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BROWN

THE LAST
DISCOVERY OF
AMERICA

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

author of *Hunger of Memory* and *Days of Obligation*

· B R O W N ·

The Last Discovery of America

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

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BROWN

Richard Rodriguez works as an editor at the Pacific News Service in San Francisco and is a contributing editor for *Harper's* magazine and the Sunday "Opinion" section of the *Los Angeles Times*. He appears regularly as an essayist on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS. He is the author of *Hunger for Memory* and *Days of Obligations*.

ALSO BY RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez

Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father

For Jimmy, before the birds cry . . .

Preface

BROWN AS IMPURITY.

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

I eulogize a literature that is suffused with brown, with allusion, irony, paradox—ha!—pleasure.

I write about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America.

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 several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once).

It is that brown faculty I uphold by attempting to write brownly. And I defy anyone who tries to unblend me or to say what is appropriate to my voice.

You will often find brown in this book as the cement between leaves of paradox.

You may not want paradox in a book. In which case, you had better seek a pure author.

Brown is the color most people in the United States associate with Latin America.

Apart from stool sample, there is no browner smear in the American imagination than the Rio Grande. No adjective has attached itself more often to the Mexican in America than “dirty”—which I assume gropes toward the simile “dirt-like,” indicating dense concentrations of melanin.

I am dirty, all right. In Latin America, what makes me brown is that I am made of the conquistador and the Indian. My brown is a reminder of conflict.

And of reconciliation.

In my own mind, what makes me brown in the United States is that I am Richard Rodriguez. My baptismal name and my surname marry England and Spain, Renaissance rivals.

North of the U.S.–Mexico border, brown appears as the color of the future. The adjective accelerates, becomes a verb: “America is browning.” South of the border, brown sinks back into time. Brown is time.

In middle chapters, I discuss the ways Hispanics brown an America that traditionally has chosen to describe itself as black-and-white. I salute Richard Nixon, the dark father of Hispanicity. But my Hispanic chapters, as I think of them—the chapters I originally supposed were going to appear first in this book—gave way to more elementary considerations. I mean the meeting of the Indian, the African, and the European in colonial America. Red. Black. White. The founding palette.

Some months ago, a renowned American sociologist predicted to me that Hispanics will become “the new Italians” of the United States. (What the Sicilian had been for nineteenth-century America, the Colombian would become for the twenty-first century.)

His prediction seems to me insufficient because it does not account for the influence of Hispanics on the geography of the American imagination. Because of Hispanics, Americans are coming to see the United States in terms of a latitudinal vector, in terms of south-north, hot-cold; a new way of placing ourselves in the twenty-first century.

America has traditionally chosen to describe itself as an east-west country. I grew up on the east-west map of America, facing east. I no longer find myself so easily on that map. In middle age (also brown, its mixture of loss and capture), I end up on the shore where Sir Francis Drake first stepped onto California. I look toward Asia.

As much as I celebrate the browning of America (and I do), I do not propose an easy optimism. The book’s last chapter was completed before the events of September 11, 2001, and now will never be complete. The chapter describes the combustible dangers of brown; the chapter annotates the tragedies it anticipated.

I think brown marks a reunion of peoples, an end to ancient wanderings. Rival cultures and creeds conspire with Spring to create children of a beauty, perhaps of a harmony, previously unknown. Or long forgotten. Even so, the terrorist and the skinhead dream in solitude of purity and of the straight line

because they fear a future that does not isolate them. In a brown future, the most dangerous actor might likely be the cosmopolite, conversant in alternate currents, literatures, computer programs. The cosmopolite may come to hate his brownness, his facility, his indistinction, his mixture; the cosmopolite may yearn for a thorough religion, ideology, or tribe.

Many days, I left my book to wander the city, to discover the city outside my book was comically browning. Walking down Fillmore Street one afternoon, I was enjoying the smell of salt, the brindled pigeons, brindled light, when a conversation overtook me, parted around me, just as I passed the bird-store window: Two girls. Perhaps sixteen. White, Anglo, whatever. Tottering on their silly shoes. Talking of boys. The one girl saying to the other: . . . *His complexion is so cool, this sort of light—well, not that light* . . .

I realized my book will never be equal to the play of the young.

. . . *Sort of reddish brown, you know* . . . The other girl nodded, readily indicated that she did know. But still Connoisseur Number One sought to bag her simile. . . . *Like a Sugar Daddy bar—you know that candy bar?*

Two decades ago, I wrote *Hunger of Memory*, the autobiography of a scholarship boy. Ten years later, in *Days of Obligation*, I wrote about the influence of Mexican ethnicity on my American life. This volume completes a trilogy on American public life and my private life. *Brown* returns me to years I have earlier described. I believe it is possible to describe a single life thrice, if from three isolations: *Class. Ethnicity. Race.*

When I began this book, I knew some readers would take “race” for a tragic noun, a synonym for conflict and isolation. Race is not such a terrible word for me. Maybe because I am skeptical by nature. Maybe because my nature is already mixed. The word race encourages me to remember the influence of eroticism on history. For that is what race memorializes. Within any discussion of race, there lurks the possibility of romance.

