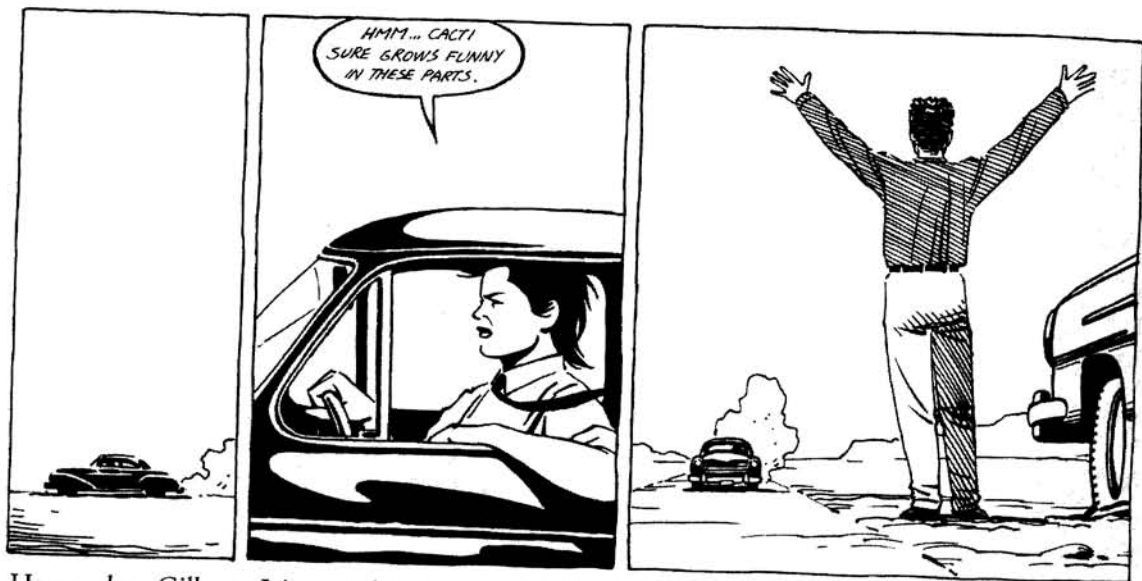


# On The --- Border

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Guest Editor: Charles Tatum

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# On the Border: From the Abstract to the Specific

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Many contemporary critics have theorized about borders—psychological, sexual, gender-inflected, class, racial, and ethnic—as well as about a specific border, most commonly (at least for U.S. and Mexican critics) the U.S.-Mexico border. Some critics have defined the term as an abstract or metaphorical concept whereas others have considered it as a site-specific location between nations. As Claire Fox points out in her recent book, *The Fence and the River. Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexican Border*, the former approach “has gained widespread currency in academic writing, particularly in cultural studies” (1-2). Numerous conferences have been held and many books and special journal issues (including the current one) have been published that reflect both approaches. My purpose in this introduction is to briefly review some important theorizations of the border that are representative of both of them.

As Paul Jay has pointed out in his excellent review essay, “The Myth of ‘America,’” the politics of location “has brought with it a proliferating set of terms to designate spaces that exist between, on the margins of, or within traditional borders” (169). The critics who have originated and developed these terms have in common their attempts to grapple with how identities, cultures, and nations

[...] are produced, fractured, and continually reproduced within spaces or locations where there are no fixed borders or absolutes, where previously con-



structured 'essences' are deployed, transformed, and reconstructed into cultural spaces whose very nature is defined by their contingency and constructed-ness. (Jay 169)

For example, Homi Bhabha has identified the "Third Space" between national borders. Edouard Glissant has developed the concept of "cultural zones" and has speculated about some of the links between novels written in various parts of the Americas. Cultural zones are spaces where historical, political, social, and religious experiences overlap national boundaries in ways that inform the literature of these zones (Jay 172-73). Each cultural zone has a particular cultural genealogy that is historical in terms of different colonial origins and the different concerns that grow out of them (Glissant, quoted by Jay 173). Glissant maintains that the literature of the U.S. can be divided into different zones that have more in common with zones found elsewhere in the hemisphere than they do with geographically contiguous but culturally distant zones. For example, the literature of the American West and Southwest has more in common with the literature of Mexico, Spain, and the Caribbean than it does with the literature of New England. Glissant's formulations on cultural zones definitely fall within the non-site-specific category of borders between nations.

