whereby culture (or ethnicity) is defined as mutually exclusive of other cultures — are zero-sum games. They preclude any overlapping of cultures, leaving out, for instance, an account of participation in what then become, by definition, non-ethnic and non-racial cultures, such as popular culture, and print culture. Such cultural narratives — separately laundered, heavily starched — cannot account for the strong identification of white middle-class teens with hip hop, or the trilingual menus and wait staff of Chinese-Cuban (or is it Cuban-Chinese?) restaurants in Manhattan.

This is not to suggest that ethnicity does not, at times, follow the same logic as race. But neither are ethnic narratives as fluid as cultural ones. In her rigorous philosophical investigation of identity, Linda Martin Alcoff warns the reader of Visible Identities:

At times I will address race/ethnicity and sex/gender as if these each represent a common entity. This is because, as I shall argue, race and ethnicity often slip into one another’s shoes, as some ethnicities (or cultural identities) are perpetually and relentlessly raced even as race (as bodily entity) is made to stand in for ethnicity. (10)

The duality of ethnicity — at times functioning like race, and at other times like culture — confounds ready agreement on a definition of the term. By way of, here, offering a working conceptualization of ethnicity, I invoke from Alcoff’s own formulation what I take to be the key feature of ethnicity: its visibility. What distinguishes ethnicity from culture is that one’s ethnicity is perceived and recognized (to greater and lesser extent) as ethnic by others.20 Though, at first glance, this may appear to be a tautology, it is not. Rather, the above phrasing is meant to stress the semiotic aspect of ethnicity as something
that involves the recognition and interpretation of, for lack of a better term, cultural signs. Culture comprises much that is, in general, not clearly and immediately apparent (visible) to others, such as knowledge, ideas, beliefs, values, customs, practices, perceptions, and the like. Ethnicity, however culturally based, tends to be more recognizable — recognizable as pertaining to a culturally other group, whose otherness is typically characterized by regional, linguistic, biological, and similar forms of difference. (Of note is that one’s ethnicity signifies differently — as it is largely based on the recognition and interpretation of such differences from a particular social reference point — in different cultural contexts.) But, unlike race, ethnicity is not universally held to be both immutable and indelibly manifest in one’s biological features. Rather, the visibility of ethnicity emanates from a broad array of sources, such as one’s accent, surname, proclaimed ancestry, (foreign) body language, and the like. Such an account of ethnicity recognizes ethnicity’s entanglement with both race and culture. It recognizes that not only is ethnicity often used as a surrogate for race, and vice versa, but that the same is also true for ethnicity and culture. That is, it notes the extensive overlap between race and ethnicity, and ethnicity and culture, but (equally importantly) resists conflating all three. Such an account has practical as well as theoretical value, providing, for example, an explanation for the scant attention given to “white ethnics” (Irish, Italian, Polish, and on and on) these days in academic scholarship and in American society at large: in the modern era their ethnicity is less visible.

In full appreciation of its capacity to operate in the borderlands between race and culture, the depiction of ethnicity in this essay will at times reveal ethnicity’s affinity with race, while at other times emphasizing ethnicity’s overlap with culture. Rodriguez’s exploration of ethnicity emphasizes the ethnicity-as-culture mode. Lest the black suit of ethnicity become a straight jacket, Rodriguez deemphasizes the other side of ethnicity — ethnicity-as-race — to present ethnicity as tending to have the malleability and porosity of cultures. The underlying motivation for this is to gain for ethnic individuals the “white freedom” enjoyed by those whose ethnicity is less visible . . . to grant — through “a more playful notion of culture. Culture as freedom” — to racial and ethnic subjects the same capacity for reinvention that everyone else has (Brown 142). Besides excluding others from participating in the culture (and thwarting understanding between cultures), a dress code that permits only one “ethnic suit” to be worn by everyone who shares a similar background or a given set of racial traits greatly restricts the self-expression and self-realization of people who happen to possess those traits. Ethnic cultures are more miscible, Rodriguez reminds us, than the dominant narratives of ethnicity or ethnic heritage suggest. There are no pure cultural heritages, ruling out supposedly innate connections linking all Latinos (or any other ethnic group) by virtue of shared origins. Nor are there any pure cultures, hermetically sealed off from all the other cultures: “National borders do not hold. Ethnic borders. Religious borders. Aesthetic borders, certainly. Sexual borders. Allergenic borders” (Brown 213). Cultures rub up against each other in acts of mutual frottage. Inescapably, as happens between races, cultures frequently “merge”: “I write of blood that is blended. I write of brown as complete freedom of substance of narrative. I extol impurity” (Brown xi). Everyone belongs to more than one culture.

