

REVERSING THE NATIONAL MYTH IN RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S BROWN*

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz

Universidad de Deusto

aitor.ibarrola@deusto.es

There is little doubt that the American West has come to be historically associated with certain features that are deeply engraved in the country's consciousness. Since the very birth of the nation, the West has functioned as a space of freedom and opportunity in which the individual could undergo the kind of self-transformation that was not possible in the more constrained and "Europeanized" context of the Atlantic seaboard. But what would happen if the traditional myth were reversed and we looked at the history of the continent from the opposite end—that is, from the shores of California? How would such myths as the Western Hero and Manifest Destiny be transformed? This is the arduous task that Richard Rodríguez sets for himself in the second half of *Brown*: a meditation on how the country will need to re-invent itself in the 21st century in terms of movements south-north, and west-east.

Key words: *American West, Myth and narrative, Brown, Richard Rodríguez, Historical revisionism, Race and sexuality, Identity issues.*

No cabe duda de que el Oeste americano ha quedado estrechamente ligado a varios de los rasgos identitarios grabados de manera indeleble en la conciencia nacional. Desde el origen mismo del país, el Oeste ha funcionado como un espacio de libertad y oportunidades en el cual cualquiera podía conseguir un tipo de regeneración que no era posible en el contexto más restringido y "europeizado" de la costa Este. Pero, ¿qué ocurriría si diésemos la vuelta al mito tradicional y

contemplásemos la historia del continente desde el lado opuesto, esto es, desde California? ¿Cómo habría que repensar mitos tales como el del Pionero o el Destino Manifiesto por el cambio de perspectiva? Ésta es la ardua tarea que Richard Rodríguez afronta en la segunda mitad de *Brown*: una meditación sobre cómo su país va a tener que reinventarse en el siglo XXI en base a una movilidad sur-norte y oeste-este.

Palabras clave: *Oeste americano, Mito y narrativa, Brown, Richard Rodríguez, Revisionismo histórico, Raza y sexualidad, Identidad nacional.*

Whatever the merits of the Turner thesis, the doctrine that the United States is a continental nation rather than a member with Europe of an Atlantic community has had a formative influence on the American mind and deserves historical treatment in its own right.

Henry N. Smith, *Virgin Land*

Go East, young woman! I think we are just now beginning to discern an anti-narrative—the American detective story told from west to east, against manifest destiny, against the early Protestant point of view, against the Knickerbocker Club, old Ivy, the assurances of New England divines.

Richard Rodríguez, *Brown*

1. INTRODUCTION: MYTHS OF OLD AND HIDDEN AGENDAS

Most historians and political scientists would agree that the history of the United States of America has been marked from its very inception as a nation by the idea that the westward movement of its population was very much consubstantial with the creation of a singular national character. Some of the Founding Fathers—Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, most notably—were convinced that the expansion and progress of the country were closely connected with

the possibilities offered by the western territories. When Jefferson was inaugurated as President in 1801, he already foresaw that the projected scientific exploration that Lewis and Clark would carry out up the Missouri River and over the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia would accrue important economic and political benefits for the nation (cf. Smith 1950: 16-17). In fact, Jefferson could well be considered the first on a long list of political and literary “visionaries” who, throughout the best part of the 19th century, viewed the displacement of the American frontier toward the Pacific as the embodiment of a myth that would launch the country into a promising future (see Adams 2008: 39-43). Names such as those of William Gilpin, Daniel Boone, James F. Cooper, Kit Carson, Andrew Jackson, Walt Whitman or Buffalo Bill have remained inextricably linked to the “grand national narrative” that spoke of how the new country was finding its “manifest destiny” in the domination and domestication of lands that up to then had been impaired by darkness and savagery (Johannsen 1997: 7-8).

