



Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2007, 204-210

[www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente)

## Review/Reseña

Ramón Saldívar, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

## Transnational Borderlands Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century

**Michael Hames-García**

University of Oregon

On the surface, *The Borderlands of Culture* is a study of Paredes's life and literary writings. However, it is also a study of a place, the "borderlands," understood, not only as the regions of South Texas and Greater Mexico, but also as a more abstract space, "not only the imaginary geopolitical boundary line between two

nations but also the more functional one of symbolic overlap between cultural groups” (342). It is furthermore a study of a time, roughly the decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the world-historical twilight zone marking the transition from modernity to postmodernity. This was a period during which Paredes and his contemporaries--Gramsci, Bakhtin, Adorno, Benjamin, and C.L.R. James, among others--sought to invent new discourses and new methodologies to document the social and cultural changes they were observing all around them. Finally, it is a study of history and memory as methods for responding to the challenges of modernity, and of the subjectivities and identities that emerge from local experiences of modernity and of existence in the borderlands.

In developing these ideas, Saldívar’s book employs an organizational and methodological framework that parallels the one introduced by Paredes in his classic work *With His Pistol in His Hand*. For readers unfamiliar with Paredes’s book, it has two parts and eight chapters. Part one offers context for understanding the border corrido “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” while part two offers a study of the corrido itself. The first chapter gives a general history of South Texas, attempting to correct for earlier, racist depictions of the Mexico-Tejano people of the region; the second chapter describes the folktales and legends from which the corrido draws; the third chapter retells the story of Cortez from more traditional documentary sources; the fourth chapter examines the structure of the folk legends and attends to the many variants of the story. In the second part, chapter five discusses the origins of the corrido form in the border region; chapter six reproduces several variants of the corrido; chapter seven offers a literary analysis of the corrido and its variants; and chapter eight is a brief conclusion. What is striking about these chapters is that five of them repeat the story of Gregorio Cortez five times, but each time through a different medium (poetry, folklore, biography, literary criticism, history). Furthermore, the first

and fifth chapters, while not telling Cortez's story directly, tell the larger story of political and cultural border conflict of which Cortez is emblematic. So there are seven retellings of the story, each gaining depth and significance through the refracting of Paredes's ideas of culture and history through the previous formal and methodological lenses.

Something similar is at work in Saldívar's book. He takes us from eulogy to biographical essay to autobiography, in the introduction and part one of *The Borderlands of Culture*, to literary criticism in chapter 3, intellectual history in chapters four and 5, poetic analysis in chapters 6 and 7, variations of intertextual, gender, and postcolonial criticism in chapters 8 and 9, a cultural studies analysis of Paredes's journalistic work in chapter 10, and a synthesis of biographical and literary analysis in the final chapter. Each chapter brings something new to the discussion, partly through a cyclical return to similar themes, enriching the reader's understanding of each theme every time it resurfaces. Saldívar signals us to this cyclical structure in his introduction, writing that "In each of these chapters, I tell the same story, albeit in different ways and using different discourses" (19) and that "the various parts of this work should be read as layers and strata, superimpositions, or palimpsests, all of which reinforce one another while resisting one unified point of view" (15). These early signposts, however, do not adequately prepare the reader for the virtuosity of what is to come.

For example, Saldívar's analysis brings into focus the construction of masculinity in Mexican American border culture and, specifically, in the work of Américo Paredes. Saldívar's first shows how Paredes's modernist antihero in *George Washington Gómez* revises and undercuts the warrior hero of the corrido tradition. The protagonist of Paredes's novel, among other male figures in the text, proves incapable of embodying the monumental strength and courage of the *corrido* male hero, allowing us to see both the

historical inadequacy of such wedded models of male prowess and political resistance and the ways in which those models foreclose others:

We come up against the borders of this male-gendered discourse throughout the novel, but perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in the failed utopian vision at the end of the narrative. The link between the Mexican patriarchal discourse of the corrido and a certain political vision is surely one reason for the decline of the corrido as a viable resistance form in the 1930s and the rise of other genres that do not constrain themselves so readily by failing to interrogate patriarchal ideology. Perhaps more important, however, this understanding of the restrictions of patriarchal social forms accentuates the crucial centrality of the *nonheroic* (not to be confused with *unheroic*) agents of history of subsequent political courses of action (177).

