

*Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies.* By José David Saldívar. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, xvi + 251 pp., notes, biblio., index, \$15.95).

*Border Matters* aims to challenge the tendency in American cultural studies to focus mainly on Anglo-American culture and to reproduce its foundational narrative of Anglo-American cultural exceptionalism. Seeing itself as an intervention against the latent imperialism and racism of a cultural studies that would separate Anglo culture from the cultural practices of African-Americans and Chicanos, *Border Matters* strives to theorize and instantiate a cultural studies which includes the residents, experiences, cultures, historical genealogies and political issues produced by the U.S.-Mexican border. Situating itself historically in the political context of an increasingly militarized hostility toward immigrants and migrants from the South, Saldívar's study nevertheless privileges spatial and trans-historical readings, analyses, and juxtapositions. Similarly, while privileging the subjective and lived experiences of border subjects as producers and products of culture, Saldívar nevertheless scrupulously reads them back against the economic, political, and historical contexts that determine their lives. Above all, *Border Matters* aims to decenter the North American focus of cultural studies, especially its exclusionary tendency to ignore the cultural heterogeneity of the Southern and Western regions, and openly vindicates a radicalized understanding of cultural practices, which recognizes culture as a social force, recognizes Chicano/a subjects as agents of culture, and which ultimately translates into a radicalized multiculturalist pedagogy.

*Border Matters* is an ambitious book, seeking, as indicated by its subtitle, to "re-map" American cultural studies by opening its southern border. Saldívar's project involves both a recuperation of an overlooked cultural history and border "theories" in the works of intellectuals like Renato Rosaldo, Vicki Ruiz, George J. Sanchez, and Nestor García Canclini, as well as in authors like Américo Paredes, José Montoya, Bernice Zamora, Alberto Rios, Arturo Islas, and Carmen Lomas Garza. The second half of the book focuses on Californian (both Baja and Alta), Tijuana, and other border writers from the 19th century to the present, with a sustained focus on the politics of regional space and liminal culture. In as far as Saldívar's purpose is to demonstrate the rich cultural material available to cultural studies in the texts of the southern borderland, both as a conceptual and a geo-political space, he succeeds with pinache. His informed and nimble discussions of authors like John Rechy and the 19th century Baja California romancer María Amparo Ruiz de Barton, of popular genres like the *corrida* and the ballad, of different forms like painting, video, performance art, and poetry testify to the potential diversity and wealth of the comparative transnational cultural studies Saldívar advocates.

On the other hand, whether out of a deliberate aversion to theoretical metanarratives, or simply a failure to weave together the various theoretical threads Saldívar invokes, the theoretical aspect of the book is by far its greatest weakness. Although Saldívar announces his intention to bring Chicano and border studies into dialogue with European (especially the British Birmingham School and older Frankfurt School) cultural studies, an exercise potentially very valuable, he does not succeed in doing so. Apart from

occasional invocations of Herbert Marcuse, Raymond Williams, Theodor Adorno, Paul Gilroy, or Stuart Hall, usually only in order to borrow a critical term or apt formulation, Saldívar never develops any sustained critical discussion of these social theorists. More troubling still is the fact that Saldívar's use of the term "border," though richly descriptive and evocative, is similarly never interrogated or conceptually nuanced. It denotes at once the geographical area, the conceptual and symbolic space of the U.S.-Mexican border, a mythical space in the Chicano nationalist imaginary, and, by invoking Emily Hicks and Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a minority literature (e.g. Kafka and Proust), any liminal space of cultural mixing, crossing, and resistance. While Saldívar succeeds in demonstrating the immense creativity of cultural bricolage and postmodern hybridity, the possibility of confronting contradictions, real incoherence, or real critical analysis is eclipsed by Saldívar's celebratory attitude toward "heterogeneous fragmentation." The problem lies partly in his reluctance or inability to discuss the problems that beset contemporary identity politics and to try to confront the critiques which have been made from within and outside the field. For example, Saldívar claims to agree with Marcuse's claim that "ethno-racialized folks are inherently radicalized by their socially marginalized and constricted position in the United States" (71). It seems to follow for Saldívar that any cultural artifact produced by an "ethno-racialized" person is also inherently radicalized. The problem that this creates is that it allows no means to distinguish the political valences and relative effectiveness of different cultural and aesthetic strategies. As a result, Saldívar's readings tend to lean toward the descriptive rather than analytical side. Similarly, his prose style leans toward a complex and even baroque density (sometimes experienced as clutter or choppiness) which includes a lot of quotations and current "key words," but not many glosses, explanations, or interventions. To take a particularly vexing example, he likes to use the term "postcontemporary" without ever explaining how it is meaningfully distinguishable from the plain old "future." Unfortunately, obscure language frequently mars cultural studies prose, probably because it is a new and constantly evolving field without a clear disciplinary mission, which translates into an intellectual and institutional insecurity, and the greatest contribution of Saldívar is to point to several projects that cultural studies needs to undertake: first of all, the dialogue with cult studs.etc