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Crossing the Great Divide: Rewritings of the U.S.-Mexican Encounter in Walter Abish and Richard Rodríguez

Abstract

In a 1978 essay on the relationship between Mexico and the United States, Octavio Paz suggested that the two countries were separated by a "perhaps insuperable" divide. Yet two recent works—Richard Rodríguez's collection of essays *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992) and Walter Abish's novel *Eclipse Fever* (1993)—offer evidence of a changing outlook on the U.S.-Mexican encounter. Abish and Rodríguez build upon the storehouse of images of the irreconcilable differences between the two nations. However, insofar as they play with and question these images, they draw attention to the unstable, fluctuating nature of the U.S.-Mexican encounter in the late twentieth century. Abish focuses on the prevailing inequality in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, and reflects on the distinctive traits of the national character of each of the two countries. Yet a variety of narrative strategies serve to block any reading of *Eclipse Fever* in terms of sharply differentiated group identities. Rodríguez repeatedly evokes commonplace contrasts between the two nations. Yet his reading both of a variety of cultural phenomena, and of his own trajectory as an individual, suggests a complex interweaving of the cultures of Mexico and the United States.

Keywords

border narrative, U.S.-Mexican border, Walter Abish, Richard Rodríguez, Days of obligation: an argument with my Mexican Father, Eclipse Fever, nationality, identity, controversy

Crossing the Great Divide: Rewritings of the U.S.-Mexican Encounter in Walter Abish and Richard Rodriguez

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In a 1978 essay on the relationship between Mexico and the United States, Octavio Paz described the geographical link between the two nations as an example of the strange accidents and odd paradoxes so often perpetrated by history, as a massive and cruel irony comparable only to the unfortunate encounter Paz had witnessed in India (where he lived for most of the 1960s) of two such strikingly different religions as Hinduism and Islam. Paz argued that Mexico and the United States were “condemned to live alongside each other,” yet were separated by what he called a “perhaps insuperable” divide. For Paz, Mexico and the United States constituted “two distinct versions of Western civilization,” a distinction originating in the fact that in England—the country that decisively shaped the cultural and political identity of the United States—“the Reformation triumphed,” whereas Spain—the country that placed a lasting imprint on the evolution of Mexico—“was the champion of the Counter-Reformation.” Paz believed that even if Mexico were suddenly to become as powerful economically and politically as its northern neighbor, the civilizational differences between the two countries would not disappear; in fact, Paz thought that they would become “more acute and more clear-cut” (357).

More than two decades after the publication of Paz’s essay, the disparity in political and economic power between the two nations remains as marked as ever. Yet it appears that Paz’s prediction has not been borne out, for a new vision of the U.S.-Mexican encounter has emerged in this period, a vision that does not

overlook the lasting differences between the two nations, yet sees the exchanges between Mexico and the United States—the traffic across the border—as having become so intense and varied that it no longer seems likely that the gulf separating the two countries will remain forever impassable. I take the two works I will discuss in this essay—Richard Rodriguez’s collection of essays *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992) and Walter Abish’s novel *Eclipse Fever* (1993)—to constitute compelling literary expressions of this new outlook.

Students of the changing configuration of U.S.-Mexican relations have developed a particular interest in the border-zone between the two nations. Journalists, poets, cultural anthropologists, and others have stepped forward with their readings of the border—all backed by the conviction that the border offers an image of the future of our societies. For the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa, the borderlands are where a new *mestiza* consciousness is being forged. For Néstor García Canclini, an Argentinean anthropologist working in Mexico, the border is a space of deterritorialization where traditional conceptions of national culture—built on notions of autonomy and authenticity—are being broken down. For reporter William Langewiesche, the U.S.-Mexican border is a war-zone of sorts, where key cultural, political, and economic battles over trade and immigration, over narcotics, ethnicity, and over the environment are being fought out. All these writers share the view that the border—understood as a line that marks a clean break between Mexico and the United States—has become, from a certain perspective, a fiction.

Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation* includes an essay about Tijuana and San Diego and about the border that at once links and divides the two cities. But the book as a whole is about much more than just the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico. The action in Abish’s *Eclipse Fever* unfolds in the United States and Mexico, but Abish has little interest in the actual border between the two nations. But if the real border is a fiction, then the focus of border theory must be on something else. The border becomes a movable line, and comes to refer to what happens wherever the United States and Mexico encounter each other.

Days of Obligation and *Eclipse Fever* are broadly concerned with

the complex interactions between the U.S. and Mexico, and both works are best read in relation to the store of images—so effectively synthesized by Octavio Paz—of the irreconcilable differences between the two nations. But insofar as both Abish and Rodriguez play with and question these images, drawing attention to the unstable, fluctuating nature of the U.S.-Mexican encounter in the late twentieth century, their work has clear affinities with the work of the border theorists.

