



PROJECT MUSE®

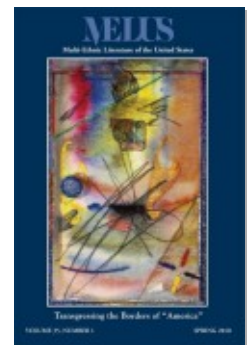
Disabling La Frontera: Disability, Border Subjectivity, and
Masculinity in "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" by Oscar Casares

Julie Avril Minich

MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 35, Number 1,
Spring 2010, pp. 35-52 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mel.0.0068>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/378019>

Disabling La Frontera: Disability, Border Subjectivity, and Masculinity in “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” by Oscar Casares

Julie Avril Minich
Miami University, Ohio

More than a century after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Chicano public intellectual Américo Paredes described the violent 1848 redrawing of the US-Mexico borderline in the following terms: “The river, which had been a focal point, became a dividing line. Men were expected to consider their relatives and closest neighbors, the people just across the river, as foreigners in a foreign land” (15). Paredes’s description emphasizes how the imposition of a new border not only reassigned the national identities of people living on the border but also forced them to redelineate the boundaries of their own families. This transformation of the river into a dividing line, turning *family* into *foreigners*, has ongoing repercussions in the lives of people living on the border today, as Oscar Casares’s debut short story collection *Brownsville* (2003) powerfully reveals. *Brownsville* deals with the connection between the geopolitical borders drawn around the nation-state and emotional borders drawn within families. It presents the US-Mexico border as a site of intense psychological violence, elucidating how social conflicts produced by a political boundary affect the most intimate of personal relationships. These issues coalesce around the representation of disability in “Big Jesse, Little Jesse,” a pivotal narrative in the book. Disability is central to the story’s critical representation of the border and to its depiction of how the existence of the border informs the construction of family life and racialized masculinity. Furthermore, the story suggests that attention to disability identity can provide a critical perspective from which to contest the exclusionary conceptualization of national belonging that the border produces and supports.

“Big Jesse, Little Jesse” tells the story of Jesse, a young Chicano father who has recently separated from his wife and struggles to maintain a relationship with his physically disabled son. Disability informs the division between Jesse and his family, suggesting that his ability to navigate the physical and emotional barriers that separate him from his former partner and his child depends on his willingness to understand the social meaning of disability. This understanding, as disability theorist Tobin Siebers observes, “requires both the ability to abstract general rules on the basis of one’s experience and to recognize that one’s experience differs from

that of others” (104). In other words, Jesse needs to comprehend how his experiences of race and class oppression can help him interpret his son’s experiences. He must also recognize how his able-bodied (and racialized) masculinity differs from his son’s disabled (and racialized) masculinity. Arriving at this awareness benefits not only his son but also Jesse himself because, as Siebers notes, disability identities “serve as critical frameworks for identifying and questioning the complicated ideologies on which social injustice and oppression depend” (105). Jesse needs access to these critical frameworks not only to have a closer relationship with his son, but also to gain awareness of how exclusionary constructions of national identity in both the US and Mexico have limited his own chances in life. As a result, “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” illustrates a key insight from the work of Paula M. L. Moya, who argues that “people who have been oppressed in a particular way . . . have experiences—experiences that people who are not oppressed in that same way usually lack—that *can* provide them with information we all need to understand how hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society” (38). By paying closer attention to his son’s experience, Jesse has the potential to gain knowledge that can help him navigate the ideologies of race, class, and gender that structure his own life on the US-Mexico border.

By engaging the representation of anti-normative bodies in order to critique the psychic violence life on the border entails for Jesse, Casares’s writing resonates in surprising ways with that of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work is predicated on the rejection of nationalist claims and ideologies of body normativity. Anzaldúa writes:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (103)

Yet, even as she appears to deny the influence of nationalism, Anzaldúa depicts national borders as a constant and painful physical presence “running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh” (24). She thus articulates in corporeal terms a dilemma Ramón Saldivar sees as a central problem in contemporary cultural studies. Saldivar notes: “We have to live with the one (the nation) even as we see something

else (the post-nation) emerging. . . . How, then, do we make sense of the national in the midst of an emerging transnational, and vice versa?" (60). Highlighting the ties between national belonging and the ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and ability that inform the concept, Anzaldúa suggests that to "live with the nation" is to live with violent exclusions from the rights and benefits of citizenship—exclusions negotiated on the bodies of the nation's subjects. "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" similarly elucidates how the enforcement of national boundaries operates through an ideology of bodily normativity. As a result, the story reveals the continued urgency in Anzaldúa's search for a way to replace nationalist narratives with "a new story to explain the world and our participation in it."

