When I was an alien, cultures weren’t opinions
Gotta find a way to find a way
When I’m there
—Nirvana

This rather enigmatic quotation from the dead poet Kurt Cobain comes from the song “Territorial Pissings” and addresses the power dynamic of being alien, of being alienated. When the subject becomes Other, cultures are indeed not opinions. Since aliens have got to find a way to find a way when they’re there, culture represents that which aliens can work, the way they can cease appearing alien and become the same.

Let me see if I can illustrate.

When I was younger, my family would make a yearly pilgrimage to Mexico. My mother and grandmother, knowing well the Mexican perception that most Americans are rich and stupid—a double reason for them to be ripped off—insisted we always speak Spanish in the streets of Mexico. I recall we were to say, if asked, that we were from the north, thus explaining our unmistakable accents. As a child, the fear of being found out was a great source of anxiety for me. In Oaxaca once, a waitress asked me where I was from. “The north,” I quasi-lied. “But where?” she persisted. “The north, the north,” like a protective mantra.

She wasn’t fooled.

This yearly crossing back to the homeland (not my homeland—not
even my mother’s homeland) became for me, inevitably, an attempt to transform my self. But I have to ask: who was my self? And who was I becoming?

I read now in the papers that many savvy young men down Mexico way stand at the frontier between Mexico and the United States, hair shorn close on the sides and left long on the top, pulled back in a tight pony tail, sporting khakis and T-shirts, dressing themselves in the fashion of their Chicano cousins. Once on the U.S. side, their clothes allow them to blend more easily with the local population, forming a protective camouflage by which they can escape the panopticon of the ins. This other crossing—not, as my crossings were, officially sanctioned by the government—is also a form of self-transformation. While different relations to power are at work in these different crossings, it is possible to detect a shared strategy of disguise, of adaptation, of acknowledging and deploying cultural forms. In both cases, the self becomes alien so that the alien appears familiar. In this process, geography, national identity, economic exchange, personal identity, and power are reconfigured.

To chart further a topography of reclamation, I turn from personal anecdote to professional criticism and the work of two critics whose projects examine late-twentieth-century cultural production. The first, José Saldivar, quotes Cuban essayist and revolutionary José Martí in considering a project of opposition that focuses on the real and rhetorical battles between the United States and Nuestra América (Our America). Nuestra América represents “the rest of us,” those not articulated in this country’s co-optation of the term America. America, as we know, refers not only to one country in this hemisphere; Americans refers not only to one national citizenry. Saldivar, in The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History, argues that we need to lay the groundwork for “finding historical, ideological, and cultural simultaneity in the imaginative writing of the Americas.” The relationship between Nuestra América and dominant U.S. culture allows us to reorient cultural production in this country and this hemisphere in terms of a north-south rather than east-west axis.

So those of you who have come “out west” from “back east” to attend this conference might instead think of yourselves as standing “up north” at the outpost of another kind of America. The passage of laws like Proposition 187 only confirms that Californians recognize some-
thing "Americans" across the country must confront. We are becoming something new and unfamiliar. How to perceive this something other remains a vexed issue, and the desire to enact an internal policing of the border is but one manifestation of the difficulties involved.

The second critic I invoke in reclaiming Our America can perhaps further ease some of this difficulty. George Lipsitz quotes Panamanian *salsero* and Presidential candidate Rubén Blades in calling upon us to consider a cultural critical project of opposition—*Buscando América* (Looking for America). This project locates evidence of collective memory in an age of amnesia. It excavates the genealogies that connect contemporary cultural creation with past oppositional subcultures. Pointing to the reclamation of historical memory as a part of a search for America, Lipsitz argues that popular cultural formations like pop music can forge a historical memory. He suggests that pop songs, while functioning in a process of commercial exchange that is responsible for the erosion of historical and local knowledge, "can sometimes be the sources of reconnection in the hands of ingenious artists and audiences. . . . Instead of serving as an instrument of division, commercial culture in these instances serves as a way for bridging barriers of time, class, race, region, ethnicity, gender, and even nationality."2 By considering the potentially resistant elements in the objects of mass culture, Lipsitz allows us to consider the return of the repressed in late capitalist society.