Abish and Rodriguez write about Mexico with a deep knowledge of the history of Western representations of Mexico.¹ But in the long tradition of literary travelers to Mexico, they introduce two new personae. These personae in themselves help to call into question traditional assumptions concerning the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. As the son of immigrants from Mexico, Rodriguez travels to Mexico not, like Antonin Artaud or D.H. Lawrence, in search of the absolute other of modern Western civilization, but rather to recover parts of his own cultural heritage. From the point of view of the history of literary representations of Mexico, Abish is perhaps an even more unusual figure than Rodriguez, for Abish did not even visit Mexico before writing *Eclipse Fever*. Drewey Wayne Gunn observes that in the nineteenth century there are numerous examples of writers who set their works in Mexico even if they had never actually been there (18). Their task was to recreate Mexico in the imagination. But at the end of the twentieth century, with the ease of international travel, to write a novel about Mexico without setting foot in the country itself has a very different meaning than it did in the nineteenth century. Abish's refusal of the commonplace option of writing with at least some first-hand knowledge of his subject indicates that *Eclipse Fever* is meant as a different type of representation of Mexico.

Abish clearly used his imagination in writing about Mexico; it is equally clear that he did extensive research in the existing literature on the country before writing his novel. *Eclipse Fever* is based on the available store of representations of Mexico; yet the novel is designed to subvert and question these representations. Abish's choice of settings for his novels has always been guided by a desire to distance and defamiliarize his subject mat-

ter. His most successful novel to date, *How German Is It* (1980), is set in Germany, but again Abish did not, in fact, visit Germany until after he had completed the novel. His first novel, *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), was set in Africa, but by allowing the novel's composition to be governed by the unfolding of the alphabet, Abish was indicating that the Africa of his book was a continent of his own construction, an Africa built up bit by bit with letters, words, and sentences. It is understandable that Abish came to be labeled a metafictionist in the wake of the publication of *Alphabetical Africa*. Yet in his subsequent novels it became evident that Abish's use of the devices of distancing and defamiliarization was informed more by a modernist disdain for the stereotype than by the metafictionist's concern with fiction as fiction. Abish's work, in other words, had an epistemological content—for Abish, to defamiliarize was to make the reader see things in a fresh light. Abish has always been a travel writer of sorts, but as a writer of displacement he belongs in part to the literary and cultural tradition described by Caren Kaplan in her recent book, *Questions of Travel*. Kaplan links this modernist tradition to what she calls the "Euro-American formation 'exile'" —a "formation" in which "the 'artist in exile' is never 'at home,' always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insight" (28). Abish belongs to this austere mode; yet there is also a significant difference between Abish and the modernism of Kaplan's description. Kaplan speaks of the melancholic, nostalgic aspects of modernism, elements rooted in the yearning for some kind of return to wholeness. It was precisely this dream of wholeness that brought so many writers from this period—Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, and Artaud come to mind—to Mexico. Abish himself speaks in an interview of the "transformative emotive power" writers in this tradition have attributed to Mexico, but he also makes it clear that he is utterly uninterested in using Mexico for this purpose (qtd. in van Delden 382). A brief (and necessarily incomplete) summary of the plot of *Eclipse Fever* will help to demonstrate Abish's point.

Eclipse Fever contains a number of interlocking plots that bring together a sizeable cast of characters, both Mexican and

entrepreneur who has hatched a plan to build an elevator in the famous Pyramid of the Sun on the outskirts of Mexico City. To get his project off the ground, Preston must negotiate with an influential Mexican senator. He also hopes to win support from Mexico's intellectuals, trying to persuade one of them, a critic named Alejandro, to write a favorable article on the project. Alejandro's wife Mercedes has just left him for the American novelist Jurud, on whose work Alejandro, at the behest of his publisher, had once written an article filled with "false praise" (17). Jurud, who lives in New York, is planning a trip to Mexico to promote his new novel, which has been translated into Spanish by Mercedes. But Jurud's teenage daughter Bonnie feels threatened by Mercedes—"the Mexican intruder" (41)—and leaves home, traveling first to the West Coast, and later to Mexico, where she hopes to get a view of an imminent eclipse. On her journey, she falls in at one point with a young Mexican Indian named Emilio, a smuggler of pre-Columbian artifacts. On their way to Mexico, they call on a Phoenix art dealer named Pech, whom Emilio tries to interest in an ancient Mexican codex. Pech later shows up in Mexico, trying to interest Preston in this same codex. Preston and his wife Rita are avid collectors of pre-Columbian art, which they often obtain illegally. The critic Alejandro, for example, introduces the Holliers to Salas, the director of the Partridge Museum, an institution—not yet open to the public—housing the collection of pre-Columbian artifacts formerly owned by Anabelle D. Partridge, a wealthy American widow for whom Alejandro and his friend Francisco had once worked as cataloguers. Salas allows the Holliers to visit the museum, where they help themselves to some items in the collection. The Holliers, in turn, cast themselves up as patrons of the museum, with Rita assisting in the task of persuading Francisco—with whom she is having an affair—to accept a generous commission to write a history of the Partridge Museum. The aim of the text will be to promote the museum, and thus to help secure financial support from a number of American philanthropies.