Disability and the Border

The relationship between the border and disability that Casares establishes in "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" has a powerful precedent in Anzaldúa's work. She describes the border as a site marked by disability as well as by other forms of corporeal nonconformity:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. . . . The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." (25)¹

Anzaldúa makes clear that although it is inhabited by subjects with non-normative bodies, the borderland is far from being a safe space; instead, she depicts it as a site of extreme social vulnerability. For Anzaldúa the border is "a narrow strip along a steep edge" (25) where tension "grips the inhabitants . . . like a virus" and "death is no stranger" (26). Indeed, *Borderlands* was written just as the United States was beginning a massive increase in militarized activity on its southern border: "Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot" (25). The conflict intensified exponentially during the two decades following the publication of *Borderlands*, and the legacy of this increased conflict is reflected in the stories collected in *Brownsville*, published sixteen years later.²

The US-Mexico border is a constant presence in "Big Jesse, Little Jesse," asserting itself through such details as the Border Patrol agents who frequent the same café as Jesse, "standing guard next to the salt and pepper shakers" with their walkie-talkies (104), and the ex-brother-in-law who works as a customs supervisor on the bridge from Matamoros. These

elements establish the policing of national boundaries as a daily part of the characters' lives. Jesse lives with persistent reminders of how he and his son (and racialized men in general, particularly those of Mexican origin) are excluded from dominant US constructions of national belonging and cultural citizenship. At the same time, he is also excluded from dominant constructions of cultural citizenship in Mexico, a fact eloquently revealed by his tense relationship with his boss, "a businessman from Monterrey" who takes disparaging note of Jesse's shabby clothing and warns him that "if he ever plans to be manager, it isn't going to happen with him missing a button on his shirt" (95). The text thus illustrates the many quotidian ways that, as José David Saldívar points out, the "border changes pesos into dollars, humans into undocumented workers, . . . people between cultures into people without culture" (8). The fact that Casares explores this phenomenon through the representation of disability brings to attention the theoretical and political possibilities—as well as the potential problems—of bringing together border studies and disability studies. "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" therefore presents an important case study for investigating the social, ethical, and political significance of linking disability to what Anzaldúa calls "mestiza consciousness" (102) or what Saldívar refers to as "borderland subjectivity" (57).

One important, frequently overlooked point of comparison between border studies and disability studies has to do with the fact that critics in both fields have shown a long-standing suspicion of the ways in which their objects of analysis are mobilized as literary metaphors. The metaphorical uses for the border and disability are quite different; the border often represents utopian notions of cultural plurality, while disability frequently represents social problems and cultural decay. In both cases, the result separates an abstracted notion of the disabled body or the border from the unjust political and social conditions in which both come to acquire their cultural meanings. Regarding Anzaldúa's work, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues against a widespread "temptation to pedestalize or even fetishize *Borderlands*" on the part of critics who ignore the text's "careful charting of mestiza consciousness in the political geography of one particular border" (8). Meanwhile, disability theorist David T. Mitchell points out that the consequences of using disability as a metaphor are immediate and harmful if "disability provides a means through which literature performs its social critique while simultaneously sedimenting stigmatizing beliefs about people with disabilities" (24). Certainly, literary and critical tendencies to treat both the disabled body and the US-Mexico border as mere metaphor rob both of their sociopolitical specificity and erase, misappropriate, or misrepresent the lived experiences of people with disabilities and people who inhabit the border.

At the same time, exploring the ways in which disability and the US-Mexico border are linked conceptually allows critics to consider how disability theory and border theory might contribute useful insights to one another. For one thing, the experience of crossing the US-Mexico border without documentation is one that renders people vulnerable to acquiring disabilities (and dying), as is the experience of working in the United States without papers, thus without official attention to safety and without protection from workplace abuses. Disability theorist Robert McRuer claims Anzaldúa as a “crip theorist,” arguing that the key strength of her work is its ability to encourage subjugated peoples of diverse identities “to imagine themselves otherwise and to engage purposefully in the difficult work of bridge-building” (*Crip Theory* 39). I use “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” to engage Anzaldúa’s work and build upon McRuer’s claim, highlighting the potential for making productive connections between border studies and disability studies.

