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Bacich, Damian

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LÓPEZ MORÍN, JOSÉ R. *The Legacy of Américo Paredes.* College Station, Texas: Texas A&M UP, 2006. 167 pp.

Like all movements, movements in academia have their originators, and Américo Paredes (1915-1999) deserves to be considered as a father-figure of what is today known as Border Studies, namely the recognition that the boundaries between peoples and cultures are often dynamic spaces of creativity and conflict, and that the frontier is seldom a bright line of demarcation but is instead a porous area of interchange. Paredes, who taught English and anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin for over three decades, is perhaps best known for his pioneering study of the folk ballads of the Texas-Mexico borderlands where he grew up, *With his Pistol in his Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (1958). Like a latter-day Abraham, Don Américo (as he was known by students) led his discipline of Folklore studies out of the old country of romanticism and mythologizing and into new, dangerous, and promising territories of cultural studies and ethnography. At least that is the case made in *The Legacy of Américo Paredes* by José López Morín, Associate Professor of Chicano Studies at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Though concise (167 pages, including notes, bibliography and index), *The Legacy of Américo Paredes* covers a good deal of ground. The author, who knew and corresponded with Paredes, offers an engaging and learned analysis of his life and work. From his birth and early childhood in Brownsville, Texas, to his years at UT Austin, we follow Paredes's evolution from a restless teenage poet writing lines such as "Why was I ever born / Proud of my southern race, / If I must seek my sun / In an Anglo-Saxon face" (38), into a groundbreaking scholar who would challenge the assumptions of folklore, anthropology, and ethnography, and along the way help give birth to the new field of Chicano Studies.

Written in a clear and appealing prose, this book will be of interest to teachers of undergraduate courses in American Latino literature or ethnic studies as well as senior scholars interested in situating Paredes's *oeuvre* within the contemporary critical framework. For those without specialized knowledge of the American Southwest, López Mórin's study begins with some useful background on the history of the Mexico-Texas borderlands, dating back to the time of the first Spanish explorations. According to the author, after a turbulent

initial period of attempted colonization and indigenous resistance, a unique and advantageous *modus vivendi* developed along the Lower Río Grande, in which both Spanish and Indian residents maintained a degree of autonomy and self-determination: "[. . .] a mestizo culture, or blending of different cultural groups, began to evolve and thrive [. . .] away from the Mexican and U.S. governments" (10). This agrarian lifestyle with its ranch-based economy would be threatened and eventually vanquished by the U.S. westward expansion and the consequent introduction of a capitalistic financial system. These historical forces helped form the matrix from which were drawn the Mexico-Texan folk ballads so dear to Américo Paredes.

As a young man, Paredes grew up imbued with the rhythms of music and poetry. Américo learned to play the guitar at an early age, despite the protests of his father, a lover of Spanish poetry who did not hide his disdain for popular music. Américo's differences with his father did not impede him from developing a deep love for the written word, in the languages of Cervantes and Shakespeare, both of which he commanded with native fluency. This grounding in both English and Spanish canonical literature would eventually allow Paredes to appreciate the particularities and inflections of the Spanish spoken along the Río Grande. Yet as a Mexico-Tejano, Paredes lived what Morín has defined as an "in-between existence:" a sense of being neither fully Mexican nor fully American, yet being both at the same time. This "in-betweenness" would eventually give birth to his work at UT Austin, defining theory of folklore as performance, an expressive space inhabited by the artist between the work performed and the public receiving it.

At the core of *The Legacy of Américo Paredes* is Paredes' seminal work, *With his Pistol in his Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (1958). By now an almost universally required reading for students of Chicano literature, the book is a scholarly study of a famous Spanish-language ballad, "El corrido de Gregorio Cortez." As Morín points out, it is impossible to pigeon-hole *With his Pistol in his Hand*: part folklore, part sociolinguistics, part anthropology, it helped to redefine the boundaries between these disciplines and to challenge the prevailing view of Mexican American culture as a series of bastardized customs with no authentic voice. In subsequent years, *With his Pistol in his Hand* achieved cult status among young Chicano activists in the 1960s seeking a narrative to support their nascent ideology of

resistance. The author provides an overview of the book for those unfamiliar with it and a summary of its critical reception to the present day, as well as a critique of the 1984 motion picture *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, which featured a young Edward James Olmos as Cortez. According to Morín, among the flaws of the film was its coarse portrayal of Cortez, one which bothered Américo Paredes and "[. . .] robbed him of his dignity and courage" (95).