Mary Louise Pratt's idea of "contact zones" is similarly non-specific. In her book on travel writing, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, contact zone

[...] refer[s] to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations,

usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6)

She borrows the term "contact" from linguistics: "the term contact language refers to the improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other" (6).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have also made an important contribution to the process of theorizing borders. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, they define the three characteristics of a minor literature as 1) the deterritorialization of language; 2) the connection of the individual to political immediacy; and 3) the collective assemblage of enunciation (i.e., everything takes on a collective value (as quoted in Hicks xxx). They consider Kafka, the Czech Jewish writer who wrote in German, to be a border writer who is at once a member of a "minor literature."

In her 1991 book *Border Writing. The Multidimensional Text*, Emily Hicks draws extensively on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization in her characterization of authors as diverse as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Luisa Valenzuela, the Nicaraguan poet Carlos R. Monjarrez, and the Chicano poet Rubén Medina as "border" writers. Hicks rewrites Deleuze and Guattari's categories in order to expand the definition of minor literature to include border writing: 1) the displacement or "deterritorialization" of time and space through nonsynchronous memory and "reterritorialization" through nostalgia; 2) deterritorialization or nonsynchrony in relation to everyday life; 3) the decentered subject/active reader/assemblage/agent/border crosser/becoming-animal; and 4) the political. She says:

When one leaves one's country or place of origin (deterritorialization), everyday life changes. The objects that continually reminded one of the past are gone. Now, the place of origin is a mental representation in memory. The process of reterritorialization begins. (xxx1)

Hicks is explicit in defining borders as cultural, not physical borders. She argues that border writers emphasize the difference in reference codes between two or more cultures. Border writing "depicts, therefore, a kind of realism that approaches the experience of border crossers, those who live in a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality" (xxv). In her view, border writers undermine the distinction between original and alien culture and give the reader "the opportunity to practice multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory," that is, quite literally the ability to see not just from one side of the border, but from the other side as well. Drawing on Roland Barthes, Hicks believes that a reader's perception "would be informed by two different sets of referential codes" (xxiii) informed by double sets of signifiers. Hicks draws on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "machine" which they define as 1) a system of interruptions and breaks; 2) possessing its own set of codes; and 3) connected to other machines (*Anti-Oedipus* 36-37). According to Hicks, the "border crosser" subject who emerges from the double sets of referential codes is linked in terms of identity, activity, legal status, and human rights to the "border machine" which she views as border patrol agents, secondary inspections, helicopters, shifts in policy, and *maquiladoras* (xxvi). Although she refers frequently in her introduction to the

U.S.-Mexico border, she generally avoids such specificity in the remainder of the book.

In contrast to the above theorizations of the border, Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson's edited collection of several critics' essays, *Border Theory. The Limits of Cultural Politics*, "rethinks the place of the border in border studies" and "jeopardizes not just the border, whether of political-geographic or metaphoric realities, but the limits of any attempt to theorize the border" (28-29). The editors rightly observe that the idea of "border" or "borderlands" has been expanded to include "nearly every psychic or geographic space about which one can thematize boundary or limit" (1-2). It is their intent to further expand the border concept by bringing together a diverse group of critics from different disciplines to address the topic from a wide range of anthropological, sociological, feminist, Marxist, European postmodernist and poststructuralist, post-colonial, ethno-historical, and race/ethnicity theory. Johnson and Michaelsen explicitly reject what they believe are the inherent limits of conceptualizing the border within the framework of a cultural politics of diversity and inclusion which they believe can only be based on exclusions. The selection of at least some of the critics included in the volume is designed to "map these exclusions—whether geographic, ethnic, theoretical, or other—and filling in the gaps in border work" (3). The editors hope to dispel and come to grips with what they consider to be the limits of identity politics that they believe have dominated border studies.