This is the Rodriguez that Juan E. de Castro describes as having “evolved towards a celebration of hybridity,” pairing Rodriguez with Gloria Anzaldúa and José David Saldivar as a “theorist of the borderlands” (116, 102). In the penetrating analysis of
Rodriguez and his work that introduces her 2003 interview with him, Claudia M. Milian Arias also now compares Rodriguez to Gloria Anzaldúa: “Regardless of whether or not he [Rodriguez] has achieved ‘white freedom,’ or whether he no longer desires it, one cannot help but turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s foundational book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa (1999, 101), perhaps the most renowned theorist of Chicana *mestizaje*, notes that she wants ‘the freedom to carve and chisel my own face’” (273). As Milian Arias’s direct comparison indicates, Rodriguez’s conceptualization of “brown” clearly resonates with Anzaldúa’s theorization of *mestizaje*: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity … She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing is rejected, nothing abandoned” (101). Writing in the same year, 2001, as de Castro, Maarten van Delden concurs in arguing that Rodriguez’s “work has clear affinities with the work of border theorists” (120).

Saldivar, himself, in his book *Border Matters*, dubs *Days of Obligation* a “borderland ‘text[s]’” (12). “If Richard Rodriguez remains an ‘assimilated man,’” writes Rubén Martínez in his essay-review of *Days of Obligation*, “then the terms of assimilation – American ‘culture’ itself – have changed” (19). And Kevin R. McNamara argues that Rodriguez “enacts a poetics of cultural miscegenation” (106). To this reappraisal of Rodriguez’s work following the publication of *Days of Obligation* in 1992 and *Brown* in 2002, Frederick Luis Aldama adds, “Rodriguez re-visions himself neither simply as *activo* nor *pasivo*, *gringo* nor *hispánico*, Chicano nor *indio*, but as a confluence of coexisting identities” (78). Even more recently, Nidesh Lawtoo sets out to reassess *Hunger of Memory* and “Rodriguez’s epistemology of in-between identities,” explaining Rodriguez’s troubling dichotomies (particularly between public and private) as manifestations of a “kind of writing which allows for the expression of different and contradictory voices” (220, 240). Gustavo Pérez-Firmat recovers the Spanish voice in Rodriguez in arguing that, as Spanish was his mother tongue, Rodriguez’s writing is indelibly stamped with the imprint of Spanish: “Contrary to what *Hunger of Memory* wants to assert, however, the contest between Spanish and English is resolved in favor of the former, for *lenguajes* cannot rival *lenguas* or *idiomas* in their hold on individual speakers, including Rodriguez”; that is, “Rodriguez abandons his mother tongue, but he cannot escape her,” yet again alluding to the largely unexcavated mosaic of voices and identities to be found in Rodriguez’s writings (19, 155). Further profound linguistic reevaluation of Rodriguez’s texts is offered by Martha J. Cutter, who traces the interlingual voice in Rodriguez from the binary opposition of English and Spanish presented in *Hunger of Memory* to Rodriguez’s “using, yet also refashioning, English,” in *Brown* “so that English becomes interlingual, mixed-blooded, brown, and inflected by Mexican Spanish, by ethnicity itself” (190).

I do not mean, in here cataloguing charitable evaluations of his recent work, to suggest that there is now anything like a critical consensus on Rodriguez’s writing. On the contrary, much work remains to be done in recuperating Rodriguez’s texts, not only within the academic community, but also for much of the Latino community at large. What José E. Limón observed in 1998 (in his introduction to a special issue on Rodriguez in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*) is, to a troubling extent, still true today: “there is no intellectual or political love lost between him [Rodriguez] and the Chicano and post-Chicano and Chicana movement intelligentsia. They remain
uniformly critical and in rejection of his work since the publication of the preliminary essays that appeared later as *Hunger of Memory* (392). Critics have failed to notice the multiple ‘selves’ Rodriguez re-presents in his texts,” explains Laura Fine, “and have not come to terms with his re-writing/righting of his identities” (120). Critical engagement with Rodriguez’s work continues to be constrained by the legacy of, as Randy A. Rodriguez describes it, “the political and ideological demands of cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Chicano movement, which prescribed loyalty to racial and ethnic identification” (396). And though a common refrain is to sing the praises of *Brown* while denouncing his first book, *Hunger of Memory* is simply too important of a book (and Rodriguez too important of a writer), to dismiss in such a manner. Rather, *Hunger of Memory* needs to be reread (as Nidesh Lawtoo and Randy Rodríguez, for example, have begun to do) in light of Rodriguez’s later work.