In the fourth and final chapter, "Toward New Perspectives in Folklore and Cultural Anthropology," Morín stakes his strongest claim: namely that Paredes "[. . .] articulated an idea of performance that anticipated the postmodern movement in cultural anthropology—a movement that inspires the protection of primitive and local cultures from First World attempts to reorganize them" (97). Through his work on the folklore of the Mexico/Texas border region the author of *With his Pistol in his Hand* ultimately subverted the paradigm of the fieldworker who observes the cultural production of another people from the "outside," and empowered the "observed" to have a voice through the performance of their songs, legends, and jests on their own terms. This he did through the publication of his 1977 essay, "On Ethnographic Work among Minority Groups: A Folklorist's Perspective," arguing that the perceived expectations of the ethnographer often conditioned the responses of the individuals relied on as informants. In order to decipher the complex set of visual and aural markers indicating irony, flattery, or sarcasm, a researcher needed a deep knowledge of the culture under investigation, one that was almost impossible to attain for an outsider. Paredes's concept of "folklore as performance" aided him in offering a counterpoint to traditional anthropological methods, a concept which, Morín maintains, anticipated the postmodern revolution in the social sciences yet never receiving the credit it deserved.

While the focus of Paredes's scholarship was arguably the demolition of U.S. stereotypes about Mexican Americans, he also engaged in sparring matches with Mexican intellectuals, most notably the poet Octavio Paz. Incensed by the disparaging depictions of Mexican Americans in Paz's well-known work, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950, rev. 1959), Paredes accused the Nobel laureate of reducing the image of young Mexican-Americans to a stereotype that was no less bigoted than those employed by Anglo-Americans. Moreover, Paredes took issue with Paz's overly oedipal evaluation of Mexican

machismo, arguing that in some aspects *machismo* reflected nothing more than the ideals of courage commemorated in the folk songs of all nations; and that there was no evidence to suppose that in its most exaggerated "Mexican" forms machismo "[. . .] even existed in Mexico before the Revolution" (119), an insight which effectively vitiated Paz's analysis.

Morín has done a great service by rendering the work of Américo Paredes available to a broad audience, and it is natural that a work about such a complex figure should bear some shortcomings, one of which is the use of less-than precise terminology at times. When dealing with the ethnic groups that populate the Texas-Mexico borderlands, the subjects of Paredes' studies are designated as "Mexicans," "border Mexicans," "Mexico-Tejanos," "Mexican Americans," in contrast to the dominant culture north of the Río Grande, which is alternately referred to as "American," "North American," "Anglo-American," "Anglo-Texan," or simply "Anglo." Many of these names are used interchangeably throughout the text, though in becoming familiar with Paredes' work, the reader will note that they are not always equivalents. Regarding the use the word "Mexican" to designate the peoples of Mexican extraction living in Texas, Américo Paredes himself argued that what developed along the Río Grande was not merely a subset of Mexican culture, but rather a unique hybrid. Moreover, is "Anglo" the best term to describe both the culture of the English-speaking settlers that entered the Texas-Mexico borderlands during the 19th century as well as the dominant U.S. Texan culture one hundred years hence? Perhaps the answer is "yes," but a scholarly book of this caliber could have benefited from a definition of terms at its outset.

The above criticism notwithstanding, to write a treatise on a scholar of the stature of Américo Paredes is a daunting task, which Morín has accomplished with great skill. Given the amount of material that Paredes published, this will not be the last word on the legacy of Don Américo, nor should it be. Instead, readers should be thankful that there is now available an erudite, accessible, and engaging introduction to the father of Border Studies.

Damian Bacich
San José State University