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The Case of “Brown”

Sara Ellingsworth

The world is understood through the formation of categories, of defining what something is and what something is not, totalizing an experience, person, or word in order to come to an understanding of its essential meaning. Associations color one's thoughts whether they are fully acknowledged or not. Without exploring the associations, accumulated through personal experience, that determine one's view of another individual, there is a danger of marginalizing that person, instead of allowing them to fully inhabit their identity. In the following, I aim to expose the ways in which Richard Rodriguez uses Jaques Derrida's concept of deconstruction as a way to discuss the complexities of race and the complications that arise due to differing associations within language. I will also attempt to provide a possible definition for the signifier “brown” by evaluating a considerably small sample of associations within the context of Richard Rodriguez's “The Brown Study.” I will not evaluate all of the associations included in the text, however, due to the amount of space that would be required to deconstruct every association tied to “brown.”

Richard Rodriguez

Richard Rodriguez is a noted editor of well-known news publications whose additions have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *American Scholar*, *Time* and other publications. Rodriguez has published three books, as well. In preparation for one of his books, Rodriguez wrote an introductory essay titled “The Brown Study.”

After writing “The Brown Study,” Rodriguez stated, “I intended an essay dense with allusion and filled with a despair for the entire literary enterprise (this brown, gay, “ethnic” writer, shelved in some remote section of the bookstore.)” He also wrote, “I intended this essay to be the first chapter in my book called *Brown*. I intended the essay to work as an overture for that book, to introduce its many themes, but also raise the question: What should a brown voice sound like?”

Rodriguez's “The Brown Study” deconstructs the problem of understanding the differences and influences of race. The primary focus of Rodriguez's deconstruction is to illuminate the complications of what it means to be brown, what people associate with being brown, and how all of this lacks a solitary definition that can be totalized. “The Brown Study” is a commentary on the sterility of simplifying the complexities of race into a single signifier and leaving assumptions unnoticed.

In his short essay, Rodriguez uses the signifier “brown” and its variants 57 times. (He also employs the French word *marron* which is translated into English as “brown.”) As Rodriguez uses this word, it continually carries more meaning and associations, so that, by the end of the essay, a definition for the

signifier “brown” lacks totalization.

Opening line

Rodriguez begins “The Brown Study” with the line, “*Or, as a brown man, I think.*” Without context, the phrase takes on several possible meanings. Is the writer the subject of the sentence, with “brown man” acting as a qualifier for himself, the subject? Is the writer referring to another man, as in answering a question? Is he saying that only brown men can think, that thinking is exclusive to someone of his nature? Or that he thinks in the way that a brown man would think?

Furthermore, the “Or” positioned as the first signifier suggests that this phrase is acting as an opposition, but without the context, the meaning of that opposition is lost.

It is also important to question: why are the words “Or, as a” in italics? Does the author wish to emphasize these? And, if so, why? What meaning is the author trying to expose and communicate?

Derrida

Literary theorist Jacques Derrida is concerned with the way in which people hold to the definite assurance of a totalized meaning of a signifier. In *Différance*, Derrida asserts that language is an unstable metaphysical structure that guides a culture’s concept of reality.

He argues that the meaning of signifiers is established through difference. He believes all texts are constructed around elemental oppositions, that a word derives its meaning based on what it is not, in its relationship to other words. Because of this, Derrida argues that the limits of a word should be exposed for a more complete understanding in communication.

According to Derrida, language does not simply work on difference, but difference in union with supplementarity. For example, the words that surround a signifier in a sentence affect the meaning of the signifier and the associations a reader may have with that signifier. This is also true on the sentence-to-sentence, sentence-to-paragraph, paragraph-to-paragraph, and text-to-text levels

Derrida argues that people carry different associations with signifiers. Similar to the limits of the signifier, these associations should be exposed (at least partially) for better understanding. Therefore, in *Différance*, Derrida coined a term and discussed its possible meanings, averting a concrete definition and drawing upon several associations which could possibly supply meaning to the term.

This is similar to what Rodriguez does in “The Brown Study.” Rodriguez deconstructs the issues of race by deconstructing the possible meanings and associations behind the signifier “brown.” As Rodriguez continues to employ the signifier “brown,” the associations for “brown” continue to build upon each other. At the end of the piece, it is evident that “brown” derives its meaning from the associations built within the contexts of the piece.