“Big Jesse, Little Jesse” begins with a three-page paragraph that directly links Little Jesse’s disability to the story’s border setting. Jesse offers two contradictory descriptions of his son in this extended paragraph. First he says that Little Jesse primarily resembles his mother Corina with the “same light brown hair, same dark eyes, same light skin that sometimes makes people think they’re Anglo.” A few sentences later, he relates that his son “used to limp enough to remind Jesse of one of those indios begging for spare change on the bridge from Matamoros” (90). Both of Jesse’s descriptions of his son reveal more about Jesse than they do about his son—for instance, Jesse is visibly mestizo and never seen as Anglo, and Jesse’s racialized identity is salient in his everyday life in ways that he assumes it is not for Corina and his child. These descriptions convey a great deal of information about Jesse’s social world, in which skin color and (dis)ability are powerfully correlated to economic opportunity. They reveal that Jesse believes his son to be unlike him, as he discursively positions his son outside the borders of his racial identity by asserting that Little Jesse is often mistaken for Anglo; yet he simultaneously fears that his son is like him, excluded from dominant national narratives (as he imagines Little Jesse positioned precariously as a beggar on the bridge between Mexico and the US).

The particularly distressing comparison of Little Jesse to a beggar on the bridge merits special attention. First, this description is one of three passages in the story that directly link Little Jesse’s disability to the US-Mexico border.³ Jesse’s comparison of Little Jesse to a beggar implies that Jesse’s primary interactions with disabled people prior to the birth of his son have been with beggars, revealing Jesse’s narrow awareness of disability and demonstrating the limited economic opportunities available

to working-class people with disabilities in Jesse's community. The use of the past tense ("used to remind Jesse"), furthermore, indicates a possibility for Jesse to revise the problematic assumptions about race, class, and disability the comparison reveals. Finally, the fact that Jesse takes for granted the racialization of the "indio" beggars on the bridge, even as he himself is racially marked, shows that he has internalized the race and class ideologies of his social world in a way that is harmful to both him and his son.⁴

The connection Anzaldúa and Casares establish between disability and the border suggests that the construction of the nation relies upon assumptions about the normative, unmarked body of the ideal citizen. For Jesse, to possess a non-normative body like that of Little Jesse means to inhabit a border zone, a site in which the rights and benefits associated with citizenship are not ensured—in other words, to be denied a place in the hegemonic national narratives that confer cultural citizenship in both the US and Mexico. As a result, when Jesse compares his son to "one of those indios begging for spare change on the bridge," the comparison assigns Little Jesse to the violent and vulnerable site described by Anzaldúa where there is no safety net and no protection afforded by any state. What makes the character of Jesse so compelling, despite his attitude toward his son, and what makes the story so rich for understanding the links between disability studies and border studies is that it is so evident that this violent and vulnerable site is also one to which Jesse himself fears being assigned. The race and class ideologies and the limited awareness of disability Jesse demonstrates in his descriptions of and interactions with his son are directly correlated to the violence of living with the US-Mexico border.

Narrating Masculinity

The depiction of Jesse's identity and the potential for him to reassess the social value of his own and his son's identities are reinforced by the narrative strategies Casares uses throughout the story. One formal device Casares employs to great effect in "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" and throughout *Brownsville* involves the use of a third-person narrator whose intimate, casual tone reflects the cadence and vocabulary of the collection's working-class, South Texas protagonists. Like a first-person narrator, this narrative voice generally focalizes only the protagonist; however, at key moments, certain phrases mark a slight distance between narrative voice and protagonist. This distance subtly guides the reader away from identifying completely with the protagonist and destabilizes confidence in that character. Often, the authority of *Brownsville* characters is undermined through phrases hinting that an individual's understanding of his or her situation may be limited. Such phrases suggest that while a character's

actions and beliefs possess logic according to his or her available knowledge, other information might be available that would lead to different behaviors and ideas. One result of this technique is that the reader is able to sympathize with the character even as the narrative voice implicitly guides the reader toward a critique of the character's actions. This disconnection between character and narrative voice illustrates a point Moya emphasizes: "[T]here is an epistemic component to identity that allows for the possibility of error and of accuracy in interpreting the things that happen to us" (40). Despite feeling great compassion for Jesse as a character, the reader is given information that prompts disagreement with many of his views.

"Big Jesse, Little Jesse" is peppered with phrases that imply the partiality of Jesse's knowledge and perspective: "according to Jesse," "to Jesse," and "Jesse tells himself" (91). As the story progresses, the reader learns more about Jesse's feelings of shame regarding his son's disability, an aspect of his character that further discourages identification with him: "And later, when Little Jesse kept falling . . . Jesse carried him because he didn't want people to know their baby wasn't like a regular baby" (106). This distance enables the reader to question whether the interpretation of events from Jesse's point of view is, in fact, the best or most accurate. Finally, phrases like "Corina has it in her head" (93) also appear, implying the possibility of at least one other version of events. The story does not valorize Corina's view, which is demonstrably classist and equally presumptive about Little Jesse's needs and desires, but it nonetheless indicates the possibility of other perspectives, based on different experiences, that might afford a different view of the situation.