### The inauthentic ethnic

From an early age Rodriguez notes being painfully conscious of authenticating ethnic narratives – “the Puritans’ insistence upon deathless identity” (*Brown* 51):

There was not another noun in my childish Spanish vocabulary that made me more uneasy than the word “cultura” (which was always used against me, but as indistinguishable from me – something I had betrayed). I did not shrink from culture’s cousin-noun, “costumbre” – custom, habit – which was visible, tangible, comestible, conditional.

In Spanish, culture is indissoluble; culture is everything that connects me with the past and with a sense of myself as beyond myself. (*Brown* 129)

In the last sentence, Rodriguez is ventriloquizing indictments made against those who have “lost” their (Mexican, or more generally, Spanish language) culture. Those who fault Rodriguez for losing his *cultura* conflate culture with the visibility of ethnicity: one’s family background, mother tongue, surname . . . race. But Rodriguez exposes the essentializing assumptions – the fetishized link between ethnic origins and/or racial features and culture – behind the charge: “If culture is so fated, how could I have lost it?” (*Brown* 129). He rejects both the conflation of the self with any particular culture and the notion that personal identity is historically determined by that culture. Nor does anyone ever belong exclusively to only one culture, wholly free of other cultural influences. “Our” culture is never truly segregated from “their” culture.

Rodriguez would, instead, complicate ethnic identities, noting how each culture rubs off on the other, changing the pigment of each, as happened with the ineluctable “browning” of “the American paint box”: “From the inception of America, interracial desire proceeded apace with segregated history” (*Brown* 139, 134). Americans persistently ignored “One of the first lessons in America, the color-book lesson, [which] instructs that color should stay within the lines” (*Brown* 135). Old discourses of race may stubbornly dichotomize the world into black and white, suppressing consciousness of the “erotic history of America,” but miscegenation and waves of new immigrants cause ruptures in such tidy categories: a “brown intrusion into the tragic
dialectic of America, the black and white conversation” (Brown 134, 126). Rodriguez reminds us that miscegenation, rather than racial difference, should be the dominant American metaphor:

The last white freedom in American will be the freedom of the African American to admit brown. Miscegenation. To speak freely of ancestors, of Indian 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 Hispanic. (Brown 142)

Likewise, there is no pure ethnic identity, and though the ethnic costume hopes to cover up such indecent revelations it turns out that the emperor has no clothes: “What Latin America might give the United States is a playful notion of race . . . What the United States might give Latin America is a more playful notion of culture. Culture as freedom. Culture as invitation. Culture as lure . . ./Only further confusion can save us” (Brown 142).

Most critics would agree with Rodriguez’s critique of racial essentialism, but when narratives of identity are framed in cultural terms many find him guilty of “ethnic inauthenticity” — a modern-day race traitor. Petra Fachinger, for example, criticizes Rodriguez for resisting “hybridization and double-voicedness” in Hunger of Memory (111). What is problematic, writes Fachinger, is that Rodriguez “mak[es] mainstream culture the center of [his] perception” (124). This, she argues, causes Rodriguez to “view reality in terms of dichotomies” (124). What’s more, he writes for mainstream readers who see him as an “insider informant of a [minority] culture,” and he “essentialize[s] ‘English’ as a monolithic structure that opens the door to privilege” (124).

Where Rodriguez stresses that “literature flows from the particular” (Brown 12), and (in Hunger of Memory) that “I write of one life only” (Hunger 7), Fachinger stresses the ways in which Rodriguez is representative, arguing that he “assumes a representative voice by claiming that his experience is a typically American one” (Fachinger 120). Rodriguez’s autobiography, Fachinger argues, is already more than the atomized “one life only” that it claims to be in the prologue. The book is, after all, classifiably about American “immigrant” experience, though rejecting classification as representative of “minority” or “ethnic” experience. And it is not only for his resistance to the expectation that he be ethnically representative that Fachinger criticizes Rodriguez, but also for indulging in apolitical “nostalgia” and longing “for a pastoral past” (124). “Rodriguez’s texts are problematic,” writes Fachinger, “because they avoid the ‘politicization of memory’” (124). Other critics have noted precisely the opposite: Rodriguez’s “politicization of memory” in the service of, for example, his views on affirmative action and bilingual education. It is clear, then, that what Fachinger is really critiquing is that what Rodriguez is really critiquing is not a lack of political engagement per se, but Rodriguez’s failure to conform to a particular narrative about ethnicity. It is not that Rodriguez is a politically detached art-for-art’s-sake voluptuary (as Vladimir Nabokov is often characterized as), but that his identity politics do not conform with certain expectations about what a minority writer’s self-identification should be. And such expectations lead Fachinger to conclude that Rodriguez’s “nostalgia prevents him from linking collective ethnic memory and individual memory in a dialogue, a narrative strategy that, according to Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, is characteristic of ‘ethnic autobiography’” (124). Although Fachinger does not explicitly invoke the condemnatory words, “ethnic
inauthenticity,” implicit in her faulting of the text for resisting “cultural hybridization and double-voicedness,” is a criticism of the text’s failure to be “authentically ethnic” given the ethnic background of its author. 28 I have chosen to single out Fachinger’s critique of Rodriguez for discussion here precisely because it serves as an example of the subtle ways in which expectations of ethnic authenticity can re-inscribe themselves even when one is scrupulously endeavoring to avoid ethnic essentialization by engaging characteristics — such as hybridity and compound identities — that are on the surface antithetical to essentialist claims.

