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Ramon Saldivar. *Borderlands of Culture: Americo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 520 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3789-8.

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You Know It When You See It: The Transnational Career of Americo Paredes

As a Latin Americanist, my first thoughts concerning Ramón Saldivar's *The Borderlands of Culture: Americo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* begged the question of whether the Chicano experience falls within the realm of Latin American studies. The H-Net Job Guide includes Chicano history announcements under listings for Latin America and vice versa. Nonetheless, we should ask whether Americo Paredes and his work are pertinent to a Latin American readership. After reading this well-researched and compelling study of his life and career as a folklorist and writer, I learned that he is much more than a Latin Americanist. His experiences in Japan and China toward the end of and immediately after World War II provided an exceptional opportunity to test his views of cultural nationalism and citizenship that evolved from his life experience in South Texas. According to Saldivar, "His years in Asia exposed him in a crucially formative way to the differing ethno-cultural complexities that imperialism and modernization in their multiple varieties has bequeathed to both the Americas and the Far East" (p. 10).

One of the most prolific Chicano scholars of the twentieth century, Paredes was born on September 3, 1915 in Brownsville, located in South Texas's Rio Grande Valley. As is the case with many Mexican American families from that region, he was a descendant of the original Spanish settlers of Nuevo Santander, roughly cor-

responding to the modern Mexican state of Tamaulipas. His first publications were poems appearing in "Lunes literario de La Prensa," a supplement of the San Antonio *La Prensa* newspaper, which was founded by political exiles fleeing the violence of the Mexican Revolution. Its readership extended to both sides of the Mexican/U.S. border. Early in his career, his poetic prowess culminated in the publication of a 1937 collection of poems, *Cantos de adolescencia*.

Paredes was raised with the legacies of the Mexican American War (1846-48), which resulted in Mexico ceding half of its territory to the United States. Notable events that reinforced the ethnic tensions of the region included the Mexican Revolution, the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s, and the forced repatriation of migrant workers in the early 1950s. According to Saldivar, he was "born a foreigner in his native land, he was fated to a life controlled by others" (p. 15), a seemingly ordinary but nonetheless profound statement that demonstrates the universality of the underlying class structure that could describe the life of a *campesino* from any number of nations in Latin America or the developing world.

Paredes became internationally famous for his contributions to folklore, which "represent the issues of modernity in a bilingual and bicultural context" (p. 17) through a North-to-South point of view that links South Texas

with the rest of Latin America. But his life's work was much more. For example, he also produced two novels, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexiotexan Novel* (1990) and *The Shadow* (1998), as well as his poetry collection, *Between Two Worlds* (1991), and an anthology of short stories, *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories* (1994).

Paredes's diverse and pioneering career included, but was certainly not limited to, his work as a poet, fiction writer, international journalist, scholar, and folklorist. Consequently, in analyzing the place of Paredes within the history of the Mexican/U.S. borderlands or Greater Mexico, Saldívar has produced an insightful, well-researched, transnational interpretation. In his prologue to *Between Two Worlds* Paredes wrote, "I am aware that if this volume finds any favor with the reader it will be mostly as a historical document. It is thus that I offer it, as the scribbings of a 'proto-Chicano' of a half century ago" (quoted, p. 288). This is a telling quote that demonstrates Paredes's anticipation, if only superficially, of the ideas that will herald the coming Chicano studies as a distinct and bonafide academic field of study. Within Texas, Paredes is readily identified as the "Dean of Mexican American Studies." This year the Center of Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin is celebrating its fortieth anniversary, which is a concrete legacy of Paredes's influence. According to the center's homepage, "born out of the activism of the civil rights movement, the Center for Mexican American Studies was established in June 1970, with Professor Américo Paredes as one of its principal founders and first director." [1]