Another means by which Casares establishes this combination of intimacy and detachment between Jesse and the reader occurs within the title itself. Although the story is titled "Big Jesse, Little Jesse," the protagonist is never called "Big Jesse." He is simply "Jesse," while his son is "Little Jesse." Because the story is narrated exclusively from Jesse's perspective, this dissonance between the story and its title reinforces a critique of the protagonist and his patriarchal perspective that positions his son as subordinate. This critique emerges because the distinction between the characters' names suggests that Jesse sees himself as unmarked, believing that his expression of masculinity is the norm while his son's disabled masculinity is a deviation. As McRuer notes, "[A]ble-bodiedness . . . masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" ("Good" 79); Jesse uses the diminutive for his son while refusing any sort of marker for his own name; this underscores his investment in this masquerade. Most importantly, the distinction between "Jesse" and "Little Jesse" implies that the protagonist's knowledge of his son is inadequate. As long as Jesse sees

his son as “Little Jesse” (a miniature, incomplete version of himself) and not as “Jesse” (a person who shares his name but possesses a completely different social location, worldview, and set of experiences), his relationship with his son will continue to be a problem for both of them.

The story’s nuanced attention to the social salience of working-class, racialized, able-bodied heterosexual masculinity also coincides with Anzaldúa’s work, which observes the need for new constructions of masculinity: “We need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement” (106). For instance, while Jesse expresses regret that he cannot do things with his son such as teach him “his famous around-the-back reverse layup,” a concern that initially seems to address only Little Jesse’s disability, the story hints that Jesse’s problems with Little Jesse concern more than the physical capacity to play competitive sports. Before introducing his disability, the story describes Little Jesse’s academic inclinations, also a source of discomfort for Jesse: “He was reading before he started kindergarten. You can’t drag him out of the library. That’s all he does, read books, so at least he’s good at it” (90). Indeed, more disconcerting for Jesse than the fact that his son might not be able to play sports is the fact that his son does not seem to *want* to play sports: “Nobody would want his boy or girl born this way, but Jesse tells himself it’s not the end of the world. He’s known lots of people who had something wrong with them and they didn’t sit around the house all day, reading” (91). Crucially, Jesse laments that his son was born *this way*, a phrase often used as an ostensibly polite but nonetheless homophobic euphemism for queer identities, suggesting that what pains Jesse is his son’s refusal to comply with gender norms, a refusal that may be related to his disability but is not necessarily reducible to it. As Carrie Sandahl notes: “Because disabled bodies are often unable to perform gendered behaviors in ‘passable’ ways, the disabled are often considered genderless (or less than male or female)” (“Queering” 45). Little Jesse, certainly, is probably able to perform some of the gendered behaviors his father expects of a son, but with difficulty, and he chooses not to overexert himself. The story productively leaves open the question of whether Little Jesse chooses not to perform these behaviors because they are difficult for him or because he simply does not like them (or a combination of both). Because this question is not answered, there is the possibility of interpreting Little Jesse’s refusal to play sports as an act of resistance to his father’s ideologies of both able-bodiedness and masculinity.

The class differences between Jesse and Corina further complicate Jesse’s discomfort with his son’s love of reading. Jesse himself has not gone to college and feels ill at ease helping Little Jesse with his second-grade homework. His difficulty relating to his son is certainly related to masculinity, heteronormativity, and able-bodied superiority, yet it is also

rooted in social class inequality and in Jesse's class-related fear that his son "likes [his mother] more" (90). These anxieties foster sympathy and lend complexity to Jesse's character. Furthermore, the description of Jesse's uneven access to social power and the different facets of his identity makes the story an especially rich narrative for exploring competing and contradictory discourses of ability, gender, race, and class that inform the constructions of both the nation and the patriarchal family. Following Moya's argument that social location and knowledge can be meaningfully linked, the story also suggests that Jesse's experience of race and class oppression, although markedly different from his son's experience, functions as a latent epistemic resource upon which he can draw both to understand Little Jesse's disability differently and to imagine differently his own relationship to the hegemonic US national narrative.