In writing about women writers on both sides of the US-Mexican border, and interrogating the dominant modes of “border theory,” Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba identify and critique a similar essentialization of hybrid identities as “either ideal types,” or “seen through a Bakhtinian theoretical perspective on ‘border culture,’ according to which any and all [border] readers and writers are border residents; therefore they are bicultural in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term culture” (14–15). A form of what social scientists call the ecological error — assuming that traits characterizing the group statistically, or as a whole, are equally true for individuals — leads to mistakenly categorizing all border writers as “uniformly bilingual, [and] runs the risk of excluding a large number of primary referents” (Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba 14). Sweeping away the clouding mists of overly generalized and abstract theorizations of border identities, and grounding their own observations and analysis firmly in the intractable reality of actual border people, Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba remind us that “there are few bilingual writers on Mexico’s border with the United States and even fewer who are bicultural” (14).

Even through border theory or a Bakhtinian dialogic approach, then, the anti-authenticating gesture of extolling “bicultural” or “hybrid” identities can become re-inscribed as an expectation that ethnic subjects fit some mold or another of ethnic authenticity. The Hydra-like resurgence of various forms of this expectation, and its imposition on ethnic authors, is fueled, in part, by impulses at the very core of identity discourse: “[A] sense that identity, especially ethnic identity, grounds claims to authenticity and cannot represent a complex or problematic affiliation. Ethnic identity must be limited, contained, ‘insular.' It should represent a single unproblematically authentic Otherness” (Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba, 231–2). As Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba make abundantly clear in Border Women, resistance to “complex or problematic affiliation” can place the ethnic author under attack from all sides, ducking the petards of ethnic inauthenticity (from the dominant ethnic culture and minority ethnic culture alike, from both los gabachos and los mexicanos) only to turn right into the charge of being inauthentically hybrid. 29 Of course, hybridity does not mean the same thing for Fachinger as it does for Rodriguez, or as it would for most people who consider their identities to be characterized by hybridity of some sort or another. Again, Fachinger specifically cites Rodriguez as an anomalous exception to Browdy de Hernandez’s claim that “ethnic autobiographers create a hybridized, double-voiced form of autobiography in which collective ethnic memory and individual memory are linked in a dialogue” (quoted in Fachinger 111). 30

Browdy de Hernandez’s phrase “collective ethnic memory” suggests strong essentializing or authenticating notions about ethnic identity, mystically imputing to all ethnic writers the innate possession of the same sort of heritable collective consciousness as that implied by the notion of racial memory. 31 Fachinger is more
cautious here, bracketing anti-essentializing terminology in quotation marks to hang her own arguments on the framework of a Bakhtinian theory of “hybridization” and “doubled-voicedness”:

“ethnic” discourse could consequently be read as the discourse of an “ethnic” writer who dialogizes the dominant language by self-consciously resorting to “ethnic” form and language to express his or her intentions in a “refracted” way through the dominant language. Since autobiography is traditionally both a “western” and an “androcentric” genre, “double-voicedness” in “ethnic” autobiography would be apparent in the “refraction” of conventional discourse, that is, in its rewriting, or, at least, in its self-reflexive questioning of autobiographical conventions. (111–12)

Though Fachinger herself makes no direct pronouncements about “collective ethnic memory” or collective consciousness, she endorses claims about the existence and value of such notions by making their perceived absence in Rodriguez’s text the departure point for her own critique of the autobiographical self presented in Hunger of Memory. Rodriguez is deemed an inauthentic ethnic because, in Fachinger’s reading, he lacks the “double-voicedness” that characterizes all ethnic autobiographers.