As is well known, many pioneering spirits decided to carve their future away from the more restrictive and highly-hierarchical order that prevailed in the societies on the Eastern seaboard.² Yet, despite the conspicuous opportunities offered by the lands west of the Mississippi, there is little doubt that the conquest of the American West was not without the—generally cruel and sinister—underside of an exclusionary and genocidal policy, which was unhindered by the evident “collateral damages.” Kolodny (1984) and Tompkins (1992) have recurrently noted that if anything characterizes the myth of the Far West, it is the absolute lack of attention given to the female experience. According to several scholars, the reason for this blatant erasure and de-authorization needs to be sought in the threat that activities such as domestic rituals, transcendental perspectives, and inward contemplation meant to the outdoor, physical, and masculinist pattern privileged by this myth (see Tompkins 1992: 42-45). Likewise, although there is little doubt that other non-white, non-Protestant groups played a critical role in the history of the American West, the place they have usually occupied in the myth is that of the unfamiliar and uncivilized cultural “Other” who was perceived as an obstacle to the advancement of the “divine” project (cf. Prucha 1995: 315-38). Arnold Krupat (1992) and others have complained that historical accounts of the West have

been governed up to the last few decades of the 20th century by an oppositional, Manichean binary logic that left all those human categories that were not seen as playing a part in the original script without a voice and, seemingly, no agency.³ As we know, Native Americans were encouraged to sell their tribal lands in unfair treaties and to become “civilized,” which for their communities meant abandoning their nomadic way of life and reorganizing themselves around the nuclear family unit rather than the more extended clans or tribes.

Although authors such as Ralph Ellison (1986) and Gerald Vizenor (1993) have long been defending the view that there is an unofficial, “underground history” of the country that recognizes the influence of all those minority groups on the development of a national character, it is still a fact that most accounts of the construction of the country rely on the Jeffersonian blueprint of the “Highway to the Pacific” and John Quincy Adams’ “continentalism”: “The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing our general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs” (qtd. in McDougall: 87). In *Brown* (2002), his third collection of autobiographical essays, Rodriguez takes issue with these descriptions of the myth of the continent and reflects on their profound influence on the national consciousness:

American myth has traditionally been written east to west, describing the elect people’s manifest destiny accruing from Constitution Hall to St. Jo’ to the Brown Palace Hotel to the Golden Gate. Now a classics professor in Oregon rebuts my assertion that California is not the West. His family moved to Anaheim from Queens. They moved west. Simple. The way the East Coast has always imagined its point of view settled the nation. (2002: 170)

Despite the colossal efforts of historians such as Howard Zinn (1996) and Paul Johnson (1997) to revise traditional patterns of history-making and to restore forgotten chapters and points of view often unrepresented in the “official records” of the nation, it remains

clear that, as Rodriguez argues, it is the East Coast—or European—perspective that still dominates much of the “grand national myth.” In fact, if one wishes to enjoy alternative versions of that primordial ensemble, it always makes sense to make incursions into that narrative from other vantage points.⁴ To do so, one needs to enter that history from the narrow margins that the overpowering bulldozer of the Establishment left for those who did not easily fit into the widely-sanctioned picture of the country (see Weeks 1996: 30-32). My discussion below shows that Richard Rodriguez’s migrant parents, his place of birth, his Catholicism, his homosexuality, and, especially, his great interest in socio-cultural processes that often escape the attention of others, grant him that privileged position. In an article he published back in 1986 in *The American Scholar*, he argued:

The residue of the past is told in a mood, gesture of hands, a tone of voice. A man who knows my family well tells me today that when I write in English he can recognize the sound of my father speaking in Spanish. This is the way Mexico will influence America in the future: American English will be changed by the Mexican immigrant children who put it in their mouths. Optimism will be weighted, in time, by some thicker mood. (1986: 176)

Rodriguez’s retrieval of the national myth—or narrative—is definitely burdened by the persistent feeling that what was a path of hope and optimism for most Anglos was much more difficult and tortuous for others who, due to their culture and religion, were not likely to read “Manifest Destiny” and the American frontier in the same light. Hence his decision to reverse the path of the prevailing national narrative, and to highlight the importance of other racial collectives in the formative stages of the country.

2. REVERSING THE PATH OF THE HEGEMONIC NATIONAL MYTH

In the first half of *Brown*, Rodriguez returns to the exploration of the prickly issues of class and ethnic identity that he had already

dwelled upon in his two earlier collections of personal essays. Like them, this last instalment of the trilogy is far from offering a complaisant representation either of himself or the country in which he lives.⁵ A self-declared “comic victim of two cultures,” Rodriguez has often maintained that his intention in writing is not to offer convenient examples: “I don’t think we [writers] should make people feel settled. I don’t try to be a gadfly, but I do think the real ideas are troublesome. There should be something about my work that leaves the reader unsettled. I intend that” (London 1997). By using significant doses of penetration, sympathy, and irony, Rodriguez manages to make us question many of the assumptions that we often take for granted when considering American culture and history. He looks into the lives of well-known historical figures—such as Ben Franklin, T.E. Lawrence, Richard Nixon, and William Faulkner—in order to show that allegiances and identities in his country have always been much more complex and multifaceted than they seemed at first glance. What he says about books in the first essay of the collection (“The Triad of Alexis de Tocqueville”) could be applied just as well to many of the authors, thinkers, and politicians that he refers to:

How a society orders its bookshelves is as telling as the books a society writes and reads. American bookshelves of the twenty-first century describe fractiousness, reduction, hurt. Books are isolated from one another, like gardenias or peaches, lest they bruise or become bruised, or, worse, consort, confuse. (11)

Curiously enough, Rodriguez’s main topic in this book is precisely the advantages of being a person—or a text—that cannot be easily classified as one thing or another and, therefore, produces confusion and perplexity in the beholder. *Brown* celebrates mixture and amalgamation, the disturbing state of being a multiplicity of things at once, because radically different bloodlines and affiliations converge in the same individual.⁶ Villalon remarked in a review of *Brown* that: “This confusion—this ‘browning’—will create opportunities to fashion our own public identity, one that better reflects our private selves, one that will not be deemed ‘inauthentic’” (2002). Although the author is mostly confident about the impact that this “browning” of America is going to have on future generations—since these multifarious

individuals will end up being the primary force driving the nation in its pursuit of happiness—, he also shows some concern that this freedom to blend and combine may produce undesirable results. As a matter of fact, he points out that going too far in the opposite direction may prove as dangerous as remaining protected in your own parochial, primordial identity:

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. (xiv)

At some points, the reader cannot help hearing Rodríguez addressing quite directly those who have been questioning his apparent lack of commitment to his own ethnic group: “By telling you these things, I do not betray ‘my people.’ I think of the nation entire—all Americans—as my people” (128). However, the author is not so much interested in persuading us that his grasp on past and current realities is the right one but, rather, in showing that we all—himself included—frequently take things at face value, instead of digging into them more deeply (cf. Jefferson 2003). This exercise in cultural penetration seems particularly urgent when the kind of knowledge on which the country has relied in order to build its own identity and to establish its goals proves, upon closer scrutiny, to be afflicted by numberless inaccuracies and contradictions. As Margo Jefferson notes, “*Brown* is a series of reflections on what should become our national refusal of self-serving pieties. He [Rodríguez] is exploring—and discovering—the hypocrisies and ironies of race as America has insisted on defining it; also the ironies and glories of race as America has ended up living it” (2003).

After considering the pitfalls caused by approaching race relations in the U.S. the way sociologists and politicians have done it in the past, Rodríguez moves on to tell us, in the second half of the collection, about the socio-cultural changes that would need to take place for us to be able to read history and myth in a different light. As he sees it, while the United States—given its status as a migration

nation—may offer the world a highly “syncretic” understanding of culture, according to which an individual is free to turn to different traditions and heritages to give a shape to her/his identity, Americans would do well to learn a more playful notion of race from Latin America and Asia, a notion which would definitely transcend the black-white dichotomy that has burdened their history:

The last white freedom in America 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. (2002: 142)

In order to bring about this radical change of paradigm, Rodriguez proposes nothing less than a complete inversion in how we view the history of the country, beginning on the West Coast and moving toward the Atlantic: “Imagine how California must have appeared to those first Europeans—the Spanish, the English, the Russians—who saw the writing of the continent in reverse, from the perspective of Asia [...]” (185). The reasons for the author’s decision to reverse the path of the traditional national narrative become gradually clear as this different perspective allows him to capture “accidents” and contingencies that would have remained invisible in a more conventional account.⁷ Moreover, one also notices that his migrant and Californian roots allow him to give a distinct twist to issues that would have received a completely different treatment in the hands of an intellectual living in a less “hybrid and temperate region.” As he explains early in the collection:

The most important theme of my writing now is impurity. My mestizo boast: As a queer Catholic Indian Spaniard at home in a temperate Chinese city in a fading blond state in a post-Protestant nation, I live up to my sixteenth-century birth.” (35)

In a way, it is the convergence of all these racial, religious, and historical lineages in the author that allow—and encourage—

Rodríguez to consider U.S. history from a different vantage point. His main assumption is that the “small narratives” of women, Natives, Catholics or Hispanics have been distorted or completely erased by the more official versions of the nation’s past (cf. McDougall, 88-95). Perhaps looking into that past from the viewpoint of the South-West would provide us with a radically different narrative in which those marginal(ized) groups would play a more central role.