Nation, Family, and the Construction of Citizenship

In addition to direct references to the US-Mexico border, the story uses Jesse's view of the patriarchal, nuclear family as a way to comment on the relationship between the construction of the nation and an ideology of ability. Casares couples his critique of national borders with a critique of what Rosa Linda Fregoso calls "the Chicano familia romance," an epic form featuring a family presented as "paradigmatic for a nation" and "designed to stand for the familia of Chicanas and Chicanos" (71). Fregoso builds her definition of the Chicano family romance on Anne McClintock's now-famous observation that "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" (90). In *Brownsville*, however, alternative images of family function as iconography of national disunity as the fracturing of Chicana/o families around issues of social class, skin color, gender, and ability parallel ruptures in the nation itself. Writing against the familia romance, Fregoso argues that "the private sphere of la familia [is not] a sanctuary from external forces of racism and class exploitation" (87). By revealing and interrogating tensions around class, gender, and disability in Jesse's family, "Big Jesse, Little Jesse" offers a way to understand how the discourses of nationalism inform such tensions.

José David Saldívar argues that the representation of "spaces where the nation either ends or begins" can "problematize the notion that the nation is 'naturally' there," highlighting "transnational struggle enacted between *patrimonios* (nations) as well as within nation-states" (14). Although Saldívar does not comment further on his use of the term *patrimonio*, its gendered connotations and familial implications are quite evocative for this analysis. The confluence of the terms *patrimony/patrimonio* and

nation implies that the nation functions like a family, and that the boundaries of families and nations rely on similar discourses of inheritance and bloodlines. Indeed, “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” makes a similar point through its attention to Jesse’s unease with Corina’s family; it is no accident that her family, which polices its own borders by refusing to welcome Jesse, also includes among its members a customs supervisor whose livelihood depends on the policing of national borders. However, the confluence of the terms *patrimony/patrimonio* and *nation* also suggests that disrupting or reconfiguring one of the terms might unsettle the other, enabling the construction of more liberatory forms of human collectivity. By presenting a family that counters the “Chicano familia romance” and by setting this representation precisely in that space where the United States and Mexico “begin and end,” the story challenges the natural existence of both family and nation.

This challenge to the natural status of family and nation occurs in part through emphasis on the work that goes into building and sustaining a nation or family. The line that opens the story, for instance, highlights not only the physical distance that now separates Jesse from Little Jesse and Corina (“a small apartment three miles from the house where he used to live with his wife and son” [89]) but also the fact that Jesse has anxiously measured the exact number of miles that make up this distance. Later, we learn that Jesse still tends the yard at his former home, trying to prove that its residents are “still his family” (92). Fregoso argues that in the familia romance the family functions as a natural, essentialized microcosm of the natural, essentialized nation; Jesse’s anxiety about his lost place in the family and the labor he performs in an attempt to regain that place depict the family as a construct that requires constant vigilance. Moreover, Jesse’s awareness of the ideologies of race, class, and ability that sustain the national border draws attention to the ideologies of race, gender, class, and ability functioning within his own family. In both the family and the nation, the assumption of natural rightness masks sites of oppression.

Like Fregoso, George Lipsitz attacks the nationalism of idealized domestic images. Lipsitz maintains that such images naturalize socially-constructed conditions of inequality, but his criticism emphasizes the way such images conceal the exploitation of a migrant labor force:

The creation of homelands and homesteads in industrialized countries has always depended upon the exploitation of displaced and dispossessed workers from somewhere else. Romances of patriarchy and patriotism promising secure, stable, and homogenous homes and homelands have drawn their cultural power as much from the necessity of hiding the heartlessness on which both hearth and *heimat* have been built as from any explanatory or liberatory power of their own. (300)

Lipsitz reminds us that nationalist discourse relies not only on inequality or exploitation within the nation but also on exploitation experienced by people believed to belong “somewhere else”—those inhabiting the space outside the national community’s boundaries—and that the exploitation of those not seen as national citizens is also worthy of critical scrutiny. In Casares’s story, the implications of this argument are especially complex, for although Jesse is a US citizen and therefore quite privileged in relation to the subjects Lipsitz describes, he also clearly fears the consequences of being perceived to belong “somewhere else.” Jesse worries that his son’s disability will in some way hurt Little Jesse’s life chances. Moreover, Jesse’s fears are not entirely unfounded but are, in fact, based on his own experiences. He fears class-related discrimination at his job, worrying about how his boss perceives his shabby clothing, and lacks the money to purchase basic cookware and dishes after he moves out of his home. Moreover, the narrator tells us how much everything costs, from breakfast at Reyna’s Café to movie tickets to cotton candy at the carnival, indicating how closely Jesse must watch his money. Given Jesse’s economic vulnerability—which relates to the larger hierarchies of race and class undergirding US national identity—it is not surprising that he worries about the consequences his son may experience if he fails to comply with dominant gender roles. The story thus indicates that Jesse’s fears about his son’s refusal to comply with the norms of able-bodied masculinity are rooted in a well-intentioned though misguided concern for his son.