In the same interview from which I quoted earlier, Abish describes how in reading Lawrence or Lowry "one is made to feel that the characters are destined to undergo a cathartic conver-

sion” (qtd. in van Delden 382). Abish’s interest in *Eclipse Fever* clearly lies elsewhere. For one, Abish emphasizes social connections rather than individual conversions. The complex web of relations between the characters in the novel illustrates his interest in the glue that binds individuals in a society together. One might draw attention, for example, to the extensive use Abish makes of the device of the *introduction*, by which I mean the act whereby one character brings two other characters into contact with each other. On one level, the novel consists of a lengthy round of introductions. These introductions are often in the nature of a service one character renders to another. They emerge as a characteristic gesture in the society depicted in *Eclipse Fever*, but they also function as a structural device, helping to move the story forward. Tracing the links between a series of introductions provides insights into the novel’s structure, as well as into the governing motivations of the characters. One significant series begins with the publisher Jacobus introducing Mercedes to Preston. Mercedes subsequently introduces her husband Alejandro to Preston and his wife. Alejandro then introduces Preston to both Salas and Fernando. The connection with Salas sets the stage for Preston’s involvement with the Partridge Museum, while the link to Fernando leads to the latter’s affair with Rita. Interestingly enough, Fernando had originally introduced Alejandro to Mercedes, perhaps, as the narrator suggests, because he was “intent on dumping her” (16). The rule seems to be that the introductions in *Eclipse Fever* have a sexual purpose (or outcome), or that they serve some economic interest. Thus, we learn at the end of the novel that Alejandro had received a fee from both Preston and Salas for putting the two men in touch with each other.

In a supremely ironic scene in the third and final part of the novel, Preston invites Alejandro to a party at his home, where he promises to introduce him to Salas. But Preston fails to spot Salas as he scans the room, while Alejandro “refrained from apprising his forgetful host that it was he who had given him Salas’s name in the first place” (246). The scene might be regarded as an instance of another one of Abish’s preferred devices in *Eclipse Fever*, one that I will call, borrowing the title of a chapter in the

novel itself, the device of the *flawed connection*. The most memorable example of this device occurs in the story of Bonny, who travels to Mexico to witness an eclipse, only to find herself in the wrong part of the country, watching the eclipse on CNN. But there are numerous other moments in the novel that can be placed under this heading. Jurud, for example, fails to show up for a reception organized in his honor at the U.S. embassy in Mexico. Mercedes tells Alejandro that she will fly home to attend the funeral of Alejandro's father, but when Alejandro goes to meet her at the airport, she never appears. On the way to Mexico, Emilio takes Bonny to visit his friend Cash in Flagstaff, but when they arrive at Cash's house they find Cash gone and the house occupied by two Mexican goons, Pedro and Pablo, who fill the place with their menacing jokes. Each of these incidents—along with many others—contributes to the delineation of the novel's governing mood, which is one of *mistrust*. The social glue in *Eclipse Fever*, in other words, is not very strong.

What bearing, we might ask, do these features of *Eclipse Fever* have on the depiction of the U.S.-Mexican encounter? The critics who reviewed the novel when it first appeared offer differing views on whether Abish confirms or questions the traditional notion that there exists a profound cultural and civilizational gulf separating Mexico from the United States. Paul West asserts that the novel gives credence to the view that "Americans will never fathom Mexico, and Mexicans will never fathom America" (11). Lucy Hughes-Hallett observes that Abish makes use of the old conception of Mexico as "a handy underworld for the North American imagination." The anonymous reviewer for the Spanish newspaper *El País* speaks of the clash of two opposed realities, the Mexican and the American, in Abish's novel ("Los Países Imaginarios de W. Abish"). Abish gave some support to this reading of his novel when he told the *Washington Post Book World* that "what I love to do is to bring things together that do not fit, that are abrasive—the U.S. and Mexico, the German past and present . . ." ("How Mexican Is It"). But numerous reviewers emphasize the way in which *Eclipse Fever* tends to erase the sharp differences between the two nations. Hughes-Hallett points out that Abish does not only use, but also demystifies the traditional

view of Mexico as an “underworld.” Valentine Cunningham evokes the novel’s concern with the “commerce between North and South America—a busy trade in fictions, stories, images” (61), suggesting that Mexico and the United States are anything but sealed off from each other. Harold Bloom suggests that while Abish “maintains many shades of difference between his Mexican and his American characters” (5), he also implies that “the Mexican vision is prophetic in changes in our own outlook as we approach a millennium.” And Abish has also said in an interview that he wanted his novel to break with the tradition of non-Mexican writers who have become “conveyors of a Mexican mystique” (qtd. in van Delden 382).