The critique of ethnic authenticity offered in this essay, it is hoped, will serve as a reminder of the need to continually be on our guard against the eternal recurrence of old essentialist claims in new guises. There are few academic fields that would not profit from regular self-examination in this regard, but scholarship in the comparatively young (and bracingly vibrant) field of ethnic studies would particularly benefit from constant vigilance against taking an essentialist turn, especially given John Su’s astute analysis and prediction that “essence will continue to be a haunting presence in academic scholarship” (380). Any stroll down the essentialist path, regardless of how noble or strategic the reasons for doing so, is likely to engender more problems than it solves. Moreover, narratives of ethnicity that avoid essentialist trappings have greater resonance and power than those that do not, a reality that John Alba Cutler reminds us of when appraising Chicana/o war literature of the Vietnam War: “The power of these texts ultimately lies in eschewing traditional notions of authenticity as essential inheritance. In Benjamin’s terms authentic empowerment is an intersubjective process” (607). As Latino iconoclast, the early Rodriguez was a magnet for the label of inauthentic ethnic. As a queer, brown, church-going Catholic, perhaps Rodriguez’s example (especially in Brown) will inspire us to celebrate the irredeemable complexity of identity – the intersubjective, contradiction-laden brown-ness of us all.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Shirley Samuels, Debra Castillo, Fredric Bogel, Kenneth McClane, Satya Mohanty, Neil Easterbrook, Australia Tarver, Daniel Juan Gil, Annegret Staiger, Owen Brady, Paul A. Olson, and Steve Yao for many generous and insightful comments as well as for thought-provoking conversations on ethnicity and identity. A Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Arts and Humanities at Hamilton College furnished the most indispensable of resources to the scholarly enterprise: time off for research and writing. Colleagues at the National Association for Chicana and
Chicano Studies (NACCS) have provided for me and others not only a warm and supportive community, but also an inspirational model of gracious and intellectually rigorous academic debate, with particular thanks to Ernesto J. Martínez, Manuel G. Gonzalez, Jaime H. Garcia, Dómoñó Pérez, Nohemy Solórzano-Thompson, Michael Hames-García, Aída Valenzuela, and Richard T. Rodríguez. Additional thanks go to the anonymous readers of this essay. I am also fortunate to have benefited from many stimulating discussions about Rodriguez and his work with students and colleagues at Cornell University, Hamilton College, and Clarkson University.

Notes

1. Of Rodriguez’s three books, criticism of his first book, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), has been the sharpest. Earlier versions of many of the essays collected in *Hunger of Memory* had been in print (in *The American Scholar* and other venues) from as early as 1973 so that by the time the autobiography was published in the early 1980s Rodriguez had already gained notoriety in some academic circles for his views on the political issues of bilingual education and affirmative action. This, coupled with the volatile political context in which Rodriguez situated his narrative of the self, framed the reception and early criticism of *Hunger of Memory* and partly accounts for the avalanche of negative criticism directed most pointedly at his first autobiographical book. Rodriguez’s second book, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992) followed 10 years later. And another decade passed before the publication of *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002). For a sustained critique of Rodriguez’s assimilationist stance, see Chapter 3 of Paula Moya (100–35). See also Ramón Saldívar, Raymund A. Paredes, and Norma Alarcón.

2. Aureliano Maria DeSoto perceptively notes that in the identity politics debates over assimilation the most contested sites are just as likely, if not more so, to occur within the minority community as between minority communities and “the public at large”: “The paradox of Rodriguez’s mainstream prominence and the almost universal loathing of his work among Chicana/o intellectuals and cultural producers is indicative of the battle over who defines Chicana/o identity, and how such an identity is understood both within Chicano communities and by the public at large” (52–3). It is the context of these identity politics debates that accounts for Rodriguez’s status as, in the words of Manuel G. Gonzalez, a “celebrated though controversial Mexican American writer” (27).

3. This formulation is itself a fraught one, as it suggests an either/or dichotomy between mainstream and minority identities. The terrible beauty of identities (and of communities) is that they are, to misappropriate the terminology of creationist pseudoscience, “irreducibly complex.” Despite perennial attempts to boil identities down to reductive precipitates of their racial, gendered, ethnic, regional, socioeconomic, and ideological elements, our analysis is more penetrating when keeping in mind the interaction of all the various aspects of a person’s identity, as well as the heterogeneous composition of communities and the complex interrelationship between individuals and communities. Nancy K. Miller speaks to this point in her article “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir,” squarely framing autobiography as the product of a complex, “relational self”: “In autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in
which we find ourselves” (544). Miller’s emphasis on entanglement and the relational is particularly instructive for any discussion of Rodriguez’s autobiographical writings and of his description of the ways in which we are often unable to reconcile various aspects of our identities and the communities to which we belong. The self embodies contradiction: “Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once)” (Brown xi).

