
J. Douglas Canfield. *Mavericks on the Border: The Early Southwest in Historical Fiction and Film*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001. 238p.

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As the title itself suggests, J. Douglas Canfield's *Mavericks on the Border: The Early Southwest in Historical Fiction and Film* is an addition to the field of border studies—a field that has rapidly developed since the Chicano/a movements of the 1960s in an attempt to theorize political, economic, and cultural clashes along the Mexican/American border, vexed as those clashes are with unequal power-relations. Canfield is particularly interested in portrayals of hero-characters or “mavericks” in various novels and films of the “early Southwest” (1). He takes up the period of such cultural productions that spans from 1833 to 1917 (the end of the Mexican Revolution).

Canfield divides his book into three parts on the basis of geo-spatial demarcations. He begins part one, “South to West,” with a study of Faulkner’s protagonist Ike McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* in the midst of the slavery of the south. In part two, “North of the Border,” he moves through stories of famous American characters such as Geronimo, Doc Holliday, and Billy the Kid, among others. The last section, “South of the Border,” focuses on Mexican films and fiction—probably the best known of these is the novel (and later film) *Como agua para chocolate*.

What makes the heroes or mavericks in these works worthy of scholarly attention, Canfield argues, is the way in which their own personal existential crises—which prompt them to cross boundaries, borders, and borderlands of various kinds—are indispensable to novels and films depicting the early Southwest. In other words, Canfield suggests that collective definitions and meanings of the borderlands have been shaped through the struggles of these individual heroes.

While Canfield’s central theoretical concern is the construction of the Southwest “borderlands,” his attention to the rapidly growing field of “border” scholarship seems somewhat limited. At best, he gives a nod to Gloria Anzaldúa’s influential *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Canfield relies heavily instead on the French poststructuralist-feminist theorist Julia Kristeva for his theoretical apparatus. In particular, he employs Kristeva’s theory of the “abject”—a theory that explains the body’s necessary rejection of the abject in order to preserve the self. The “abject,” then, is that which must be rejected in the body’s secretions and excretions—such as urine, excrement, sweat—in order for the border between the self and that which is not self to be defined. Canfield argues that in many of the works he stud-

ies, the protagonist is reduced to such a state of abjection, and must find “regeneration through violence” (3). In other words, the hero is able to cross borders by rejecting the abject in himself or herself.

Canfield’s deployment of Kristeva’s concept of the abject is problematical in that he stretches it to mean racial categories as well. For instance, Canfield seems fascinated with characters who “cross into new identities” and even experience a complete transformation as they are “going native” (5). In other words, he is interested in depicting characters who have apparently gone “Native American” or “Mexican” as if white heroes can easily reject their whiteness and move across racial lines. Thus, Canfield glorifies the crossing-over of identity for white characters without adequately theorizing the potential racial/social/political conflicts that would come with whites “playing Indian,” to use Philip Deloria’s phrase.

What seems most lacking in Canfield’s study is his attention to power-relations as he studies these mavericks’ border-crossings. It is telling that he claims “multiculturalism” as a driving force for his study (5). Multiculturalism has been widely contested and critiqued by some scholars on the left as an approach to understanding various cultures and races that inevitably skirts questions of racism. E. San Juan, Jr., for example, in his most recent book *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* makes such a case against multiculturalist ideology, while Victor Villanueva in his works contends that multiculturalism needs to be replaced by antiracist politics. Thus, the fact that multiculturalism is the driving force for his study makes sense, since he undercuts and even ignores the question of unequal power-relations when it comes to the relationships among characters across borders of race, class, and gender.

Canfield proclaims a relatively self-critical stance, recognizing “the self-serving nature of this kind of study: yet one more Anglo scholar appropriat[ing] contested ground as part of cultural imperialism” (7). But I find it difficult to feel convinced that his study is undertaken in the interest of antiracist cultural work. For Canfield seems more interested in the “vertiginous thrill” (8) of crossing borders than in analyzing power-differentials when it comes to conflicts between whites and Native Americans or Mexicans. His rather utopian idea that we may “heal all the wounds—between North and South, between Anglo and Indian and Mexican, between law and outlaw” (8) is inadequately envisioned by the very act of crossing borders without any recognition of the inequality of power.

To a great extent, Canfield at least unwittingly ends up romanticizing the “classic period” of the West. The underlying theme he seems to find in the works is that the very contour of the land—its vastness, sparseness, and harshness—is enough to prompt the kind of crises for protagonists that would otherwise hap-

pen only through cultural conflicts—which he refers to in his epilogue as “great clashes of alien peoples contending over the land and its immense resources” (211). In such an analysis, then, Canfield remains indifferent to unequal power-relations between cultures and races. He makes it sound as if it were a fair game, when in reality Europeans marched through the southwest in this time period and brutally took the land from the Native Americans and Mexicans.

Canfield does add to the field by giving attention to various works that have so far received little if no critical attention in the field of border studies. Yet, his work invites questions in that he skirts around making any definite theoretical claims about the films and fiction he studies, refusing to make “sweeping generalizations about these dozen and a half works” (210). Canfield’s intent simply to present these stories with “an ambivalent narrative” (210) is reminiscent of mainstream historians who continue to make the heavily contested claim that “the truths” that they tell are “objective.” Of course revisionist historiography from Michel Foucault to Hayden White to Stephen Greenblatt suggests that such “truths” are constructed and remain contaminated by ideological and cultural biases. In the end, however, Canfield’s ideology and cultural bias comes through. His last sentence in the book is telling: “If we cannot . . . restore original rights, we can at least respect human rights at the crossroads” (212). For Canfield, to respect human rights is to simply recognize cultural stories, but not to theorize structures and systems of racism and inequality in order to challenge, combat, and change those structures and systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation. ✿