The brief description I gave earlier of *Eclipse Fever*, and of some of the novel’s characteristic devices, suggests that Abish has a sharp eye for the prevailing inequality in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. The world of *Eclipse Fever* is one in which American art collectors are responsible for the plundering of Mexico’s archeological sites, American entrepreneurs plan to desecrate one of Mexico’s most treasured monuments, and American novelists sell their slick products to an eager Mexican public. It is also a novel that repeatedly mulls over the distinctive traits of the national character of each of the two countries. Yet at the same time some of the novel’s structural features draw attention away from this perceived split between Mexicans and Americans. The device of the *introduction*, for example, creates an effect of circulation among the characters that blocks any reading of the novel in terms of sharply differentiated group identities. The constant introductions in *Eclipse Fever* are part of the never-ending enterprise of rendering favors and jockeying for advantage that involves all of the characters in the novel, regardless of their nationality. The sense that everybody in the world of the novel is driven by some form of desire, whether for sexual pleasure, economic advantage, or social status, has the effect of equalizing all of the characters, making them appear part of a single system of behavior. In addition, the device of the *flawed connection* contributes to a general effect of irony in the novel. It is the irony that comes from seeing how things persistently refuse to fall into their assigned places. On a broader level, this irony is

linked to Abish's reluctance to offer the reader fixed and stable definitions, for example of what is American, or what is Mexican. The novel's intense questioning of the very concept of belonging, and therefore of identity, is especially clear from the trajectories traced in *Eclipse Fever* by two characters, Alejandro and Bonny. Even though these two characters have only one brief meeting, their fates are paired both at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Mercedes's initial abandonment of Alejandro provokes Bonny's displacement from her father's home, while Alejandro's eventual acceptance by Mercedes's upper-class family coincides with Bonny's return to her father at the end of the novel. Back home in New York, however, Bonny appears to have regressed, acting like a seven-year-old (334), while Alejandro's embrace by his in-laws causes a painful rash to appear on his body. Bonnie and Alejandro both come home at the end of the novel, but there is so much irony attached to these homecomings that we might describe these moments as simple variants of the device of the *flawed connection*. And we are justified in seeing this device as part of a larger effort on Abish's part to question notions of place and belonging, of location and identity.

To give a further sense of this subtle, even precarious, balance in Abish's portrayal of the U.S.-Mexican encounter, let us look a little deeper into one of one of the main plots of *Eclipse Fever*, the one dealing with the theft and smuggling of a variety of pre-Columbian artefacts. It is a plot that links a diverse set of characters—both Mexican and American—all of them eager to cash in on Mexico's past. *Eclipse Fever*, thus, evokes the long history of plunder to which Mexico's archaeological sites have been subjected. This history can be said to have begun with John Lloyd Stephens, who in his *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) relates his desire to buy the ruins of Copán, and remove them piece by piece to New York, where they could be put on display in a "great national museum of American antiquities" (42). The mentality expressed by people like Stephens—labeled "archaeological Monroism" by one Mexican historian (qtd. in Delpar 93)—eventually provoked a response from the Mexican government. In 1897, it passed legislation that declared "all archaeological monuments to be the property of

the nation and forbade the export of movable objects without official permission” (Delpar 94). More than a hundred years later, however, the tradition of plunder continues unabated, as was made clear by an exhibition held in the summer of 1998 at the Museum of Ethnology in Antwerp. This exhibition, entitled “Offerings for a new life, funerary images from pre-Columbian west Mexico,” consisted of 158 artefacts, the vast majority of which had been smuggled out of Mexico and sold on the black market to collectors in the United States and Europe.²