Saldívar examines Paredes's career using a transnational analysis based on a Greater Mexico paradigm. "In seeking to document the unwritten history of the South Texas borderlands, Paredes brings his experiences of cold war geopolitics, Asian cultural and racial conflict, the contradictions of American democracy, and the heterogeneously dialogical nature of border culture to task" (p. 10). South Texas history is replete with the physical clashes and culture conflict that occurred throughout the Texan-Mexican border area following the Mexican-American War. During this era of massive change brought on by capitalist development, social bandits such as Gregorio Cortez emerged to defend the rights of their communities "with pistol in hand." The specific events of Cortez's odyssey were the basis of Paredes's 1958 "*With His Pistol in His Hand*": *A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, which began as his doctoral dissertation. The folktales of Gregorio Cortez exemplified Texas-Mexican heroes who fought against the encroachment of American capitalism and Anglo-Saxon culture that was not only usurp-

ing their land, but also their rights, and their cultural ties to Mexico. Paredes recognized the importance of such tales to borderland history, writing in *Folklore and History*, "[T]he Texas-Mexican version does not exist in documents.... It can be found in *corridos* and in the prose narrative passed on from father to son. But no history of the Rio Grande border that ignores this folklore can be complete" (quoted, p. 32).

Saldívar is at his best when he is depicting Paredes's questioning of hegemonic interpretations of historical memory by reconstructing the past from the point of view of the subaltern communities in South Texas or rural China. He demonstrates that Paredes's work maintains or even rediscovers the fading place of Mexican culture within the United States: "these texts prove at least as important as the newspapers, official records, and other documents of more modernized segments of society because they offer the only surviving evidence of conditions of life as experienced in the subaltern strata" (p. 32). Such fears are not unreasonable when one considers the recent Texas history textbook controversy, which further marginalized the historic and economic contributions of many non-mainstream peoples. Local politicians such as Dr. Don McLeroy, leader of the conservative faction on the Texas State School board, stated that history has already been skewed. Of course he meant skewed in the opposite direction of Paredes's career and works. Writer/director John Sayles reinforced Paredes's concerns in a scene from his movie *Lone Star* (1996), in which Anglo and Tejano PTA members argued over whose view of history is correct and should be taught.

Paredes demonstrated his forward-thinking views concerning nineteenth-century South Texas's entrance into the modern age of capitalism and globalization with the following quote: "[T]he river, once a focus of regional life, became a symbol of separation" (p. 37). According to Saldívar, Paredes explained here how that focus became a symbol of separation and then showed how that Greater Mexico community cut across imaginary borderlines and symbolic immigration checkpoints. But even more significant was his comparative analysis of the Texas-Mexico borderlands and Asia, where he served while in the military. Here he demonstrated his concern with democratic citizenship and its meaning in an emerging transnational world. According to Saldívar, "Paredes was observing, thinking, and writing about the power of national cultures, languages, and literatures" (p. 345).

In Asia, Paredes saw, firsthand, forms of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, racism, class oppression,

and sexual domination that he had not experienced in South Texas (p. 390). They influenced the development of his thoughts concerning national culture, citizenship, language, and how they intertwined in contributing to a region's history and folklore. Such multidisciplinary methodology was certainly a novel endeavor at the start of the Cold War era. In Asia Paredes found an ideal subject for comparison with the Texas-Mexico borderlands, employing an early example of what today we casually describe as a transnational perspective.

Paredes's time in Asia was certainly important. There, during a period of tremendous personal crisis and change, he comprehended the limitations of cultural nationalism, the restrictions stimulated by a community's own internally divisive racial and class structures, and the effects of global realignment at the beginning of the Cold War era. His comprehension of such significant issues complemented his experiences growing up with American-style racism and the influence of modernization on marginal regions of the United States. While in Tokyo, he also wrote a series of articles, which were printed almost daily during 1945-46 for the Tokyo *Stars and Stripes*. These articles covered Japanese politics and the "war crimes" trials of Japanese leaders. Paredes's international career in journalism was further augmented

in 1947-48 by a weekly column in the Mexico City daily *El Universal*, which consisted of articles and fiction about life in China, Korea, and Japan.

I found great value in this book; I have to admit that I was grossly underinformed about Américo Paredes's career. This book's impressive research and bibliography make it an excellent source for Chicano studies. It lays a solid foundation for the pre-1960s period as well as the history of the Mexican/U.S. border prior to WWII. After completing this first-rate study, I am eager to learn more about his work and career and to better comprehend the legacies of his scholarship. Although the book's length is prohibitive for an undergraduate course, it is a must-read for graduate-level courses in Chicano and borderlands studies. Paredes's life experiences and writings as a scholar of the borderlands and Latin America provide an insightful argument for more comparative work on both sides of the Mexican/U.S. border.

Note

[1]. "Mission Statement," The Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/cmas/about/Mission-Statement.php>, accessed October 15, 2010.

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