Four chapters later, in a brilliant, intertextual reading of the traditional corrido “El corrido del hijo desobediente” and Paredes’s poem “Guitarreros,” Saldívar continues his analysis of culturally resistant constructions of masculinity in the Mexican American borderlands during the transitional period of modernity. Saldívar’s arguments here open up considerations of Chicano cultural nationalism in new ways. He suggests, drawing as well from a 1967 essay on machismo by Parades and from the work of anthropologist Kate Crehan, that the warrior hero was not only inadequate to the new demands of life in an era of advanced capitalism, but that it was a nostalgic invention of a past without precedent. Paraphrasing Paredes, Saldívar writes that “machismo as an expression of the gun-toting, braggart and bully, facing death with false bravado was an invented tradition, a product of cultural romanticism, reflecting the ideological needs of a newly emergent [Mexican] state groping for a distinctive national subject identity” (277). He adds, “this nostalgia disguises a mystified desire for an archetype that the economic and social history of the Southwest will simply not entertain” (278). At the end of the next chapter, chapter eight, by which point Saldívar

has turned from Paredes's poetry to his short fiction, he picks up his argument again and brings us another step toward its conclusion, making his critique (via his reading of Paredes) much more explicit:

The origin of this fractured domain of practices that comes with 'being a man' in these stories is only partly ascribable to the influences of Mexican traditions of masculinity and its failure to keep up with the demands of a modern age. There is no signal here that there once existed a premodern moment of traditional masculinity free of the problematics outlined in these tales of confusion.

Paredes is working out here the possibility that the particular brand of male ideology associated with the heroes of these stories is not simply a residual element of the feudal world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century borderlands. It is also associated with the particular features of the class structures and gender ideologies related to the creation of a capitalist world structured by class dominance (316).

Both the insights elaborated by Saldívar here and the fact that they are first gleaned in the work of a male writer in the middle of the nineteenth century have enormous consequences for Chicana and Chicano feminist and queer studies as they attempt to understand, explain, challenge, and ultimately displace destructive constructions of masculinity that still dominate many otherwise politically resistant Chicana and Chicano cultural forms and practices (from Chicano hip hop to low rider culture). For one thing, they suggest that a strategy of portraying machismo as historically backward or as "traditional" miss the mark insofar as the motivations upholding machismo may in fact lie in the present and near-past of late capitalist and postcolonial displacement rather than in received, premodern or precapitalist tradition. (Two chapters later, Saldívar's analysis of Paredes's journalistic writings on prostitution and women's rights in post-war Japan emerge rich and nuanced against the backdrop of these deconstructions of Mexican and Mexican American masculinity.)

Up to this point, I have been focusing on masculinity in order to exemplify Saldívar's method. However, this thread, which runs

throughout the book, also opens up onto the more prominent themes of the work, weaving in and out of what I see as the book's three dominant conceptual issues:

1. The relation between history and memory as they relate to the elaboration of the future
2. The subjectivity resulting from living a condition of "in betweenness"
3. The character of (subaltern) modernity as racially indeterminate, transnational, and migratory (262-263)

Saldívar explores each of these as a general phenomenon with local instantiations, both on the Texas-Mexico border and in post-war Japan. As I understand Saldívar's claims, Paredes is responding, throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, to the radical restructuring of modernity wrought by advanced capitalism, including what we might now call "globalization from above." Paredes's response lies not (or not always) in a contemporary analysis, but rather in critical, elliptical, ironic, and/or parodic engagements with the past. These engagements with the past render the local specificities of borderlands subjectivities intelligible in relation to global designs and world-historical events.

In showing us what Paredes accomplished, one of the things that I most appreciate about Saldívar's book is the synchronicity of his analysis. He consistently reminds us that Paredes and the Mexican Americans of his generation were living the same events of world history as were Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, Langston Hughes, Walter Benjamin, and C.L.R. James. Locating Mexican Americans and Mexican American intellectuals as part of the world stage of the mid-nineteenth century allows us to understand both their place in modernity and the variations on modernity that were being lived simultaneously. This variation is what Walter D. Mignolo has called the "colonial difference." Including people like Hughes, James, and Paredes as contemporaries with Gramsci, Bakhtin, and

Benjamin allows us to see the centrality of race and of coloniality to the development of capitalism. It completes our radical intellectual history and improves our understanding of society, culture, and history.

In conclusion, however, I would like to suggest that, once again, Saldívar's critical practice follows Paredes's. In other words, while *Borderlands of Culture* is undeniably about the past, it is also a critical engagement with the past in the service of illuminating the present. Saldívar opens up for his readers a largely unknown vision of transnational, decolonial Chicana/o studies that emerges before the term "Chicano" had taken on its politically oppositional meaning. The model of Chicana/o studies practiced by Saldívar and prefigured by Paredes is one that sees identities as complex, racism as multidirectional, ethnicity as comparative, capitalism as colonial and global, and culture as transnational. Furthermore, it does so without ever losing site of Chicana/o or Mexican American experience as irreducibly particular. Both the local and the global are simultaneously held up for examination throughout Saldívar's text, whether in his reading of the differences between the Mexican "parents" and Mexican American "children" in *George Washington Gómez* or in the painful contradictions lived out by Private Jewel C. Jones, Ichio Kikuchi, and Sgt. Melguizo in Paredes's short fiction, or in the hybridity of emergent forms of Japanese culture under American occupation that Paredes chronicled in his post-war journalism.