Abish clearly wishes the reader to recall this history of plunder. Furthermore, the simple evocation of this history is a way of speaking out against it, for it is inconceivable that this depiction of the looting of Mexico’s cultural resources should fail to provoke a measure of indignation in the reader. *Eclipse Fever* presents pre-Columbian artifacts as symbols of cultural authenticity, and implicitly takes a stand in favor of the preservation of a nation’s cultural patrimony. Yet what makes the novel such an interesting exercise is that its ethical position is never articulated in so direct a fashion. The narrator of *Eclipse Fever* remains throughout in a state of fingernail-paring invisibility, and there is not a single character who is invested with any degree of moral or ideological authority. Nobody in the novel is imbued with the glamor of resistance. In an article that reads *Eclipse Fever* as an example of the fiction of globalization, Thomas Peyser argues that in delineating the conflicts produced by contemporary processes of globalization, Abish’s work is remarkable for its refusal to take sides, for “calling into question the very possibility of drawing clear lines of battle” (260). Peyser describes Abish’s response to “. . . the ever-shifting cultural, political, and economic geography prevailing at present” as “. . . a stoically imperturbable stylistic finish signaling a thoroughgoing ambivalence and a perpetual deferral of commitment” (256). Peyser overstates the extent of Abish’s neutrality, since, as I suggested a moment ago, the very subject matter Abish works with has an ethical charge to it. This is true of the topic of post-war Germany’s relationship to the Nazi period in *How German Is It*; it is also true of the subject of the use and abuse of Mexico’s cultural treasures in *Eclipse Fe-*

simple explanations and easy categorizations. If Abish is a moralist, as some of *Eclipse Fever*'s reviewers suggested,³ he is a moralist who offers us no obvious position from which to emit our moral judgments. And it is precisely this difficult equilibrium that makes his novel of Mexico so appropriate a portrayal of the current phase in U.S.-Mexican relations. For *Eclipse Fever* does not close its eyes to the role of money, or power, or culture, in shaping the encounter between the two nations. Yet at the same time it does not describe a closed system, with the United States on one side, and Mexico on the other. For good or ill, in *Eclipse Fever* there are plenty of opportunities for collaboration between Mexicans and Americans, for crossing the great divide described by Octavio Paz in his essay of twenty years ago.

On one level, Richard Rodriguez is an utterly different writer from Abish, the ornate, intimate style of Rodriguez's essays contrasting sharply with the spare, impersonal mode of Abish's fictions. Abish and Rodriguez also had entirely different reasons for writing about Mexico. Abish states in an interview that when he started writing *Eclipse Fever* he had "Italy not Mexico in mind," but after twenty pages or so he discovered that "Italy was going to be too agreeable," so he changed the novel's setting to Mexico, which offered him a "rougher texture" (qtd. in van Delden 382). Aesthetic considerations determined his decision to write about Mexico. By contrast, Rodriguez, as the son of immigrants from Mexico, had deeply personal reasons for writing about Mexico. The subject matter of *Days of Obligation* is largely consistent with the autobiographical impulse that shapes most of Rodriguez's writing. Yet in spite of these striking differences between the two writers, Abish and Rodriguez are linked by a shared concern with the problem of cultural identity. The centrality of this theme to Abish's work is demonstrated by the title of his best-known novel, *How German Is It*, as well as by the critics's penchant for devising variations on this title.⁴ But whereas the postmodernist framework within which Abish's work has frequently been read has allowed for a generous appreciation of Abish's skeptical, even indeterminate, approach to the question of cultural identity, Rodriguez's often equally fluid approach to the same problem has often been read within the context of Chicano discourse, and

has made him the object of frequent attacks. As is well known, Rodriguez first made a name for himself as an opponent of bilingual education, a position that divided him from the majority of Chicano intellectuals. This led many critics to see Rodriguez's work as an expression of his estrangement from his natural community. Caren Kaplan has shown, in *Questions of Travel*, that such a condition of displacement is regarded in the tradition of Euro-American modernism almost as a *sine qua non* of genuine creative activity. Yet in the eyes of many Chicano critics it made Rodriguez's work deeply suspect. Rosaura Sánchez, for example, condemns Rodriguez as an "ethnic writer estranged . . . from his own collectivities" (172). Similarly, Ramón Saldívar accuses Rodriguez of lacking "any organic connection to his ethnic group" and of "not feel[ing] himself part of the social whole" (158). Not all of the commentary on this aspect of Rodriguez's work has been negative, however. Kevin R. McNamara, for example, also sees Rodriguez as a figure without an overriding commitment to a particular group identity, but he places this lack in a more favorable light. McNamara sees in Rodriguez a healthy refusal of the notion of a "reconciled identity" and a praiseworthy attempt to create a new hybrid, cosmopolitan identity: "Playing national myths, group identities and received ideas off each other, Rodriguez creates himself as a point where cultures converge and are renewed" (106).

The principal cultures that converge in Rodriguez's collection of essays *Days of Obligation* are those of Mexico and the United States. Having dramatized in his first book his disaffiliation from the Mexican background of his parents—Rodriguez declares at the beginning of *Hunger of Memory* that now that he is a grown man his parents are no longer his parents in a cultural sense (4)—his second book is concerned with the return to Mexico, and so constitutes a significant change in his conception of himself. Yet if in his first book he had adamantly rejected the idea that he might be able to claim "unbroken ties" to his past (5), his encounter with Mexico in *Days of Obligation* is less a chronicle of the re-knotting of such ties than a narrative of multiple identifications and misidentifications.