3. THE PLACE OF THE AMERICAN WEST IN THE BLUEPRINTS OF THE NATION

One of the first questions that repeatedly assail the author in the closing sections of the collection is: where does the American West really begin? He reminds us that in early American literature the West began where the candle lighting a window on the frontier was finally absorbed by darkness. To him, that “small calyx of flame” represented a beacon of the East, and everything beyond it was perceived as unknown and dangerous. Precisely because it is this pseudo-religious imagery that pervades much of the literature of the American frontier in the 19th century, it is difficult to assign it to a particular geographical location. No wonder then that, as Rodríguez admits, the threshold to these territories remains a contested issue:

A couple of years ago, at a restaurant in the old train station in Pittsburgh (as coal cars rumbled past our table), my host divulged an unexpected meridian: “Pittsburgh is the gateway to the West.” The same in St. Louis; the same in Kansas City. At a Mexican restaurant in Texas: Dallas is where the East begins; Fort Worth is where the West begins. (171)

Rodríguez is all too fond of coming across these contradictory statements that make problematic the dictums of historians and politicians, who always seem to have ready answers for questions concerning the expansion and consolidation of the country. In their eyes, he says, “History has a beginning, a middle, an outcome. Many appendices, many misgivings, many motives have been summarized” (195). As a matter of fact, one can only come to an accurate

understanding of how the West and the nation as a whole have become what they are today by looking closely into those desires, misgivings, and appendices that are usually bracketed out of conventional history: “To find where the West begins I will need to follow Athene’s U-turned arrow straight through nineteenth-century Wall Street, across the Atlantic to Enlightenment Paris, down the bronzed coast of Western civilization to ancient Greece” (173). Not unlike Michel Foucault (1972) in his archaeologies of madness or sexuality, Rodriguez also travels back to excavate in the discursive practices of Western civilization in order to try to figure out how they have predetermined many of the ideas we hold as irrefutable truths. Thus, for example, the eastern area of the country has always viewed the West Coast as an emblem of innocence and future opportunity. Yet,

The price Californians pay for such flattery is that we agree to be seen as people lacking in experience, judgment, and temper. It seems not to have occurred to the East that because the West has a knowledge of the coastline, the Westerner is the elder, the less innocent party in the conversation. (174)

No doubt, Rodriguez can get quite aggressive when he realizes that historians have concentrated their efforts on building a narrative of the country that stresses violence and domination (see Slotkin 1992), “vignettes with clean endings, sharp corners, palls of certainty stretched over the toes and noses of soldiers” (195). And this at the expense of what he calls the “brown history of America,” which would also include the mixed feelings, unclear emotions, and illegitimate choices that were just as essential in the progress of the country. “Brown children,” he observes, “are as old as America—oh, much older—to be the daughter of a father is already to be brown. To be the rib-wife of Adam was already to be brown; [...] But public admissions of racial impurity are fresh and wonderful to me” (202). However, if historians and politicians are often accused of defacing and manipulating history for their own purposes, the real Nemeses need to be sought among those Puritans of the new age—both in pop culture and academe—who keep trying to purge society and its cultural artefacts of any signs of contamination and ambivalence. Julio Marzán has cogently argued that Rodriguez unleashes his ire against these

people because they are still nostalgic for straight lines and for always choosing to be essentially one thing and not another: "Puritanism quickly takes on new meaning, a desire for purity that condemns theatricality or spectacle or, most important here, artifice" (Marzan 2003). The author cannot help suspecting that, as was the case in the 19th century, twenty-first-century children of color may grow up to hate themselves, if they come to prefer the singular rather than the multiple. In fact, he immediately connects the terrorist attacks of September 11 with the atavistic inclination in some human beings to see history developing in a certain direction and the hand of God pushing them in that precise direction:

These were men from a world of certainty, some hours distant—a world where men presume to divine, to enforce, to protectively wear the will of God; a world where men wage incessant war against the impurity that lies without [puritans!] and so they mistrust, they wither whatever they touch; they have withered the flower within the carpet they have walked upon. (226-27; square brackets in original)