Jesse’s story, as a result, illuminates how the vulnerability of those consigned to the space outside the nation reinforces the vulnerability of those marginalized within the nation. It demonstrates the urgency with which subjects like Jesse, whose position in the hegemonic national narrative is so precarious, need models of community that do not rely on the boundary enforcement of the nation-state. It also reinforces the idea that boundaries between documented and undocumented, disabled and nondisabled, reinforce a racist, class-stratified, and patriarchal social order. Jesse must understand that his own struggle is related to that of his son. Siebers writes of the imperative for people with disabilities to “tell stories in a way that allows people without disabilities to recognize our reality and theirs as a common one” (48); he argues, too, that it is crucial for the most vulnerable members of a social order to find new ways of imagining collectivity within that order. However, Jesse’s second-grade son is too young to tell him the kinds of stories that Siebers sees as necessary for community building—and Jesse, initially, is too invested in maintaining his tiny fragment of social advantage (able-bodied masculinity) to want to imagine the social order differently. As a result, the story narrates three encounters Jesse has with disability that not only transform his perception of disability

and its social meaning but also profoundly readjust his understanding of the dominant social order.

The first of these encounters is the story of Pano, a blind mechanic Jesse remembers from his childhood. Jesse tells Corina about Pano in what Sandahl calls an “overcoming narrative,” in which “a tough-love, able-bodied lover or assistant . . . shows the disabled person that his or her problems boil down to a bad attitude” (“Black” 584). He claims to remember that “Pano had customers waiting for him to open up every morning” and “did it all by the sound of the engine” (91). When Jesse tells the story, insisting that Pano could fix cars by sound alone, he places the burden of overcoming disability on Pano. However, Jesse’s partner does not grasp the message: “Corina always listens to Jesse’s stories, but afterward he never feels that she’s made the connection between Little Jesse’s disability and the ‘disability’ in the story” (91). In fact, it is Jesse who fails to make the connection, for he is so preoccupied with Pano’s triumph that he fails to question a society that would require such feats of Pano and Little Jesse rather than accommodating their disabilities. Moreover, he fails to connect Pano’s story to his own situation, to ask questions about race and class ideologies that prevent him from being promoted at work and foment Corina’s family’s distrust of him. For Sandahl, the problem with the overcoming narrative is its emphasis on “individual achievements over adversity, rather than considering the political and social aspects of a situation” (“Black” 584). Casares reveals the political and social aspects of Jesse’s situation—the intersecting ideologies of class, race, nation, ability, and gender—thus making clear why Pano’s story will not help Jesse negotiate his situation or his relationship with his son.

The second event involves an encounter between Jesse and a man of short stature who approaches him at Reyna’s Cafe:

Most of the people in the place turn around in their seats and stare until they get their fill of him. . . . A little girl at a center table giggles and asks her mother if they can take the toy man home. The mother quiets the girl, but they both keep looking at him as he walks around the restaurant. Jesse is taking the last bite of his tortillia [sic] when the little guy hands him a card that says he’s deaf and mute and can you please help him out with a donation. . . . It crosses Jesse’s mind that the guy might be lying about being deaf and mute. He’s heard of people scamming money this way, pretending to be mudos when they can talk like everybody else. Either way, Jesse gives him a dollar for being born a shorty. It’s the one thing he knows the guy isn’t faking. (104-05)

This passage reveals Jesse’s limited perception, as he imagines a man who begs benefiting from social conditions that oppress disabled people—

“faking” his condition in order to “scam” able-bodied people. However, this encounter also indicates subtle changes in Jesse’s perspective. He demonstrates a growing sensitivity to the social meaning of disability, as he is initially more focused on the stares and giggles than on the beggar. At this moment, Jesse is acutely aware of the social context of disability. The incident concludes with Jesse thinking about the man’s parents: “He wonders where the little guy came from and if his parents were midgets. If they were small, would they have been happy with a regular-size baby?” (105). Despite Jesse’s use of questionable language to describe people with dwarfism, the question he asks himself here shows him to be considering, for the first time, how much his own perspective is determined by questions of social power. What is inevitably better about taller bodies, other than the fact that most people have them and our social environment is built to privilege them? Are there, in fact, social contexts we might imagine in which disabled bodies could have privileged social status?