Like Abish, Rodriguez has a good knowledge of the history of Western representations of Mexico. In one of the essays collected in *Days of Obligation*, entitled "India," Rodriguez's technique is to run through a series of interpretations of Mexico, and of the figure of the Indian. One comes from *Time* magazine, another from *The New York Times*, a third is proffered by a Señor Fuentes, a tour guide who escorts Rodriguez around Mexico City. But Rodriguez also quotes from Charles Macomb Flandrau's 1908 book *Viva México*, and the epigraph to his essay is from Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. Here is a man, in fact, who explores Mexico with the book of European travel literature in hand. Yet Rodriguez is determined to overturn the stock images of Mexico, and of Mexico's relationship to the United States found in the literary tradition and in the contemporary mass media, as well as in the minds of the people he meets.

Rodriguez's description of the US-Mexican encounter is rife with ironies. A basic and recurring trope in *Days of Obligation* is that of the misnomer—an example being the title of the essay to which I just referred, "India," an essay about Mexico and the native peoples of the Americas. The entire essay is a chronicle of misunderstandings and misapprehensions. It opens with Rodriguez contemplating the Indian features of his own face, features that seem to distance him from his own family, for, as Rodriguez explains, "no one in my family had a face as dark or as Indian as mine," and seem to prevent him from relating to America's official discourse about race, focused as it is on "two Americas, one white, one black" (1). Rodriguez then proceeds to contrast two responses to the color of his skin. On the one hand, there is an aunt, living in Mexico City, who sends him a genealogy tracing his father's family back to eighteenth-century Salamanca. No explanation is attached to this document, but the message is clear: Rodriguez's aunt is saying, "We are not Indian" (2). On the other hand, there is the Berkeley undergraduate who approaches Rodriguez one day as though he were a "stone totem" and informs him that "it must be cool to be related to the Aztecs" (2). Clearly, Rodriguez rejects both his aunt's denial of her family's Indian heritage, and the undergraduate's celebration of an exoticized Indian identity. An anecdote follows about a

Pakistani journalist who on a visit to the United States is baffled to learn that it is practically impossible to obtain the American Indian handicrafts he had promised to bring back home to his wife. Surprised at the disjunction between expectation and reality, the Pakistani journalist asks Rodriguez "Where are the Indians?" Rodriguez's typically sardonic commentary follows in parentheses: "(Two Indians staring at each other. One asks where are all the Indians, the other shrugs)" (3). It is a comical moment, but also a deeply poignant one, for what it dramatizes is a profound failure to find a place for the Indian in the contemporary world.

The image of the Indian's disappearance with which "India" opens sets the stage for a meditation that threads its way through the rest of the essay, a meditation that amounts to an attempt to recognize and then to overcome this condition of invisibility. Rodriguez recalls growing up in Sacramento "thinking of Indians as people who had disappeared" (3), and then links this experience to a powerful element in the nation's ideology: the belief that this was a new country, and the consequent refusal to make a place for the Indians, who, after all, represented "permanence and continuity" (4), precisely those qualities Americans rejected. America, Rodriguez explains, "is an idea to which natives are inimical," and it was the power of this American idea that turned the American Indian into a "ghost" (4). Rodriguez goes on to suggest that the blindness toward the Indian is just as evident in the nation's foundational ideology of America as a New World, as it is in the outlook of today's environmentalists, with their rejection of modernity. Referring to an article in *The New York Times* in which the reporter laments the changing ways of Alaska's Indians, Rodriguez complains that "The industrial countries of the world romanticize the Indian who no longer exists, ignoring the Indian who does—the Indian who is poised to chop down his rain forest, for example" (6). This idea of the Indian, not as a "stunned remnant" (4), not as a figure to be relegated "to the obligatory first chapter" of the nation's history, but as a full participant in the modern world, is picked up again in a powerful passage near the end of the essay. Standing at a crowded intersection in Mexico City, surrounded by the teeming—and

brown-skinned—masses of the world's largest city, Rodriguez experiences a kind of epiphany. He realizes that if the Indian has disappeared, it was only "in order to ensure her inclusion in time; refusing to absent herself from the future" (24). The Indian has "chosen to survive" (24); in fact, he has survived so well, the sense of life that surrounds Rodriguez is so overpowering, that he suddenly sees that "Mexico City stands as the prophetic example," that it is, in truth, "the capital of modernity" (24), for it is a city that has long since embarked on "the task of the twenty-first century—the renewal of the old, the known world, through miscegenation" (24-25). Rodriguez defends the Indian's right to change, and he sees himself as an example of this process: "I take it as an Indian achievement that I am alive, that I am Catholic, that I speak English, that I am an American" (24). For Rodriguez, the fact that he is an American does not mean that he is no longer an Indian. With this claim, Rodriguez wishes to make the Indian visible again, to make the Indian part of contemporary America. Interestingly enough, it is a claim he makes after his epiphany in Mexico City. The journey to Mexico helps Rodriguez reconceive his relationship to the United States.