Elisabeth Ferszt has recently compared Rodríguez to Jay Gatsby in the sense that, like Fitzgerald's hero, he prefers to retain his rebelliousness and romanticism, instead of squandering them on the political and academic "purists" who—like Daisy and Tom—are too happy in their own exclusive club to realize that straight lines and deciduous lineages no longer explain how the world rolls (Ferszt 2008: 444). One advantage of the south-western perspective is, of course, that it has learnt to accept the fact that no matter how high and how thick the barriers you set to the human soul, there will always be motives to cross over them or pull them down. Although there are things that one is told not to do or that one thinks s/he should not do, there is our Nature silently trying to pull us under. This becomes most apparent when cultures and communities come into contact, which was the case in the Far West: "America is fated to recognize itself as intersection—no, nothing so plain as intersection—as coil, pretzel, Gordian knot with a wagging tail" (192). That is what Rodríguez discovers in California, not so much a State where the east-to-west movement of the country came to its culmination, but rather where

the East, represented by the increasing Asian population, meets the South in the form of the Hispanic immigrants.⁸ Various conceptions of time and the past, multiple religions, allegedly incompatible value systems need to learn to cohabit in social spaces that have already been profoundly marked by certain narratives. Yet, it is also true that many of the lines drawn by those narratives do no longer seem effective in protecting or separating what they had originally tried to control:

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

In a review of Rodriguez's collection, Anthony Walton has argued that its principal merit is "His compassionate vision of [American] society and its complicated past" (2002). Yet, he also maintains that although the author shows great faith in the possibilities opened up by this (re)discovery of the country from a more syncretic viewpoint, he undercuts himself—and the reader—by promptly admitting just how difficult that brown future will be to manage and articulate. As the quotation above illustrates, while it is true that some of the barriers that have historically separated human groups are falling apart, it is also evident that most people still show some resistance to those changes that are inevitably going to take place. Perhaps the key to success in this transition would be to gain awareness of our own limitations and tribulations in dealing with socio-cultural phenomena that would probably have been unthinkable only a few decades ago.

4. HISTORICAL IRONIES AND THE POTENTIAL FOR NEW IDENTITIES

Despite the hope and optimism in Rodriguez's latest "discovery" of his nation, it would be myopic to come to the conclusion that he

may fall prey to the kind of naiveté that is sometimes observable in other proponents of cross-fertilizing and hybrid models of culture.⁹ On the contrary, as has already been noted earlier on, he is deeply conscious of the tensions that could be generated in contemporary Americans—including himself—by this huge pull in different directions. Not only does he recognize that the effects of the collapse of earlier barriers are not always fully satisfactory but, in some instances, they are seen to be further aggravating problems that, theoretically, they should have contributed to solving. For example, when he considers the advantages of the digital revolution and the craze for doing everything on-line in California, he immediately adds that “For the purposes of this book, the digital divide is between the Few and the Many. The Few will continue to disport themselves within their exception, as is their custom [...]” (158), while the Many “sleep in shanties, shit in holes, and grow in number every day.” In the opening pages of the book, Rodríguez describes himself as “skeptical by nature” (xv) and one only needs to examine the unexpected twists that he gives to issues that would seem crystal clear to others to realize that he is rarely uncritical or complaisant—beginning with his own views and assumptions. Thus, when he confesses to the reader his frictions with groups of homosexuals and academics, he cannot help declaring his frustration at the impossibility of conveying in less partisan terms the role that certain aspects of his identity have compelled him to adopt. Still, as he explained to Scott London in an interview, there are aspects of any human existence that are too intricate to be comprehensible to others, and “we desperately need to start realizing just how complicated our reality is in America” (1997).