Brown...

As in the example of the first line, there are problems of literary suggestiveness and association for each use of “brown” that Rodriguez uses. In the sentence following the first, Rodriguez adds associations to the signifier “brown.”

He states, “But do we really think that color colors thought?” Here, the signifier “color” is clearly used as a noun and a verb. Through the use of repetition, Rodriguez highlights the incongruities that occur in language and the locations for misunderstanding. He also states, “Sherlock Holmes occasionally retired to a ‘brown study’—a kind of moribund funk; I used to imagine a room with brown wallpaper” (119). Here, the reader is reminded of Rodriguez’s title, “The Brown Study.” By including the reference to Sherlock Holmes’ brown study, and providing an explicit definition of what Rodriguez believes a “brown study” is, he provides context and associations for his title. Every sentence, then, every word, in the context of the essay is imbued with the association of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes: the

fictional character, the master detective, the resident of London, the creation of author and physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes, who first appeared in the context of the year 1887, and continued to appear in over 50 publications, the fictional character who was a master of disguise, concealing his identity in order to uncover a complicated mystery. This is the authority that overshadows Rodriguez's piece. Thus, all of the associations that surround Sherlock Holmes arguably surround every signifier in the essay. In using Sherlock Holmes as an association that overshadows his essay, Rodriguez illuminates the present need to uncover or expose that which remains unknown. That is, to expose the complexities of associations and meanings in references and race.

To go further with the Sherlock Holmes associations, Rodriguez states that Holmes, "occasionally retired to a 'brown study'—a kind of moribund funk" (119). Rodriguez shows when the signifier "brown" is supplemented by the signifier "study," "brown" refers to a dying state of fear or dejection. Therefore, it could be said that his entire essay is a "moribund funk," a dying state of fear or dejection, and that all of the signifiers in the essay work together to illuminate this message.

However, his definition could also lie within the associations in the phrase that follows, "a room with brown wallpaper." Is the essay then just "a room with brown wallpaper?" Is his text not a literary text, but a physical text of society, like a shopping mall? Is his text a bare room, plastered over with "brown?" And if so, why is it plastered and not painted?

In the paragraph which follows, Rodriguez illustrates how he sat in a jury room and listened to the other jurors there. As he did, one man, who is described as "a man late in his twenties" prefaced his remarks with, 'As a black man, I think . . .' Here, Rodriguez provides the context for his opening sentence. He goes on to say, "I have wondered, ever since, if that were possible. If I do have brown thoughts" (120). This scene, like Sherlock Holmes, provides context for the entire essay, as it informs the reader about the context of the introductory sentence, which is the first of the associations of "brown."

Rodriguez states on page 121,

Most bookstores have replaced disciplinary categories with racial identification, or sexual. In either case I must be shelved Brown. The most important theme in my writing is now my 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. "Brown," then, is also a category that can be shelved; it is a racial identification as well as a sexual identification. And "brown" refers to the impure, which is associated with "dirty," "unwanted," "abused," and "tainted." "Impurity" supplements "my mestizo boast," which is supplemented by the following associations: "queer," (gay, strange, unordinary) "Catholic" (Christian, dogmatic, orthodox, liturgical, traditional, devoted, fake) "Indian" (Asian, formerly colonized, spiritual, Native American) and "Spaniard" (European, religious, traditional). These nouns are supplemented with "at home" (at a house, at an apartment, having ownership, to be in a comfortable state) "in a temperate Chinese city" (moderate; Asian, productive; municipal, a governed people), "in a fading blond state" (decaying, dying; golden, white; territory, state of being), "in a post-Protestant nation" (beyond Western, beyond unorthodox; people group, territory, country) "I live up to my" (fulfilling, not descending) "sixteenth-century birth" (New World, Protestant Reformation, Heliocentric universe, revolutionary; new life). In listing the associations after the phrase "My mestizo boast," Rodriguez is clearly drawing on the complications of totalizing a definition in order to create meaning, in this case, in order to illustrate the complications of totalizing the identity of a person or group of people with a single signifier.

He goes on to say, "The future is brown, is my thesis—is as brown as the tarnished past. Brown may be as refreshing as green. We shall see" (121). Thus, the future is brown (Or is this just a thesis? Or is the future his thesis?). If the future is "brown," then is "brown" is the future? But as seen from the title, this is a "brown study," that is in a dying state, a fearful state. Is the future, then, in a dying, fearful state?