4. Jeehyun Lim also notes that “neoconservative’ seems to be the word most often used to describe Rodriguez today (Camacho 197, Parikh 64–95),” and she too—as does the current analysis—raises questions about the epistemic and hermeneutic usefulness of the label: “What explanatory value this word has for interpreting Rodriguez’s writing, however, is open to question” (518). Moving beyond the outdated “not one of us” interpretive lens, Lim offers a complex, dichotomy-dissolving reading of Rodriguez, insightfully noting how the writer slips the yoke of his own public/private binaries through appealing to a “third language”: “His third language tropologically relates to postcolonial scholarship on ‘Third Space,’ and provides an alternative to the binary view of the public and private so prominent in the debates on bilingualism in the 1990s. Characterizing the language of the lovers in D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover and liturgical Latin as third languages, Rodriguez removes the binary of the private and public languages from cultural and political contexts, and instead writes it into a universal narrative of American individualism” (520). The two scholarly texts cited by Lim are Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s Migrant Imaginaries and Crystal Parikh’s An Ethics of Betrayal. Parikh argues that “the assimilatory betrayals of the minority neoconservative— the model minority and the pocho [read: Rodriguez]—must be read as betrayals compelled by the structural configurations of race, ethnicity, class, and diaspora in late-twentieth-century America” (67). Camacho’s sense of various political labels and how these might or might not apply to Rodriguez is more nuanced: “Despite Rodriguez’s long flirtation with the neoconservative demand for a ‘color-blind’ society, his reflections on the migrant presence undo his personal accommodations to the liberal ideal. Rodriguez’s aspirations to full, unmarked citizenship notwithstanding, his interest in the undocumented reveals the continued salience of Latina/o critiques of liberalism, when delivered from another quarter, from within the migrant imaginary” (197–8).

5. The fundamental question about Rodriguez’s views on affirmative action is whether Rodriguez is dubious about opportunity programs for the disadvantaged in general, or if he would favor such a program if class were also considered. Rodriguez frames his critique of affirmative action as skepticism, primarily, about the ways in which the policy has been historically implemented, specifically “for not defining carefully who, in their eyes, was disadvantaged or not” (quoted in Torres 178). But though stressing the difficulties in deciding who should benefit from such programs and for how long—when does one “stop[s] being disadvantaged” (Hunger 150)—Rodriguez clearly believes that disadvantage is discernible. And within Hunger of Memory, one finds the basis for a radically class-based (one might even say, Marxist) approach to disadvantage and inequality: “It became easy to underestimate, even to ignore altogether, the importance of class. Easy to forget that those whose lives are shaped by poverty and poor education (cultural minorities) are least able to defend themselves against social oppression, whatever its form” (Hunger 149–50). Worth noting, as this passage makes clear, is that Rodriguez emphasizes social class in considering one’s socioeconomic status, and does not consider economic class in strictly financial terms.
Rodriguez’s arguments against Bilingual Education are tied to his arguments about the importance of recognition (through a shared public language and culture) by others as a person. See, for example, the “Aria” and “Complexion” chapters of Hunger of Memory (11–40, 112–39).

6. Though his lamenting of the replacement (following Vatican II) of the Latin mass with the vernacular might suggest a certain nostalgia for tradition (Hunger 101), Rodriguez’s religious liberalism — “I was a liberal Catholic” (Hunger 105) — is abundantly evident. Rodriguez belongs to a progressive parish, the Most Holy Redeemer in San Francisco, “where my partner and I are acknowledged by the other people in the parish as a couple” (quoted in Carstensen). What’s more, the supposedly “conservative” or “neoconservative” Rodriguez offered vigorous, “activist”-style criticism of the role of conservative churches in the passage of California’s Proposition 8 ban on gay marriage, which he described as “a deliberate civic intrusion by the churches” (quoted in Carstensen).

Religion is also the topic of Rodriguez’s current cultural and philosophical musings, as he is now working on a book about the big three monotheistic “desert religions” of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In his penetrating analysis, “The Art of Being Richard Rodriguez,” J.A. Marzán argues that “to advance his career he [Rodriguez] used conservatives, with whose sexual views he disagreed” (58).


8. See, for example, Henry Staten, who writes, “I believe, however, that Rodriguez’s critics have not sufficiently noted the irony in his view of himself... This irony belies the absoluteness of the cultural either-or (either Chicano or American) that he proclaims; his cultural situation lies, rather, at the complex intersection of a both-and and a neither-nor. He does not map this intersection accurately, but neither do those who would define the authenticity of his selfhood strictly in relation to an ‘organic human collective’ called ‘la raza’ (Saldívar 169)” (104).

9. Antonio C. Marquez gently reminds us that “To read Hunger of Memory is not to read sociology or history, but rather a literary construction of a person’s memories” (133). Rodriguez’s writing, Marquez stresses, is “highly stylized” (133).