So the reclamation of Our America involves a genealogical as well as topographical project. In looking for America, the interstices of cultural production become sites of oppositional cultural consciousness—sites where historical bridges and oppositional blocs can be forged. These interstices find a correlative in the national border as a site that needs to be bridged, as a site where the struggle between inclusion and exclusion has most clearly manifested itself in military, economic, and political ways.

Chicana and Chicano literary critics bring this critical perspective—a border sensibility, a historical sensibility—to the next century of American literary studies. The type of critical discourse one might want to envision for our field involves a free trade of sorts, an open dialogue with the most engaging and provocative issues addressed by Chicano and Chicana cultural critics. Yet there are barriers to a fully open exchange. Several Chicana and Chicano academics have argued that issues pertinent to Chicano culture do not yet find full citizenship
in the academy. As is underscored by the context of this conference—in San Diego, at the border, in California, after the passage of 187, at the site of the next GOP convention—the bridging of nationalisms and internationalisms becomes central, the mutation of theory and the crossing of blood boundaries integral to the future direction of American studies. For now, as earlier this century, we must ask ourselves what is signified by the terms *America* and *American*? After 500 years of dis/covering America, now we search to re/cover the sign *America*, reconstitute it, reconstruct it, recreate it in an act of self-identification and self-contradiction. This act will certainly not be uncontested.

One issue American literary studies continues to address is the way its practitioners are disciplined to position minority discourse within and against academic disciplines. In his most recent book, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Eric Sundquist reminds us that “it remains difficult for many readers to overcome their fundamental conception of ‘American’ literature as solely Anglo-European in inspiration and authorship, to which may then be added an appropriate number of valuable ‘ethnic’ or ‘minority’ texts, those that closely correspond to familiar critical and semantic paradigms.” As Professor Sundquist points out, it is difficult not to view the Others within American literary production as a complement to the dominant socio-cultural order rather than as a supplement to it, supplement implying a simultaneous addition to and replacement of. Critical, cultural, and institutional practices are increasingly concerned with understanding Others as agents of change who have informed and continue to inform the direction of American literary studies.

However, the dominant mode in which many labor views real cultural work as taking place only at the level of poststructural, postmodern, postcolonial, postfeminist discourses. There is nothing wrong with any of these critical/theoretical fields, and they are absolutely essential in charting a map of minority discourse. Problems arise, however, when these theoretical realms are employed as a cultural critical signpost directing the course of Other discourses.

The direction of U.S. Third World feminist discourse serves as a prime example. Women of color have contested the hegemonic signifier “woman” when it serves to distort or erase specificities of race, ethnicity, class, geography, and culture. As Chandra Mohanty notes about hegemonic feminist scholarship, “women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds
women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between ‘women’ as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history.”

Using this universal signifier—women—it becomes a simple matter to subsume the work of women of color beneath the already articulated positions of a universal (hegemonic) feminism. The work produced by feminists of color becomes only simultaneity. The limitations inherent in this positioning—even undertaken with the most progressive of purposes—is the inability to view subjectivity within difference.

When not subsumed by an epistemic dominant, minority discourse is imagined as marginal—as some Other work excavating the authentic or genuine voice of the wretched of the earth. That is, this work becomes the domain of sometimes reified, sometimes glorified, sometimes vilified Others whose work may or may not be “of quality,” but it is “their” work. The view that minority discourse becomes the realm of Others can reinscribe a sense of marginality, of insignificance. At best it feeds into our entrenched practices of specialization, practices critiqued from Habermas to Said. Legion are the pathologies developing from the view that minority discourse is secondary at best, divisive at worst: from the persistent banishment of minority discourses to the fetishization of academics of color to the pernicious suspicions about affirmative action hires to the salving of institutional conscience through the aggregation of minority peoples and programs.