Although Rodríguez feels relatively at ease speaking of the paradoxes and seeming contradictions—like being a Catholic and gay—that he discovers in himself, he can become deeply sarcastic when he comes across suspicious distortions occurring in the gap between other peoples’ intentional utterances and what we see them doing in the real world. According to Rice, this is what we usually understand by irony, which is a figurative trope that focuses our attention on the strategic discontinuities between “intentional acts of representation and the world in which they take place” (2007: 4). Like the “trickster figures” in the Native-American tradition, Rodríguez is extremely ingenious in detecting those instances of human behavior

that conspicuously subvert the norms of nature or ethics in order to pursue some allegedly superior goals. Evidently, the author's main purpose in highlighting those apparent incongruities is to demystify various cultural practices and world visions that have become widespread in his area of the country. For example, he refers on some occasions to the so-called environmentalist movement to show that, to a great extent, it originates in the "Weeping Conscience" or sense of guilt that white Americans suffer from after they have very much domesticated or completely destroyed the wilderness of the West:

Wisdom and a necessary humility inform the environmental movement, but there is an arrogant self-hatred, too, in the idea that we can create landscapes vacant of human will. In fact protection is human intrusion. The ultimate domestication of Nature is the ability to say: Rage on here, but nowhere else! (178)

Although Rodriguez acknowledges the fact that great efforts are being made to try to revive the memories of the Indian as a spiritual preserver of nature and of the virgin lands as a regenerator—and equalizer—of human life, he also contends that these efforts tend to obliterate history in order to legitimize contemporary crusades. As he explains, environmentalists are often seen to turn sympathetic with the "dead Indian" but, curiously, it is because this figure has come "to represent pristine Nature in an argument [...] against 'overpopulation'" (180). Hence the irony he perceives in Ralph Lauren's building himself a 14,000-acre ranch outside Telluride, Colorado, to go to "whenever he wants to escape the rag trade in New York" (177), or his own habit of going to watch Pocahontas movies in a shopping center where he can conveniently station his car on a well-paved parking lot and buy some fries (180).

The closing essay in *Brown* ("Peter's Avocado") is a brilliant rumination on the vibrant and dangerous possibilities that individualism—especially as experienced in California—offers to most Americans. Rodriguez wonders whether the freedom enjoyed today by people of different class and color will suffice to lead them into a brown future embracing hope and reconciliation. In the author's opinion, this will be possible only if the different groups first learn to

accept that that hard-earned freedom has repeatedly been threatened by the attempts of some to pasteurize and “purify” a history that was not without its ambiguities and illicit emotions. As Rodriguez remarks:

The stories in the history book that interested me were stories that seemed to lead off the page: A South Carolina farmer married one of his slaves. The farmer died. The ex-slave inherited her husband's chairs, horses, rugs, slaves. And *then* what happened? Did it, in fact, happen? (196; italics in original)

Rodriguez is convinced that Americans can come to an understanding of their position in the history of the country only by making those secret connections and admitting some bitter truths about their peoples' past. It is only when one finally faces the unclear and ambivalent nature of those “scandalous” decisions—which, as he says, have been “missing in plain sight” (197)—that one can hope to (re)discover the true potential of a hemispheric nation in which the boundaries of old are gradually beginning to dissolve. Several reviewers have argued that Rodriguez's re-vision of American history enhances our understanding of other intellectuals—such as Du Bois, T.S. Eliot or Ellison—who also explored the issue of how true individualism can be achieved only by thinking of oneself as a convergence of frequently contradictory forces (Villalon 2002; Walton 2002). And this is true, incidentally, not only of their ancestors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when boundaries of race, class, gender, and nation were much more clearly defined, but also in the twenty-first century, when we have developed our own “sacred truths” concerning biology, technology or aesthetic values. Rodriguez provides the example of his friend Franz's difficulties in understanding his son's behavior: although Peter is super-scrupulous about the kind of food he ingests and takes great care of his body, he has no problem defacing it with “contaminating” designs:

Though Franz can provide an approximate translation of Peter's behavior, its moment remains inexplicable to him. Despite Peter's care that his body not be defiled, his body is tattooed. Despite the impulse to live outside time, his mundane impulse to customize

himself, to paint indelible bracelets on his arm, to embarrass some future version of himself with this illustration. (216)