Yet the future is only as brown as the tarnished past. What is the "brown" of the past, and what does it mean to be tarnished?

And it's possible for "brown" to be refreshing, but only as refreshing as green. How refreshing is green?

Rodriguez continues linking associations with “brown” in the following paragraph. He states, “L.A., the unreal city, is brown already, though it wasn’t the other day I was there—it was rain-rinsed and as bright as the dark age” (121). Thus, L.A. is unreal, and L.A. is brown. So, then, is brown unreal? Does that mean the future is unreal? The past is unreal? Impurity is unreal? Mestizo is unreal? A sexual identification is unreal? Sherlock Holmes is unreal?

On page 124 Rodriguez states, “Brown people know there is nothing in the world—no recipe, no water, no city, no motive, no lace, no locution, no candle, no corpse that does not—I was going to say descend—that does not become brown. Brown might, as well, be making.” Everything becomes brown. Everything becomes maggots, both the future and the past? Everything becomes unreal? But only brown people know this. Is that because they are already brown? Because they are already the future, the past, maggots? Is it because they are already shelved brown, already categorized as impure? Brown is making as well as dying, creating as well as decaying.

Rodriguez intentionally structures the latter sentence, “Brown might, as well, be making” with literary incongruities. Is “brown” possibly making an addition to something? If so, what is “brown” supplementing? And why is it only a possibility that “brown” may be making an addition? Or should “brown” be obligated to make, might as well make?

Rodriguez concludes his essay by stating, “I think I probably do. (Have brown thoughts.)” (131). At this point in the essay, the signifier “brown” is charged with thousands of associations.

The phrases here stand alone as a paragraph, as the opening sentence does. The first sentence contains two qualifiers: “think” and “probably.” The addition of these qualifiers emphasizes the lack of assurance that comes from the instability of language. Also, by placing the phrase “Have brown thoughts” in parenthesis and ending in a period makes it appear as if a sentence. Yet, this fragment lacks a subject and the phrase only has meaning based on its context to the sentence preceding it. This phrase is acting as a qualifier for the preceding sentence. By crafting the phrase in such a way, Rodriguez is exposing the limits of his sentence. Understanding that the reader would not be able to follow the thoughts in his mind without supplementarity, he exposes a portion of his personal context and associations. Rodriguez’s piece exemplifies the very thing he wishes his audience would do.

Thus, “brown” is...

“Brown” could be decaying, but could also be the future. “Brown” is the past, but it is also possibly creating. “Brown” is unreal, but is as real as the color of someone’s skin. “Brown” might be like green, but “brown” is definitely not black.

There is no definition that can totalize the meaning of the signifier “brown” at the end of Rodriguez’s essay, due to the ways in which he deconstructs the signifier’s differing associations. As illustrated, meanings become complicated once the associations with the signifier begin to be exposed. However, I believe Rodriguez would argue this is a crucial task. Without exposing the associations and personal contexts with words and thoughts, complete meanings are unknowable.

Meanings of signifiers are complicated due to the differing Derridian *supplements* that are connected to them, and the effect that those supplements have on the signifiers.. Rodriguez plays with this idea by structuring sentences in ways that allow for several different meanings based on the how words are ordered and their interaction with one another.

For Rodriguez, it is important to notice the ways in which the signifier “brown” pulls itself apart because this action illustrates how meanings are neglected or lost when people don’t seek to expose or discover their own associations. This results in assumptions being made, which is what I believe irks Rodriguez. Instead, he would argue that one should expose the limits of understanding rather than assuming one that is complete..

This is especially true for the identity of a person, which is the heart of Rodriguez’s argument; it’s a matter of knowing people and feeling known. Often, people assume they know someone or understand someone based on that person’s racial identification or their cultural context. Yet, as Rodriguez

demonstrates, understanding a totalization is complicated. Unless someone seeks to understand the associations of a culture, the assumptions they have about a person within it will always remain incomplete. Someone's identity cannot be totalized in one word.

I argue that what Rodriguez would have his audience do, then, is seek to understand others through investigating the meanings located within their relationships and to investigate the personal associations or references that color them, rather than following cultural assumptions.

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