Rodriguez's interest in offering a new description of the relationship between Mexico and the United States is perhaps clearest in "In Athens Once," his essay on Tijuana and San Diego. At first, Rodriguez runs through a series of commonplace contrasts between the two nations. Mexico, for example, is a country turned towards the past: Rodriguez crosses the border and immediately proclaims that "Already the sun feels older" (80). On the other hand, San Diego, shorthand for the United States in this essay, represents the future, "secular, soulless" (84). America is an individualistic nation, whereas Mexico is more communal. He writes: "The point of the United States is distinguishing yourself from the crowd. The point of Mexico is the crowd" (81). Americans prize transparency, whereas Mexicans accept that nothing is ever what it seems. Witness the following two remarks: Mexico is "a country of nuance and mascara" (87), whereas "American virtues are daylight virtues" (88). Each of these topics is mentioned by Octavio Paz in "Mexico and the United States." Yet the stereotypes in Rodriguez's essay are there

not to be confirmed, but to be picked apart. Ultimately, Rodriguez's aim is to undo the familiar oppositions between Tijuana and San Diego, between Mexico and the United States, and to suggest a different perspective on these two cities, and hence on the two nations to which they belong.

To begin with, Rodriguez undercuts the idea of Mexico as a unified entity by repeatedly drawing attention to the distance that separates Tijuana from the nation's capital. On some level, Tijuana simply does not exist from the perspective of Mexico City. Rodriguez notes that "In Mexico City you will waste an afternoon if you go to bookstores looking for books about Tijuana" (83). Yet Mexico City itself is also largely irrelevant to the life of Tijuana. Rodriguez chronicles, with considerable irony, the somewhat hollow efforts of the nation's capital to symbolically certify that Tijuana belongs to Mexico. Rodriguez notes the "Kremlin-like dullness" of the monuments to the nation's heroes that line one of the city's main avenues (85). He visits Tijuana's Cultural Center—another gift from the capital—and finds it empty (86). Finally, he recalls how in 1925 the capital tried to change Tijuana's name to Ciudad Zaragoza: "The resolution languished in a statute book on a shelf in Mexico City, two thousand miles away" (86-87).

Concurrent with the uncoupling of Tijuana from the nation's capital, we see an attempt to draw the city closer to the United States. I noted earlier the association established by Rodriguez between San Diego and the future, but it is in fact on the other side of the border that he sees signs of a youthful, optimistic culture. In terms of urban layout, Tijuana is also more like a Californian than a Mexican city. Tijuana is that rare Mexican city without a *zócalo*, a central square on which the civic life of the community is centered. Tijuana is all sprawl. According to Rodriguez, it is a city to which can be applied "all the adages about California cities—suburbs in search of a center, no there there . . ." (94). Toward the end of his essay, Rodriguez, in fact, does discover the center of Tijuana, its *zócalo*: an American-style shopping mall that makes Rodriguez think that he might be in Stockton.⁵

Rodriguez describes two attitudes toward the border between Mexico and the United States. On the one hand, there is the view from San Diego, where the border is seen as “a clean break, the end of us, the beginning of them.” From the Mexican perspective, on the other hand, *la frontera* is “something less fixed, something more akin to the American ‘frontier’” (84-85). For Mexicans, Rodriguez suggests later on in the same essay, “the border is not that rigid Puritan thing, a line. . . . The border is a revolving door” (90-91). On the subject of the border, Rodriguez clearly tends to the Mexican view of things, although it is ironic that, in order to explicate the Mexican perspective, Rodriguez resorts to a concept—the “frontier”—with deep roots in American historiography. Rodriguez wants us to see Tijuana and San Diego as a single city. Hence his emphasis on Tijuana’s distance from Mexico City, and on its Americanization. Yet lest his readers make the mistake of thinking that he simply wishes to erase the differences between Tijuana and San Diego, Rodriguez reminds us that “The theme of city life is the theme of difference. People living separately, simultaneously” (105). Cities are places rich in irony, and together Tijuana and San Diego form “a city of world-class irony” (106).