Like Michaelsen and Johnson, John C. Welchman's edited book of essays, *Rethinking Borders*, also brings together a very

diverse group of writers, artists, and intellectuals who contribute very interesting and highly individualized perspectives to the topic of borders. Unlike Michaelsen and Johnson, Welchman is not motivated by a desire to point out the limits of cultural politics, but rather “to raise significant questions about the border cultures in which we live and have traversed in the middle of the last decade of the twentieth century” (xii). The editor’s intent is to develop a context for the proliferation of “border theories” and “border practices” that have, in his opinion, marked a new stage in the debates over postmodernism, cultural studies, and postcolonialism. Perhaps the most interesting essay is by cultural studies critic Trinh T. Minh-ha. In “An Acoustic Journey,” she draws on the writings of Maurice Blanchot, Julia Kristeva, and Edward Said as well as of other critics and theorists and integrates into this discussion fragments of Vietnamese poetry and Indian philosophies as well as references to painting, haiku, and contemporary music. Most of the other essays are similarly abstract in their conceptualization of borders. Only the last essay, “Response to a Philosophical Brothel,” which is characterized as an extended conversation between Welchman and Chicano artist David Avalos, deals with specificity with the U.S.-Mexican border. Welchman states that this concluding section foregrounds the border-as-power and seems almost apologetic that addressing the topic in such practical terms somehow threatens the spirit of the other collected essays that have dealt more abstractly with “border-theory” that are interlaced with references to Jacques Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s highly philosophical formulations of borders. The ex-

tended conversation touches on art practices undertaken in the U.S. border region, but such practices are couched within Lyotard’s notion of the border as a “break,” that is, “the discursive disruptions of the modernist great” (188). Welchman and Avalos agree that:

[T]here is, of course, no (unitary) *border*, just as there is (say) no singular *vision*; rather there are borders (and visions) whose constitution is the product of specific institutions and discourses, including the formation and implementation of national legislations, the social and economic differential that straddles the border hinterland and the resultant *pressure* on the use of the border (by both *sides*). There is no one (official) border, then, but always two, corresponding to its axiomatic points of control. And there is the unofficial border convened as the myriad points of crossing that traverse that unfathomable ‘line’ achieved by the social cartographers of Euclidian statehood (where it is not abetted by the ‘natural’ partitioning of seas, river valleys, and mountain ridges). (198, emphasis in the original)

We have taken the liberty of including a lengthy quotation from the concluding conversation/essay in order to illustrate the level of abstraction that characterizes some critics’ conception of even specific border sites. I am not critical of the philosophical formulations of such postmodernist theorists as Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari; I am saying that the level of abstraction that seems to be the nature of such formulations sometimes distances the reader from the lived reality and the representations of that lived reality of the U.S.-Mexican border. As we

negotiate the intellectual twists and turns of such musings it is easy to forget the border on which millions of people live and the border that is traversed daily—both legally and illegally—by thousands of women and men.

Let us briefly review the historical record and the events that led to the creation of the U.S.-Mexican border, the geopolitical space that has drawn so much attention from both Anglo, Chicano, and Mexican critics, writers, artists, musicians, etc. for the past century and especially during the last part of the twentieth century. In 1821, the former northern Spanish territories that are today the U.S. Southwest and California officially became a part of the newly independent nation of Mexico. During the next thirty years, many of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of these territories became increasingly disenchanted with the highly centralized government administration in Mexico City and began demanding greater autonomy and a greater voice in the formulation of policy that affected their economic and political destiny. Sectionalism and bitter fights developed, particularly in Alta California, where politicians spoke out ominously about separation from Mexico. Although alienation from Mexico City increased markedly in the 1830s, the northern territories did not form a sufficiently cohesive power base to break away. Such alienation did, however, facilitate the American occupation of much of the Southwest as a natural outcome of the U.S.'s expansionist philosophy known as Manifest Destiny. The occupation and eventual military conquest of the Southwest left a bitter legacy of hatred and suspicion towards Anglos that has persisted to this day among much of the Chicano population as well

as among Mexican nationals.

Beginning with the founding of the first Anglo settlement of San Felipe de Austin in Texas in 1821, Anglos steadily flowed into Mexican territory for the next twenty-five years. Anglo Texans, under the leadership of Stephen F. Austin, pressed the Mexican government for autonomy and then independence, a political state that was achieved militarily with the defeat of the Mexican army at the battle of San Jacinto in 1836. In the same year, Sam Houston was elected president of the newly formed Republic of Texas.