10. And in an interview with Gregory Wolfe: “Brown is the mess you make when all the colors in the Crayola box melt in the sun” (65).

11. Herrnstein and Murray argue that class inequality between the races may, in part, be due to heritable differences in intellect. For a devastating critique of The Bell Curve, see Stephen Jay Gould’s The Mismeasure of Man (revised and expanded 1996 edition). For a much earlier critique of popular racial myths about intelligence and heritability, see Ehrlich and Feldman, The Race Bomb: Skin Color, Prejudice, and Intelligence (1977).

12. Su also argues that the invocation of racial memory (particularly in fictional works) is useful for “posing alternative narratives of the past” and “to encourage imaginative explorations of existing portrayals of minority populations from alternative points of view” (380–1).

13. See Beyond Ethnicity, in which Sollors pragmatically notes the hermeneutic consequences of the fact that ethnic literature is “often read against an elusive concept of authenticity” (11). See also Sollors, The Invention of Ethnicity. Also see Siemerling and Schwenk. Particularly salient to the current discussion are the following chapters: Katrin Schwenk’s “Introduction: Thinking about ‘Pure Pluralism’” (1–9), Monika Kaup’s “Crossing Borders: An Aesthetic Practice in Writings by Gloria Anzaldúa” (100–11), and Ernst Rudin’s “New Mestizos: Traces of a Quincentenary
Miracle in Old World Spanish and New World English” (112–29). See, for example, Walter Benn Michaels’s “Race into Culture.” Michaels also takes up a critique of nonbiological essentialism in The Shape of the Signifier: “The race that antessentialists believe in is a historical entity, not a biological one. In racial antessentialism, the effort to imagine an identity that will connect people through history is replaced by the effort to imagine a history that will give people an identity” (137). Additionally, Michaels interrogates the conflation of history and personal memory implicit in the notion of “racial memory”: “the obvious objection to thinking of history as a kind of memory is that things we are said to remember are things that we did or experienced, whereas things that are said to belong to our history tend to be things that were neither done nor experienced by us” (135).

In their “Editor’s Introduction: Criticism in the Borderlands,” to the seminal anthology Criticism in the Borderlands, Héctor Calderón and José David Saldivar note the importance of seeing Latino/Chicano literature as part of, rather than separate from, American literature, citing “the need for a new history of American literature, one that would include the contributions of women and cultural groups ignored by the academy” (1). This is not to ignore differences, but rather to be more inclusive of diverse voices and experiences. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín captures this spirit in describing her “ultimate aim” in Killing Spanish as an attempt “to garner a wider audience for a compelling body of literary works” (15).

Sonia Saldivar-Hull incisively critiques the extent to which similar assumptions excluded the experiences of minority women by relying on “a type of essentialism that assumes the universality of Women’s experience” (205).

Along with his arguments about “the epistemic status of cultural identity,” Mohanty’s “postpostivist realist” approach in Literary Theory and the Claims of History also gives prominence to the vital role of interpretation in identity politics and identity formation (203–4).

On mestizaje – the mixing of races and cultures – see Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.

For a thoroughgoing spatial theorization of Latino (in this case, Chicana) literature and identity, see Mary Pat Brady, Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space (2006).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Brown Study” as “A state of mental abstraction or musing; ’gloomy meditations.’”

It is the visibility of ethnicity that Werner Sollors seems to be stressing in using the phrase “and being perceived by others” in the definition of ethnicity offered in The Invention of Ethnicity: “By calling ethnicity – that is, belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group – an ‘invention,’ one signals an interpretation in a modern and postmodern context. There is a certain, previously unrecognized, semantic legitimacy in insisting on this context” (xiii). I would also underscore the importance of Sollors’s emphasis on interpretation and context. Calling ethnicity an “invention” highlights the cultural aspects of ethnicity. Finally, the use of the word “belonging” could be taken, here, to indicate the role of self-identification in ethnic identities.

Defining culture is a notoriously fraught enterprise. For the purposes of this discussion, culture’s key traits are the following: (1) culture is humanly created; (2) there is no direct link between any single individual’s biological makeup and his or her cultural inheritance; (3) culture is not static, but is always changing.
22. De Castro also notes that, “While his celebration of intercultural connections and of
hybridity echoes that of Chicano theorists of the border — and is a sign that Rodriguez
participates in contemporary critical paradigms — his analysis reaches conclusions that
contradict those of other Chicano critics” (118). As Rodriguez confounds easy political
categorization (“he hold[s] positions associated with both the political right and left”),
his writings offer a possible starting point for a re-evaluation of Chicano identity and
discourse” (118–19).