As it moves productively into a culturally richer (though politically more problematic) future, American literary studies will continue to struggle with the transgression of borders. The work many of us undertake in relation to “marginal” concerns—sexual, racial, linguistic, and social—presents the opportunity to transform our positions in relation to one another and ourselves. And though this sounds grandiose, this is precisely what various proponents of minority discourse call for. Gayatri Spivak, for example, argues that students identified with dominant racial, ethnic, linguistic groups should not refuse engagement with Third World issues simply because they are “white.” “I say to them,” she says, “‘Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?’... From this position, then, I say you will of course not speak in the same way about the Third World material, but if you make it your task not only to learn what is going on there through
language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same
time through a historical critique of your position as the investigating
person, then you will see that you have earned the right to criticize,
and you will be heard."5 The transformation of self into another Other
signifies a shifting of subjectivity. The key to Spivak’s comments is the
transformation of a central subjectivity. If the project of decolonization
has taught us nothing else, it has shown that colonization debilitates—
differently but always destructively—both the colonizer and the colo-
nized. I use, quite ahistorically, the term colonization to describe the
experience of having to constitute the self as sexually, racially, politi-
cally, or ethnically deviant from notions of normalcy, centrality, unity.
The advent of minority discourse as decolonization is integral to the
future of American literary studies. It engenders a transformation of
majority discourses.

But if the transformation of discourse is enacted through a meta-
morphosis of subjectivity, what about the subjectivity formed in the
borderlands? Certainly, transformation describes the dynamics of the
borderlands and the debilitating, empowering, infuriating, and ener-
gizing experiences of those who move across this terrain. The border-
lands can be configured in numerous ways, as geographic or cultural,
political or economic. However their specificity may be defined, the
borderlands represent a state of liminality, a passing (to use Victor
Turner’s oft-deployed phrase) “betwixt and between” one state and
another. That passing can imply a passing from one nation state to an-
other, or from one economic, linguistic, social, or political state to
another.

These passings bring with them other passages. In her essay “The
Eyes of Texas Are Upon You,” Debbie Nathan describes “the look,”
a strategy migrants employ to become someone other in crossing to the
“other side.”6 They replace sombreros with baseball caps, put on
blue jeans instead of purple slacks, and wear boots with perpendicular
heels rather than heels cut on a slant, as they are in Chihuahua.
They become more “American.” There are other less immediately
visible changes, and Chicano culture in its various configurations and
complexities represents an outgrowth of these transformations. The
process of a cultural and personal identity based on being neither
zero nor one, neither this nor that but both, represents a form of mix-
ing, of miscenagenation, of mestizaje. This process demands different
conceptualizations, different enactments, different discourses.
So we come to a point at which the difference within sameness is recognized. Voices from the margin—from Ralph Ellison to Toni Morrison to Américo Paredes—have argued that configurations of "race," for example, or "gender," or "ethnicity" involve a self-transformation and (if understood) self-recognition for all subjects moving within connected networks. A recognition of the difference within leads to a process of deterritorialization (a term I invoke from the English translation of a work by French theorists talking about a Czech Jew who wrote in German). Of particular use in understanding this type of deterritorialization is Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker's observation that in articulating "the difference within," "we must abandon the dream of an outside or an inside that would provide firm footing, whether we call it 'reality,' 'experience,' or 'consciousness.'" This relinquishing of firm footing is analogous to that step so many citizens of the Americas take when they cross oceans or rivers to breach the borders at the Center of Empire. Notions of identity, of self, undergo a process of transformation—some enacted by agency, some imposed as a form of ideological, economic, or political control. And the inheritors of the abandoned dream of inside and outside wake to the odd sensation of finding difference everywhere within sameness.

But we wake also to the awareness that among the different there is a sameness. This is not, however, a sameness of difference. Which is to say that a process of alliance and citizenship can form among those who are both "different within" and "within difference," an alliance that seeks not to reify difference. "It has become the obsession of the dominant cultural paradigm," R. Radhakrishnan observes, "to insist that 'difference' somehow remain 'different,' transcendent in its alienness . . . in the very project of producing 'otherness,' the dominant paradigm (or the master code) dehistoricizes it within the 'sameness' of the dominant identity." So I have been bandying the term difference about with great indifference. But it is important to underscore that that vague term is not meant to be globalizing. Radhakrishnan helps articulate the process by which the master code retains a hermetic space for difference, casting it into a dehistoricized alienness. The dominant cultural paradigm allows for difference as absolute Other and not as an integral part of "us." The alien never becomes us.