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that Rodriguez himself is an individual of world-class irony. Several critics who reviewed *Days of Obligation* suggested that Rodriguez is fundamentally an autobiographical writer.⁶ But insofar as Rodriguez constantly bears witness to the links between personal experience on the one hand and broad social and cultural issues on the other, his descriptions of the complex and paradoxical relationship between his Mexican side and his American side amount at the same time to a proposal to rethink the U.S.-Mexican encounter as a whole. Jeffrey Louis Decker argues that *Days of Obligation* is organized around a series of oppositions: “between youth and maturity, optimism and cynicism, comedy and tragedy, American and Mexican, fatherland and motherland, Protestant and Catholic.” Decker also claims that “the reader cannot help feeling that the self-proclaimed American author, in the last instance, gives the former term . . . the critical edge” (128).

Rodriguez’s own statements demonstrate Decker’s error: “Now

that I am middle-aged,” Rodriguez writes in the introduction to *Days of Obligation*, “I incline more toward the Mexican point of view” (xvii), that is, a point of view informed by Mexican pessimism and by a Mexican sense of tragedy. But it would be wrong simply to reverse Decker’s conclusion. In fact, all of the oppositions listed by Decker exist in a state of what Rodriguez himself calls “irresolution” (xviii). Interestingly enough, the opposition between American and Mexican is surely the one most fraught with irony and ambiguity in Rodriguez’s essays.⁷ This becomes especially clear when we take another, less uncertain, aspect of Rodriguez’s identity—for example, his Catholicism—and see how unsettling an effect it has on the opposition between Mexican and American.

What does being a Catholic involve for Rodriguez? It implies, for one thing, a belief in Original Sin, a belief that accounts, among other things, for Rodriguez’s skeptical view of the sexual utopia envisioned by the San Francisco gay community in the 1970s and 80s, a community of which Rodriguez himself was a member. In a characteristically ironic gesture, Rodriguez introduces César, a South American who moved to San Francisco in middle age, as the spokesman for this utopia. Since Rodriguez regards the gay pursuit of “an earthly paradise” (41) as typically American in its optimism, in its faith in complete personal freedom, he in effect presents César, the recent immigrant from South America with his view of San Francisco as a new City on a Hill, as more American than Rodriguez, the self-proclaimed assimilationist, born and raised in California, yet speaking all the time of “limits,” of how he has learned from his Mexican father, and the Irish nuns of schooldays, “to count on winter” (29). Perhaps even more important, however, in Rodriguez’s portrayal of himself as a Catholic is his emphasis on Catholicism’s communitarian dimension. Rodriguez informs us that “Catholics exist in the plural” (175), and he speaks of the Catholic “assurance” that “we are social creatures” (177). Rodriguez makes it clear that from his Catholicism he derives his belief in the paramount value of belonging to a community, and also that his controversial defense of the need for immigrants to assimilate to

defends the importance of “a shared history and a shared future” (163), and he sees the classroom as the ideal place for forging this sense of a common American culture. But Rodriguez acknowledges that some key features of that very culture make his argument a profoundly paradoxical one. For Rodriguez assumes that the United States is a Protestant nation, and insofar as Protestantism presupposes an individualistic outlook, it opposes the very idea of America “as a culture . . . as shared experience . . . as a communal reality” (163). This analysis produces the paradoxical conclusion that what binds Americans together is their refusal to be bound together as a community: “no belief is more typical of America, than the belief that one can choose to be free of American culture” (171). This leads to a parallel irony, one that Rodriguez does not formulate explicitly: insofar as the opposition between Protestantism and Catholicism has traditionally been aligned with the opposition between the United States and Mexico, and insofar as Rodriguez’s Catholicism shapes his belief in the need to be part of a common American culture, we can conclude that Rodriguez wants to become an American precisely because he is such a true Mexican. It would be difficult to think of a more vivid example of how narrow the divide described by Paz in his essay of twenty years back may in fact be.

Notes

1. For discussions of this history see Gunn, Castillo, and Alarcón.
2. For a report on this exhibition see Bugarin’s article for the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma*.
3. See Johnson and Montrose.
4. See Johnson’s “How Mexican Is It?” and Peyser’s “How Global Is It,” as well as the interview with Abish in the *Washington Post Book World*, also entitled “How Mexican Is It.”
5. José David Saldívar praises Rodriguez for recognizing in *Days of Obligation* that “the future of California is in its Latinoization” (151). He neglects to mention that Rodriguez is equally interested in a parallel process: the Americanization of Tijuana.

6. Portes observes that Rodriguez “tells us mainly about the architecture of his own mind” (42). Kirp points out that “the self remains Mr. Rodriguez’s best and truest subject.”

7. The best analysis of Rodriguez’s complex cultural identity is by Henry Staten. Among other things, Staten demonstrates the importance of taking the question of social class into account in examining Rodriguez’s work. He shows, for example, that Rodriguez’s aspirations to join the American middle-class (chronicled in *Hunger of Memory*) are to a large extent inherited from his parents, who brought a sense of class distinction with them from Mexico. From his Mexican background, then, Rodriguez inherits the impulses that will estrange him from that same background.

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