23. For other insightful post- Brown interviews with Rodriguez, see Cooper, Sedore, and Wolfe.

one reader (a writer) whose opinion of the trajectory of Rodriguez’s writing cuts in a
direction counter to that of academic responses to his books: as someone admiring of
Hunger of Memory, but critical of Brown as a “regression...to identity politics” (27).

25. In addition to noting Rodriguez’s vexed relationship with the Chicano and Chicana
Movement, Limón also notes the widespread rejection of Rodriguez in academic
circles: “we are confronted with a perplexing issue, namely that the only public
intellectual [Rodriguez] from Mexican America has been rejected by most, if not all, of
a leading [institutional] intelligentsia that would also claim some substantial intellectual
and political representation of Mexicans in the United States” (393).

26. It should be noted that (Randy) Rodrı́guez penetrates even deeper in his critique than what is
suggested by the above citation. Invoking queer theory, (Randy) Rodrı́guez cites an added
element of heteronormativity in the rejection of (Richard )Rodrı́guez’s writing by the
Chicano intelligentsia: “Mexican American and Chicano homosexuals, though, were in
many ways the greatest threat to Chicano/a nationalism because of the symbolic potential of
cultural emasculation Chicano men feared. To allow Rodrı́guez’s soft assimilationist
narrative to represent “the” Mexican experience in the United States would symbolize the
potential loss of Chicano masculine vigor and nerve. He served as an “other” sign designation
what Chicana/o literature and culture could not tolerate and therefore had to exclude and
repress” (411). See Yaakov Perry for a more recent queer reading of Rodrı́guez — one that
focuses on Rodrı́guez’s key trope of desire: “a reading of desire’s exposition and the
figuration of sexual (dis)orientation in the text” (156).

27. See, for example, Gustavo Pérez Firmat: “Rodrı́guez demurs, asserting that his 'most
real life' lies in his controversial views on such issues as bilingualism and affirmative
action” (Tongue Ties 147).

28. In the chapter “The Prince and I,” Rodriguez complicates notions of “authenticity...the
Puritan dilemma” (Brown 52) through the story of Timm Williams, a “full-blooded”
Yurok who transformed himself into the Stanford University mascot, “Prince
Lightfoot.” The Yurok headdress that Williams donned on game days was not that of
his native tribe, but a feathered headdress apparently borrowed from the “Plains
Indian[s]” (Brown 57). His “authentic” ethnic costume was largely imagined as
authentic; much of it — he made the headdress himself — was a “theatrical invention of
himself” (Brown 57). His “authentic” portrayal was impure, though seen by those
hungry for authenticity as authentic.

29. For another trenchant deconstruction of racial and ethnic authenticity see Rey Chow’s
“Where Have All the Natives Gone?” (in Writing Diaspora 27–54).

30. Fachinger cites from page 57 of Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez’s “The Plural Self.”
Note that other critics have observed just the opposite: that a double-voice of some
sort is clearly present in Rodriguez’s work. Gustavo Pérez Firmat — building on the
work of preeminent scholar of autobiography studies, Paul John Eakin — writes that
“Eakin has called attention to the presence of two voices in this book [Hunger of Memory], one narrative and the other expository ... What I would add to Eakin’s insight is that the two voices are not just distinct but, to some extent, dissonant” (“Art of Abstraction” 259.) See also Eakin’s illuminating book, Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography (117–37).

31. Browdy de Hernandez’s work on ethnic autobiography is insightful and inspirational, making all the more poignant the point that even when scrupulously avoided – see, for example, footnote four on page 58 of Browdy de Hernandez’s “The Plural Self” – essentialist notions can work themselves back into the academic discourse about ethnicity in unexpected ways.

References


Lawtoo, Nidesh. “Dissonant Voices in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memories* and Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*.” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature (TSLL)* 48.3 (Fall 2006): 220–49. Print.

Lim, Jeehyun. “‘I was Never at War with my Tongue:’ The Third Language and the Performance of Bilingualism in Richard Rodriguez.” *Biography* 33.3 (Summer 2010): 518–42. Print.


---

Michael Nieto Garcia is an assistant professor of Literature at Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York. He is the translator of Indonesian author Djenar Maesa Ayu’s celebrated collection of short stories, *They Say I’m a Monkey*. Among the authors whose writing his scholarly work engages are Richard Rodriguez, Vladimir Nabokov, Richard Wright, and Helena Maria Viramontes. He is currently completing a monograph titled *Narratives of the Ethnic Self in American Literature*. Address: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Clarkson University, 8 Clarkson Avenue, Box 5750, Potsdam, NY 13699, USA, [e-mail: mgarcia@clarkson.edu]