Events in Texas generated much anti-Mexican sentiment throughout the United States and prepared many Anglo Americans for their country's expansionist war against Mexico in the mid-1840s. On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war on Mexico and the bloody conflict ended two years later with the defeat of the Mexican forces and the proclamation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. According to the treaty's provisions, Mexico accepted the Rio Grande as the Texas border and ceded to the United States the presentday states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Colorado in return for 15 million dollars. Four years later, in 1852, Mexico sold part of New Mexico and southern Arizona to the United States under military threat. The occupation of the Southwest and California was now complete and the entire 2,000 mile border between the two countries extending from Brownsville/Matamoros on the Gulf Coast to San Diego/Tijuana on the Pacific coast. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and of the Gadsden Purchase of 1852 thus fulfilled the manifest destiny of the United States to extend its political, economic,

and ideological hegemony over the American continent.

The border and the borderlands—this term is variously interpreted as a narrow space on both sides of the border or as the broad band of U.S. states (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) and Mexican states (Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas) that share a common border—have been a site of conflict since the mid-nineteenth century.

Many Mexican and Chicano historians have amply documented the conflict that grew out the common fate of racial, political, and economic oppression that most *mexicanos* shared (regardless of class differences among them) with the new American civil framework after 1848. These new, largely Spanish-speaking, American citizens of Mexican descent attempted tenaciously to hold on to their traditional way of life in the face of a new political and cultural order. They very soon developed a decisive sense of opposition to Anglo-American forms and institutions. The former Mexicans—now U.S. citizens—who had remained north of the newly created U.S.-Mexico border, not only lost their family and communal lands but became subject to racial and political discrimination as well as cultural erosion. Their eventual second-class status set the pattern for later treatment of Mexican immigrants that continues even today and that explains the very high level of acrimony and anti-immigrant sentiment that rages along the U.S.-Mexico border. Incidents of racial violence against Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, particularly between 1850-1930, simply added to this long and tragic history of conflict along the border that in the past decade has taken on the form of Anglo

vigilante justice, English-only campaigns, and the “light up the border” activities on the late 1980s and early 1990s. Recent federal legislation as well as California state legislation are but official governmental expressions of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment that continues to smolder into the twenty-first century. The U.S.-Mexico border is, today, the focus of much of this sentiment that frequently erupts into conflict and even violent confrontations.

Unlike the critics, philosophers, and theorists discussed earlier, other scholars have focused on the U.S.-Mexico border as a location of live reality, hybrid or liminal subjectivities, transculturation, a contact zone, etc. We will discuss only a few of those whose analysis we consider to be the most important and pertinent to contemporary theorizations of the border: Claire Fox, José Saldívar, Renato Rosaldo, and Socorro Tabuenca.

Claire Fox's book-length study is about representations of the U.S.-Mexico border that have appeared in literature, art, and mass media in the twentieth century. In her words, the book is also meant “as a critique of the current fashion in post-national, non-site-specific border imagery [an abstract, metaphorical border] in contemporary cultural theory” (1-2). She correctly observes that the idea of “borderlands” has become an overarching metaphor in much Chicano fiction and criticism but then does not discuss the most prevalent representatives of this trend such as Gloria Anzaldúa, José Saldívar, Alejandro Morales, Rolando Hinojosa, and Miguel Méndez. She begins from the premise that

[...] the border as it appears in literature and art must be understood as polyvalent, as a place where urban and

rural, national and international spaces simultaneously coexist, often in complex and contradictory ways. (2-3)

One of her numerous insights is her placement of the U.S.-Mexico border within the context of NAFTA (the Northern American Free Trade Agreement) as well as her signaling the importance of the border region within the context of “changing spatial and economic formations in Latin America, where regional trade blocs have quickly gained momentum in this decade [the 1990s]” (3). Fox’s introduction sets the tone for the entire book; that is, its firm groundedness in the socioeconomic and political realities of the past two decades as well as U.S.-Mexico relations from the Porfiriato on. She warns readers and future scholars that

we need to question the consequences for cultural workers of isolating the ‘cultural’ as a privileged category or entity independent from other sectors of economic production which is becoming an increasingly common presupposition in current debates about the role of intellectuals. Most cultural workers, regardless of their national or transnational orientation, still operate as relatively free agents with regard to the political and economic struggles with which they express solidarity. (14)

Fox clearly recognizes the importance of the extensive scholarship that social scientists and natural scientists have conducted that have facilitated our understanding of the complexities of the border, and she is on target in observing that the major research institutions on the border have generally marginalized the humanities. It has been the non-academic cultural centers on both sides of the bor-

der that have become magnets and meeting places for writers, critics, artists, activists, and humanities scholars.