Contents

Preface xi

CHAPTER

- One* The Triad of Alexis de Tocqueville 1
- Two* In the Brown Study 33
- Three* The Prince and I 47
- Four* Poor Richard 81
- Five* Hispanic 103
- Six* The Third Man 125
- Seven* Dreams of a Temperate People 145
- Eight* Gone West 169
- Nine* Peter's Avocado 193

Acknowledgments 231

▪ Chapter One ▪

THE TRIAD OF ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

TWO WOMEN AND A CHILD IN A GLADE BESIDE A SPRING. Beyond them, the varnished wilderness wherein bright birds cry. The child is chalk, Europe's daughter. Her dusky attendants, a green Indian and a maroon slave.

The scene, from *Democracy in America*, is discovered by that most famous European traveler to the New World, Alexis de Tocqueville, aristocratic son of the Enlightenment, liberal, sickly, gray, violet, lacking the vigor of the experiment he has set himself to observe.

"I remember . . . I was traveling through the forests which still cover the state of Alabama. . . ."

In a clearing, at some distance, an Indian woman appears first to Monsieur, followed by a "Negress," holding by the hand "a little white girl of five or six years."

The Indian: "A sort of barbarous luxury" set off her costume;

"rings of metal were hanging from her nostrils and ears, her hair, which was adorned with glass beads, fell loosely upon her shoulders. . . ." The Negress wore "squalid European garments."

Such garments are motifs of de Tocqueville's pathos. His description intends to show the African and the Indian doomed by history in corresponding but opposing ways. (History is a coat cut only to the European.)

"The young Indian, taking the child in her arms, lavished upon her such fond caresses as mothers give, while the Negress endeavored, by various little artifices, to attract the [child's] attention. . . ."

The white child "displayed in her slightest gestures a consciousness of superiority that formed a strange contrast with her infantine weakness; as if she received the attentions of her companions with a sort of condescension."

Thus composed: The Indian. The Negress. The white child.

"... In the picture that I have just been describing there was something peculiarly touching; a bond of affection here united the oppressors with the oppressed, and the effort of Nature to bring them together rendered still more striking the immense distance placed between them by prejudice and the laws."

At Monsieur's approach, this natural colloquy is broken. He becomes the agent of history. Seeing him, the Indian suddenly rises, "push[es] the child roughly away and, giving [Monsieur] an angry look, plunge[s] into the thicket."

The Negress rests; awaits de Tocqueville's approach.

Neither response satisfies the European. The African, de Tocqueville writes, has lost the memory of ancestors, of custom and tongue; the African has experienced degradation to his very soul, has become a true slave. "Violence made him a slave, and the habit of servitude gives him the thoughts and desires of a slave; he admires his tyrants more than he hates them, and finds his joy and his pride in the servile imitation of those who oppress him."

The bejeweled Indian, alternately, is "condemned . . . to a wandering life, full of inexpressible sufferings," because European interlopers have unbalanced the provender of Nature.

And, de Tocqueville remarks (a fondness for fable), whereas the Negro's response to mistreatment is canine, the Indian's is feline. "The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men who repulse him. . . ." The Indian is filled with diffidence toward the white, "has his imagination inflated with the pretended nobility of his origin, and lives and dies in the midst of these dreams of pride." The Indian refuses civilization; the African slave is rendered unfit for it.

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?

These women are but parables of your interest in yourself. Rather than consider the nature of their intimacy, you are preoccupied alone with the meaning of your intrusion. You in your dusty leather boots, cobbled on the rue du Faubourg

St.-Honoré. Your tarnished silver snuffbox, your saddlebag filled with the more ancient dust of books. You in your soiled cambric. Vous-même.

■ ■ ■

A boy named Buddy came up beside me in the schoolyard. I don't remember what passed as prologue, but I do not forget what Buddy divulged to me:

If you're white, you're all right;

If you're brown, stick around;

If you're black, stand back.

It was as though Buddy had taken me to a mountaintop and shown me the way things lay in the city below.

In Sacramento, my brown was not halfway between black and white. On the leafy streets, on the east side of town, where my family lived, where Asians did not live, where Negroes did not live, my family's Mexican shades passed as various. We did not pass "for" white; my family passed among white, as in one of those old cartoons where Clarabelle Cow goes shopping downtown and the mercantile class of dogs does not remark her exception. As opposed to Amos and Andy, whose downtown was a parallel universe of no possible admixture. And as I easily pass in these pages between being an American and regarding America from a distance.

As opposed, also, to the famous photograph of a girl in Little Rock in the pages of *Life* magazine. A black girl, no older than Alice, must pass alone through the looking glass. I remember