It is these tensions—or ironies—that Rodriguez believes have driven human history and have made the nation a complex—but also rich—crucible of identities. He is not interested in offering easy answers to the kind of contradictions that he sees between the individual aspirations of the people and the social practices they get involved in due to various types of pressure. So, whenever he is asked whether he thinks of himself as a Catholic or a gay—two supposedly irreconcilable terms—he never favors one category over the other. As he admits, it is “the tension I have come to depend upon. That is what I mean by brown. The answer is that I cannot reconcile” (224).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This contribution sets out by providing an analysis of the importance that the myth of the conquest of the American West had in the development of a national consciousness and the self-definition of the U.S. as an “exceptional” country. Weeks and others have argued that the roots of the “Manifest Destiny” ideology need to be sought in several features of the country’s Puritan heritage such as the sense of mission to spread certain institutions and the conviction that God had chosen these people to do this work (Weeks 1996: 61). As a result of this view of the progress of the American frontier, historical accounts—which can be traced back to the “Founding Fathers” of the Republic—have been dominated by the idea that the pioneers were extending the principles of freedom and democracy over the continent. Of course, we know nowadays that the myth of the “divinely favored nation” moving westward to create its new and shining “city on the hill” has been plagued by acts of violence and exclusion that have left whole segments of the population—most notably, minorities and women—as the expendable victims of the enterprise.

In the second half of *Brown*, Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez embarks on the ambitious project of reversing that traditional (and mythical) pattern in the design of the history of the

nation so as to allow his readers to discover some of the forgotten (or hidden) chapters of that history. In order to do so, Rodríguez chooses to look into the lives of some well-known and other less-often extolled national figures from rather oblique perspectives—of the migrant, the dispossessed, the homoerotic, etc.—to reveal aspects of the culture that are rarely discussed. To the highly-polished and pasteurized versions of the national myth, this author opposes an account that seems to be governed by illicit emotions and “accidents” that drive the country in unexpected directions. Often fascinated by the less pure and straight elements in his new “discovery” of America, he contends that the nation would do well to recognize that, although its history is full of optimism and possibilities—deriving mostly from its very diverse character—, there are other less “shining” chapters—mostly related to class, race, and gender divisions—that also need to be borne in mind if a more hopeful future is to be built.

Rodríguez has often been described as a polemical writer all too fond of digging into issues that may be unpleasant to different communities—homosexuals, Mexican-Americans, academics, etc.—(Ferszt 2008; Marzan 2003). As we can see in some of the passages from *Brown* discussed in this article, Rodríguez is especially interested in those instances of human behavior confirming that there is usually a significant gap between the alleged motivations driving his compatriots to support particular policies and then the practices they carry out in their daily lives. He proves to be a master in the use of irony—and even sarcasm—to show the generalized tendency to whitewash a history of the nation that proves invariably deeply “brown.” It should be said, however, that he never shies away from making himself the target of those ironies as his life has been as full of tensions and contradictions as anybody else’s (cf. Jefferson 2003). Like Walt Whitman, though, he has learnt to accept those conflicting elements of his identity as part of his own “brownness.”

NOTES

- ¹ A shorter version of this contribution was presented as a keynote lecture in the 8th International Conference on Chicano Literature: “Cruzando las fronteras de la imaginación” held in

Toledo in May 2012. The research done for the writing of this article is part of a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN) and the European Regional Development Fund (Code: FF2011/23598).

- ² Many of these pioneers were encouraged to move to the Western territories by John L. O'Sullivan's columns in publications such as the *Democratic Review* in the mid-1840s. Although O'Sullivan was not a radical "expansionist," he did believe that it was the Anglo-Saxons' "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."
- ³ David Carroll (1987), elaborating on Bakhtin's and Lyotard's views, emphasizes the huge complementary (and oppositional) importance of little (or marginal) voices and stories to monologic or grand narratives of any nation (see especially pp. 77-78).
- ⁴ Historical revisionism has become a habitual practice in historiography these last few decades as feminists, ethnic-minority historians, Marxists, environmentalists, etc. have recognized the urgent need to reinterpret traditional views of cause and effect, decisions, and evidence. Since history is generally written by the winners, it is important to look into the past with a critical eye so as to improve our understanding of it.
- ⁵ In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez writes: "In order to show you America I would have to take you out. I would take you to the restaurant—OPEN 24 HOURS—alongside a freeway in the U.S.A. The waitress is a blond or a redhead—not the same color as at her last job. She is divorced. Her eyebrows are jet-black migraines painted on, or relaxed, clownish domes of cinnamon brown. Morning and the bloom of youth are painted on her cheeks. She is at once antimaternal—the kind of woman you're not supposed to know—and supramaternal, the nurturer of lost boys" (1992: 54-55).
- ⁶ This topic comes up in most interviews with the author. He explained to Scott London, for instance, that "Cultures, when they meet, influence one another, whether people like it or not. But Americans don't have any way of describing this secret that has been going on for more than two hundred years. The