Finally, the story concludes by depicting Jesse engaged in what Siebers calls “disability drag” (114), or the performance of disability by able-bodied people. The event begins when Jesse takes Corina and Little Jesse to the carnival. From Jesse’s perspective, the excursion is a success, until he and Little Jesse encounter another father and son in the line for the bumper cars. The description of the pair echoes both Jesse’s internalized classism and his desire for the kind of father-son relationship he imagines them to share: “Jesse notices the father and son in front of him both have rattails. Rata and Rata Jr., he thinks to himself. Jesse imagines the father and son sitting next to each other in barber chairs and telling the barber they want the exact same haircut. . . . Rata Jr. looks like a perfect copy of his dad, only smaller and without the homemade tattoos and fresh love marks on his neck.” Even as Jesse is contemptuous of Rata’s hair, tattoos, and “love marks,” he clearly projects onto Rata the relationship he desires with his own son, evident in his wistful fantasy of father and son getting identical haircuts, the way he imagines them “spinning around afterward and checking themselves out in the mirror, each one reaching back to play with his colita” (108). Jesse’s fascination with Rata and Rata Jr. involves not only envy but also shame, for he knows Corina is looking at them with contempt: “He knows this is the main reason why Corina didn’t want to come to the carnival. When she said there were ‘too many people,’ what she really meant was that there were too many people like Rata” (109). The contradictory sentiments these lines reveal (envy, contempt, desire, and shame) condense Jesse’s emotional dilemma. As a result, when Rata Jr. begins helping himself to Little Jesse’s cotton candy, things quickly escalate. Rata encourages his son, making fun of Little Jesse’s short leg, and

Jesse initiates a fistfight with Rata while Corina tries to hold him back.

The encounter plays out as a scripted performance, beginning when Jesse and Rata first meet in line: "Rata . . . cocks his head back to say hello. Jesse does the same" (108-09). Even the fight seems scripted, at least until the police intervene, suggesting that the fight would have had one of two predetermined endings had the police not ended it: "It's over as soon as it starts, not because Jesse kicks his ass the way he wants to or because Rata shows him what he did to the last guy who was stupid enough to lay a hand on him, but because a couple of cops walk by." Jesse, meanwhile, seems to start the fight almost mechanically, "as if he's on one of the carnival rides and the momentum is taking his body" (111); with this metaphor, the story suggests that the characters' enactment of masculinity is an unconscious performance. However, as the scene progresses, a different kind of performance replaces this performance of masculinity.

In the skirmish with Rata, Jesse loses one of his shoes and walks unevenly as the police drag him out. The story ends with these lines:

He wants to ask for his shoe, but the cop is tugging at him. Jesse steps awkwardly every time his right foot comes down. It looks as though he's stepping into a small hole and then out of it again with his next stride. . . . The boy with the shoe mimics the way Jesse walks, making him look more like a chimp than a man. This gets the biggest laughs so far. Jesse could step on his toes and look like anyone else walking out of a carnival. But he doesn't. He lets them keep laughing. It's the only thing he can hear now. (113)

The ambiguity of this ending is noteworthy. First, we do not know whether Jesse has learned anything from this experience that will change his relationship with his son. Second, we might associate this moment with the practice of simulation exercises critiqued by disability activists, in which able-bodied people presume to gain an understanding of disability by spending a day in a wheelchair or wearing a blindfold. Finally, the fact that Jesse's performance of disability replaces his performance of masculinity posits disability and masculinity as mutually exclusive. However, I argue that it is not the mere act of walking like his son that has transformative potential for Jesse (as in a simulation exercise) but rather the socially contextualized action that subjects Jesse to stares and giggles similar to those that greeted the beggar in the restaurant. Jesse does not experience this confrontation with the police officer and the crowd as a person with a disability; rather, he experiences it as a working-class man of color. The implication is not that he might learn something about how his son walks that will change his way of thinking, but that he might learn something about *his own* relationship to power that will help him understand his own

and his son's social locations differently.

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander investigate the performative nature of disability identity formation, arguing that "to think of disability not as a physical condition but as a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable is to think of disability in performative terms—as something one *does* rather than something one *is*" (10). They argue that "identity is performed both in everyday life and in theatrically framed events that contribute to the *self-conscious* expression of that identity" (9, emphasis added). Jesse self-consciously performs his own identity differently from how he performs it during the rest of the story; becoming aware of himself as the object of stares and giggles, he recognizes his own working-class, racialized masculinity as a socially marked, anti-normative identity. As a result, he begins to perform masculinity in an anti-normative way. He recognizes that to the police, Corina, and the laughing crowd, he is like Rata—an object of contempt—and that to Rata he is, as the father of a disabled and gender-nonconforming child, not properly masculine. This awareness could constitute the beginnings of a deeper understanding of his and his son's positions of opposition to the hegemonic national narrative.