This dehistoricizing impetus leads to an empty sense of difference that does not challenge or transform normative categories—categories of analysis, of identity, of culture. Dehistoricized alienness allows us
either to naturalize difference as a recognized citizen within some sense of benign diversity or to expatriate difference to a space beyond our perceptual borders as an "illegal" rather than "legal" alien. Legalized alienness allows for an empty celebration, a raising of glasses to a rich and meaningless variety. So Bill Clinton can talk about an idealized vision of a diverse federal work force filled with people who "look like America." But what is "America"? If America becomes simply a multihued citizenry filing for a green card, pledging allegiance, and inheriting intact hegemonic formations, nothing changes.

The challenge posed by the importation of illegal difference resides in its reconfiguration of citizenship. Few theorists have considered this reconfiguration with greater intelligence or clarity than Chela Sandoval. In an essay on U.S. Third World feminism in *Genders*, she argues that in the 1970s U.S. feminists of color began to identify common ground upon which they formed coalitions across boundaries of culture, race, class, and gender. Their position in the borderlands of feminism enabled a crossing across difference, a recognition of sameness amid difference, a recognition of other countrywomen and countrymen living in the same psychic terrain.

The differences between these men and women—differences signifying struggle, conflict, and asymmetry, differences implying dislocation, dispersal, and disruption—were never erased. Rather, a fuller process of recognition occurred. The construction of a differential consciousness, one which understands its difference in relation to others and simultaneously recognizes itself in others, manifests itself in the articulation and deployment of a U.S. Third World feminism. Differential consciousness becomes a form of illegal alienness, one that strategically reconfigures itself in a fluid movement between different clusters of power.

The crossing from one node of power to another, the crossing from one state to another, and the crossing of borders replicate the crossing of race implicit in notions of *mestizaje*. Differential consciousness is *la conciencia de la mestiza*, a mestiza consciousness that moves among different worlds. According to Sandoval, this consciousness demands "a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer"; she argues that differential consciousness posits "a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted." Notions of center and
margin, within and without, colony and empire blur within the liminal borderlands of a differential consciousness. The capacity for change, transformation, and movement—as well as self-identification, stasis, and stillness—varies according to kind of power to be negotiated, negotiated not contractually but navigationally. The terrain to be crossed determines the strategies to be adopted.

The difference within the sameness of identity enacted within the mestizo subject finds its analogue in the difference within the same-ness of the term America. The dialectics of Our America becomes terribly clear in the borderlands, the cultural, geographic, political, and military configuration in which we have convened. Whatever parochialism may yet linger in configuring American literary studies along notions of linearity and centrality may soon, perhaps by the year 2001, fall away. And as the date 2001 suggests, the odyssey for American literary studies may occur in "outer" space. But that outer space becomes the discontinuous inner space of our disciplinary borderlands.

Less than fifteen miles from this San Diego hotel, there are men called coyotes who (for a price) will attempt to smuggle human beings across the militarized zone of the United States national border. Those men bring into these national boundaries individuals in a process of transformation—sporting baseball caps, blue jeans, and boots with straight-cut heels. These transformed people undergo other transformations, becoming like and unlike U.S. citizens, becoming part of a citizenry that does not feel a responsibility to them, becoming part of a nation that both desires and detests them. And they transform, in the process, what it means to be a United States citizen.

What the term American means, where we draw the lines around literary, and what the word studies signifies, are—this we know—increasingly contested. Those involved in the articulation of minority discourses of all kinds act like coyotes, smuggling across national, disciplinary, and methodological boundaries (for a price) agents who already challenge the significance of those boundaries. While there will be those who seek to enact laws that counter this alien movement, already the aliens serve us, already the aliens move among us. Indeed, already, always, we are the aliens. The aliens are us.

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Notes


11. Sandoval, 14.