- intermarriage of the Indian and the African in America, for example, has been constant and thorough" (London 1997).
- ⁷ Rodríguez repeats several times throughout the collection that he is particularly interested in those missing, unrecorded events of American history: "Missing, I suppose, because of the orderly sensibilities of recorders, and then of readers. We cannot record time. Time is capacious, a rose. Such is what Virginia Woolf intuited. Such is what Marcel Proust intuited. These heroes of the imagination objected to history because the center of it was missing" (2002: 197).
- ⁸ California resembles, in this sense, the "contact zones" as famously defined by Mary L. Pratt in the early 1990s: "I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1991: 34).
- ⁹ Although Rodríguez refers to José Vasconcelos' piece *La Raza Cósmica* (1925) as the "brownest secular essay" advocating "the fusion and mixing of all peoples," most critics today would think of Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987) as the work that most clearly exalts the hybrid condition.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, S.P., ed. 2008 *The Early American Republic: A Documentary Reader (Uncovering the Past: Documentary Readers in American History)*. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Anzaldúa, G. 1987 *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Carroll, D. 1987 "Narrative, Heterogeneity, and the Question of the Political: Bakhtin and Lyotard," in M. Krieger, ed. *The Aims of Representation: Subject / Text / History*. Stanford: Stanford UP. 69-106.
- Ellison, R. 1986 "Going to the Territory," in R. Ellison, *Going to the Territory*. New York: Vintage Books. 120-44.
- Ferszt, E. 2008 "Richard Rodríguez: Reluctant Romantic." *Early American Literature* 43.2 (June): 443-52.

- Foucault, M. 1972 *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Jefferson, M. 2003 "On Writers and Writing; The Color Brown." *The New York Times*, 16 February 2003. Accessed November 26, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/books/on-writers-and-writing-the-color-brown.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>
- Johannsen, R.W. 1997 "The Meaning of Manifest Destiny," in S.W. Haynes and C. Morris, eds. *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP. 7-20.
- Johnson, P. 1997 *A History of the American People*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Kolodny, A. 1984 *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P.
- Krupat, A. 1992 *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, Literature, Criticism*. Berkeley: U of California P.
- London, S. 1997 "A View from the Melting Pot: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez." *The Sun Magazine*, August 1997. Accessed November 26, 2010. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/rodriguez.html>
- Marzan, J.A. 2003. "The Art of Being Richard Rodriguez." *The Bilingual Review*, 27.1 (Jan.-Apr.): 45-64. *The Free Library*. Accessed 26 November 2010. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+art+of+being+Richard+Rodriguez.-a0136908114>
- McDougall, W.A. 1997 *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776*. Ashland, OH: Ashland UP.
- Pratt, M.L. 1991 "Arts of the Contact Zone," in *Profession 91*. New York: MLA. 33-40.
- Prucha, F.P. 1995 *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2nd edition. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.
- Rice, L. 2007 *Of Irony and Empire: Islam, the West, and the Transcultural Invention of Africa*. SUNY Series, Explorations in Postcolonial Studies. Albany, NY: State U of New York.
- Rodriguez, R. 2002 *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York and London: Penguin Books.
- Rodriguez, R. 1992 *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Rodriguez, R. 1986 "Mexico's Children." *The American Scholar*, 55.2 (Spring): 161-77.

- Slotkin, R. 1992 *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum.
- Smith, H.N. 1950 *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, MA and London. Harvard UP.
- Tompkins, J. 1992 *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Villalon, O. 2002 "One Color Fits All: Richard Rodríguez Finds the Future in *Brown*." *San Francisco Gate*, 7 April 2002. Accessed November 26, 2010. <http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/One-Color-Fits-All-Richard-Rodriguez-finds-the-2855505.php>
- Vizenor, G., ed. 1993 *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures (American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series)*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P.
- Walton, A. 2002 "Greater than All the Parts." A review of *Brown* by Richard Rodríguez. *The New York Times*, 7 April 2002. Accessed November 26, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/07/books/greater-than-all-the-parts.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>
- Weeks, W. E. 1996 *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc. 30-58.
- Zinn, H. 1996 *A People's History of the United States: 1942-Present*. 2nd Edition. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Ltd.