The theoretical point of departure of her study is that an inquiry into how contemporary representations of the U.S.-Mexico border “may be read as evidence of the persistence of the national in the postnational” (11). In the first two chapters, she discusses the debates about national identity and culture that were waged during the simultaneous negotiation of NAFTA and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) during the early 1990s. She studies arguments advanced by progressive and nationalist advocates that culture [mass media] industries should be exempted from trade agreements altogether and left to state or national capital supervision. Fox focuses on the representations of the border in contemporary art and literature produced by Chicano/a and Anglo artists. She argues

[...] that the changing valence of the two common border icons—the border and fence—attests to the persistence of nationalism in the contemporary era, although older representations of the border as a unitary ‘line drawn in the sand’ have given way to a more dispersed spatial construct. (12)

In the third chapter, she contrasts these current representations to ones from the beginning of the century—the heyday of the Porfiriato—when the U.S.-Mexico border was a virtual free-trade zone. In the final two chapters, she considers the themes of movement and migration that pervade narratives about the border region including Luis Spota’s novel *Murieron a mitad del río* (1948), Alejandro Galindo’s film *Espaldas mojadas* (1953), and the re-



cent work of Mexican/Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

José Saldívar's book, *Border Matters. Remapping American Cultural Studies*, is ambitious in its undertaking to "reconceive literary and cultural practices" as the scholar sets about the task of exploring a series of questions "about modernity, postmodernity, and postcoloniality by bringing cultural studies in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands into dialogue with U.S. and British cultural studies" (8). By putting a number of border texts and cultural phenomena under the close scrutiny of a new optic, Saldívar at least succeeds in his aim

[...] to encourage comparative intercultural research and theoretical work that moves us beyond the fragmentary knowledges juxtaposed by specialists in so-called interdisciplinary studies. (8-9)

Perhaps the book's greatest value is its insightful examination of the works of Chicano/a and Latin American social and cultural theorists and postmodernist intellectuals such as Renato Rosaldo, Vicki Ruiz, George J. Sánchez, and Néstor García Canclini. Of great interest also are his rereadings of specific border texts by Américo Paredes, José Montoya, Bernice Zamora, Alberto Ríos, Arturo Islas, Chicana artists Carmen Lomas Garza, Helena María Viramontes, John Rechy, the musical group Los Illegals, (Kid) Frost, Luis Urrea, and Rubén Martínez. His aim is to "suggest alternative border cultures, histories, and contexts" (9). Drawing on Mary Louis Pratt and perhaps also on Néstor García Canclini, Saldívar creates a new term, "*transfrontera* contact zone" to refer to the two-thousand-mile-long border between the United States and Mexico,

a social space of subaltern encounters where geopolitically separate peoples are forced "to negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics" (13-14).

Renato Rosaldo's 1989 book, *Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis*, is cited by several of the critics who write about borders, but not necessarily because of its importance to the development of border theory. For example, Johnson and Michaelsen call the book "perhaps the most important text in the growing canon of multicultural anthropology" (22). José Saldívar believes that the book

[...] sets the postcontemporary agenda for cultural studies in the United States by demonstrating how the multiple concepts signified by the single word *culture* are more fluid than traditional anthropologists suggest. (21)

Rosaldo, however, does contribute significantly to the theoretical discussion on border theory, particularly in his chapter, "Border Crossings," where he discusses "cultural visibility" and "cultural invisibility" in relation to his critical observations on how traditional anthropology assigns cultural value to some people and none to others. Rosaldo prefers a new and more dynamic approach to considering "people between cultures" (198) and urges his colleagues to investigate and write about culture in the borderlands or in the border zones. His own investigation leads him to find ample examples in cultural border zones among, for example, oppositional Chicano literary forms. The U.S.-Mexico border is a site where people between cultures play out their identities and make

their cultural stand. For Rosaldo, "El Louie" by Chicano poet José Montoya is a work that epitomizes the extended U.S.-Mexico border between Chicano and Anglo-American cultural traditions. Rosaldo observes that the fictional "El Louie" seeks out the incongruity of such unlikely juxtapositions as Cagney and El Charro Negro, Bogart and Cruz Diablo. In his opinion, the poem is "postmodern before its time" and celebrates multi-culturalism in a polyglot text that depicts Anglo, Chicano, and Mexican elements dancing together:

The result is not identity confusion but play that operates within, even as it remakes, a diverse cultural repertoire. Creative processes of trans-culturation center themselves along literal and figurative borders where the 'person' is crisscrossed by multiple identities. (216)

Rosaldo also cites Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Chicano/a border text that "has further developed and transformed the figure at the crossroads in a manner that celebrates the potential of borders in opening new forms of understanding" (216). He urges social scientists and others to view these two examples as border texts that "demand study more as complex sites of cultural production than as representatives of a self-contained, homogeneous culture." Border zones within and between homogeneous communities and not homogeneous communities themselves will be the site of future analysis and scholarship.

The Mexican critic María-Socorro Tabuenca C. offers a useful and insightful analysis on border theory and criticism in her article, "Border Perspectives desde las fronteras: A Reading of Rosario San-

miguel's 'El reflejo de la luna.'" Her review of recent scholarship by U.S. critics leads her to conclude that

[...] the border as perceived from the United States is more of a textual-theoretical border than a geographical one. U.S./Chicana/o scholars use the border metaphor to create a multicultural space in the United States in order to erase geographical boundaries. (239)

We would agree with this assertion but only partially because there are many exceptions among critics who deal very specifically with writers such as John Rechy, Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, Benjamin Sáenz, Miguel Méndez, Aristeo Brito, Norma Cantú, Ricardo Aguilar Melanzón, and Pat Mora whose creative focus is very definitely the geographical border. We would fully agree, however, with Tabuenca's assertion that "In Mexico, on the contrary, the few critiques written about the border are devoted to demystifying the concept of 'el Norte bárbaro y vendido/the barbarian and sold north.'" Since the 1980s, regional and local writers and producers of Mexican literature of the northern states have tended to portray the border in a positive way related more "to a trope or a *locus amoenus* than to a sociocultural movement" (240). The flowering of literature, literary workshops, and literary conferences grew out of the centrist federal government's desire in the 1980s to promote cultural activity along its northern border as a way of inoculating this area against the threat of U.S. cultural domination. However, as Tabuenca observes, this campaign backed by government funding resources simply reflected the utter disdain that Mexico City's government and intellectual elites have had historically

towards "the barbarians of the North." Based on interviews she conducted with numerous northern Mexican writers, critics, and other intellectuals, Tabuenca concludes that Chicana/o writers and critics have generally failed to appreciate and value northern Mexican writers and that at least most recently Mexico City tends to pay more attention to U.S. Latino writers than it does to its own writers and critics from Mexico's northern states.

Tabuenca observes that it is difficult to generalize about Mexican border writing as opposed to the concept of "border literature" from the U.S., because:

[...] *la literatura de la frontera norte* is a phenomenon set into motion differentially by the unique cultural factors existing in different places of the geographical border. (243)

The priority that writers have given to the re-creation of everyday life and the representation of urban space has tended to differentiate and even distinguish a writer from one border city from a writer from another border city. She illustrates this difference by drawing on the highly contrasted use of language and urban space in the fiction of Rosina Conde (Tijuana) and Rosario Sanmiguel (Ciudad Juárez) although both elaborate on topics of gender consciousness or female issues. In the latter part of her essay, Tabuenca gives a detailed analysis of Sanmiguel's short story, "El reflejo de la luna," which draws heavily on the geographical specificity of Juárez/El Paso.

All of the contributors to this special section of the journal draw on at least some of the diverse theoretical approaches to borders discussed in this introduction

(i.e., Deleuze and Guattari, Bhabha, Welchman, Glissant, Hicks, Lyotard, Michaelsen and Johnson, Pratt, etc.), and they also cite some of the important recent work on the U.S.-Mexican border by critics such as Claire Fox, José Saldívar, Renato Rosaldo, and María-Socorro Tabuenca C. At the same time, they discuss literary, artistic, religious, and ritual representations of a specific border—the U.S.-Mexico border—from multiple perspectives: Chicano/a, Mexican, or more broadly pan-Latino. They thus articulate in their scholarship the confluence between the main currents of writing about the border as, on one hand, an abstract, non-site-specific site and, on the other, a specific border as a lived reality.

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