Recalling Mitchell's critique of the metaphorization of disability, it is now evident that Casares avoids the problem Mitchell identifies in much literature about disability. Mitchell notes that "there is a politics at stake in the fact that disability inaugurates an explanatory opportunity that the unmarked body eludes by virtue of its physical anonymity" (24). Rather than treating Little Jesse's disability as an aberration that requires explanation, however, the story treats normative, able-bodied masculinity as the identity that must be explained. Jesse's misunderstanding of his son's disability is the problem to overcome, rather than disability itself. The dilemma the story presents is the difficulty of drawing on specific experiences of oppression such as race and class oppression to understand, empathize, and act in resistance alongside people experiencing a different kind of oppression due to factors such as disability or gender. Jesse's identity—and not Little Jesse's—takes on the explanatory burden in the story because the final events demonstrate ethical and epistemic limitations of overinvestment in dominant identities *as well as* Jesse's potential to overcome these limitations by connecting one experience of oppression with another. However, the ambiguous ending does not prescribe an answer to the problem it presents. Instead, it hints at the work ahead for Jesse, the emotional and epistemic labor he must perform in order to create a new model of family that will give him not only a more honest and satisfying relationship with his son but also better critical tools to contest his own

marginal position within the national narrative.

Like the work of Anzaldúa, “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” engages with the relationship between body normativity and the production and imposition of borders. It uses disability to make visible a larger impulse of nation-building and border construction—a need to control and regulate participation in the body politic, acknowledgement of full citizenship, and membership in the category of “the people.” As a result, “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” reveals how disability informs and is informed by border subjectivity. Casares’s work corroborates Anzaldúa’s descriptions of life in the borderlands: “It’s not a comfortable place to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape” (19). Like Anzaldúa’s description of border consciousness, moreover, Casares’s story concludes on an ambivalent note, refusing to resolve the contradictions or to provide a sense of comfort. “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” therefore offers a compelling look at the work that lies ahead not only for the story’s protagonist but also for those readers seeking ways to make similar connections between different constructions of identity and experiences of oppression.

Notes

1. Robert McRuer also cites this passage as evidence of “an unlikely identification of Anzaldúa with disability or crip theory” (*Crip Theory* 218).
2. One particularly compelling example comes from the story “Domingo,” about an undocumented migrant in Brownsville whose separation from his family in Mexico causes him extreme loneliness: “He wished he could go back and be with his wife, cross the bridge and buy a ticket for the next bus headed south. But he had to remind himself that he had been home less than a month earlier and getting back across was becoming more difficult with the immigration authorities stationed along the river” (77). In this passage the bridge functions as a dividing mechanism that keeps Domingo from his family; a key passage in “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” also invokes the bridge as a dividing line separating father and son. It is crucial, then, that the character of Domingo is also present briefly in “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” to link that story to the rest of the collection. Domingo appears in the story when Jesse considers the state of the house he used to share with his wife and son: “He still takes care of things around the house as if he lived there. He could pay the old man who cleans yards to come by, but it’s still his house” (92).
3. The second reference occurs when Jesse observes that his son’s orthopedic shoes “look as though they were polished at one of the stands across the river” (94). The final reference occurs at the end of the story, when Jesse takes his son to ride the bumper cars at the carnival; here another father makes fun of them both, taunting Jesse: “Your boy don’t know how to drive. Where’d he get his driver’s

license? Matamoros?" (110).

4. This is confirmed later in the text when, considering Corina's family's dislike of him, Jesse concludes that he "wouldn't like a guy like himself, either" (97). By this time we know a great deal about the differences between Jesse's and Corina's families, and we therefore know that "a guy like him" refers to social class differences that are salient in a society that distributes its resources according to a logic fueled by racism.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd. ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999.
- Casares, Oscar. *Brownsville: Stories*. New York: Back Bay-Little, 2003.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- Lipsitz, George. "'Home Is Where the Hatred Is': Work, Music, and the Transnational Economy." *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian. New York: Routledge, 2006. 299-313.
- McClintock, Anne. "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 89-112.
- McRuer, Robert. "As Good as It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability." *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003): 79-105.
- . *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York UP, 2006.
- Mitchell, David T. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson. New York: MLA, 2002. 15-30.
- Moya, Paula M. L. *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002.
- Paredes, Américo. *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. 1958. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003.
- Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Saldívar, Ramón. *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.
- Sandahl, Carrie. "Black Man, Blind Man: Disability Identity Politics and Performance." *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 579-602.
- . "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003): 25-56.

- Sandahl, Carrie, and Philip Auslander. Introduction. "Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies." *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Ed. Sandahl and Auslander. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005. 1-12.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008.
- Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*: Cultural Studies, 'Difference,' and the Non-Unitary Subject." *Cultural Critique* 28 (1994): 5-28.