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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Excerpt from Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico

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https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7dr777vs

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 4(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/T841012816

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Excerpted from José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ViewProduct.php?productid=45740.

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TRANS-AMERICANITY



Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico

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6

The Outernational Origins of Chicano/a Literature: Paredes's Asian-Pacific Routes and Hinojosa's Cuban Casa de las Américas Roots

What does Asia have to do with Américo [Paredes], and with the U.S. Mexico borderlands, the crossing of which represents such a volatile issue in the contemporary cultural politics of the U.S.? What is the Asian connection to the U.S. borderlands? To race and gender on the border? To matters of class structures in the U.S.? I claim that the history of Asian immigration and American interventions in the Asia Pacific global region is related to each of these questions and to the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, but not in simple-minded ways.—RAMÓN SALDÍVAR, "Asian Américo: Paredes in Asia and the Borderlands"

It is always risky to try to account for the canonical success of U.S. minoritized writers. In my previous work on Américo Paredes and Rolando Hinojosa as figures of trans-American literary and cultural studies, I tried to focus on the intriguing examples of Paredes's and Hinojosa's extraordinary history writing of Greater Mexico in their subaltern texts.[1] So far, I have chosen to concentrate on their outpouring of minor novels, short stories, poetry, and criticism as a way to rethink a potential divide between their early literary successes and prizes and the later (middle-age) so-called lapses, flaws, and failures. It is a periodization that is gaining monumental status in recent Chicano/a literary and cultural histories. For example, to speak of Paredes's middle-age writing career exclusively in terms of recalcitrant nostalgia and of his mythic rendering of Greater Mexico's patriarchal culture and Mexican Americans (after 1848) as somehow having fallen from a once "stable" and "egalitarian" pastoral state in the opening chapters of *"With His Pistol in His Hand"* (1958), as Renato Rosaldo did so strikingly, is, of course, not wrong. But Rosaldo's dominant

portrait of the middle-aged border ethnographer stuck in the conservative mode of pastoralism seems to me an unfinished painting of Paredes's life and work. That image erases the rest of Paredes's life and the earlier Asian-Pacific journalistic writings of his Second World War years, the rich production of his outernationalist writings from Tokyo, when he witnessed, as a young, proto-Chicano reporter for *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, the American military and cultural hegemony beginning to take over the planet (see Rosaldo in Calderón-Saldívar 1991, 87).

In following Ramón Saldívar's magisterial arguments that Paredes's Asian-Pacific journalistic writings foreshadow the subject of global coloniality and modernity in the later writings, I am also suggesting that we need to re-examine this outernantional literary and journalistic terrain that U.S.-Mexican borderland scholars are only now beginning to take into account in their understanding of Paredes's minor and iconic literary and cultural texts. How were Paredes's years in Asia, from 1945 to 1950, generative for his outernational idea of "Greater Mexico"? What postwar idea of other Asia(s) did he bring back to the U.S.-Mexican borderlands for understanding U.S. racial formations? Was there a laboring of borderlands' culture? With Rolando Hinojosa's iconic South Texas novel *Klail City y sus alrededores*, I will go back over the literary and ideological terrain of this work's winning the prestigious Cuban Casa de las Américas Prize in 1976 that I described in previous work (via the dialectics of Roberto Fernández Retamar's school of Calibán). But *Klail City y sus alrededores* deals more directly with Cuba's vernacular culture (via the roots of the Cuban vernacular aesthetic of the *choteo*) than I first recognized. It wasn't until I visited Cuba and Casa de las Américas as a judge of the inaugural *premio extraordinario* in U.S. Latino/a literature that I was able to better understand the history of the Cuban vernacular choteo and to begin formulating its impact on Rolando Hinojosa's novels about Greater Mexico. Instead of viewing Paredes and Hinojosa as local South Texas writers, I propose to take an alternative route here and attempt to read the planetary Asian-Pacific and Cuban-Gulf of Mexico roots and routes that helped form these great writers.

Despite having published scores of journalistic chronicles exploring how U.S. military occupation had transformed Japan in *Pacific Stars*

and Stripes, poems about the cultures of U.S. imperialism and the military occupation of Japan, and short stories that take us from the social spaces of twentieth-century Greater Mexico and into the Pacific theater of the Second World War and the opening days of the Korean War, Américo Paredes is usually viewed by U.S. scholars as only a local-color writer and folklorist.[2] However, Paredes, as we will see, is one of the earliest proto-Chicano writers responsible for putting transnational culture at the center of his cultural studies project and for theorizing the relationship of folk ballads on intercultural conflict (*corridos*) to Mexican American belles-lettres.[3] His vernacular aesthetic is most usefully approached within this historical and formal ethno-musicological framework of corridos. The particular qualities of Greater Mexico's border folksongs, which had a profound influence on at least three other Chicano and Chicana writers—Rolando Hinojosa, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Tomás Rivera—provide a key for reading Paredes in an outernational frame and confronting his critical perspective.

Paredes's interaction with what he topo-spatially baptized "Greater Mexico's" border folksongs is considerable. From his middle-age study of border folksongs in his master's thesis, "Ballads of the Lower Border" (1953) at the University of Texas, Austin, to his interdisciplinary study of the border hero Gregorio Cortez, "*With His Pistol in His Hand*" (1958), Paredes began to de-essentialize the border cultures of South Texas on which his text focused. Paredes's study inaugurated not only the multicultural discipline of Mexican American studies at the University of Texas but also the proto-Chicano studies interest in border studies in general. Both of these cultural histories of border music emphasize his ongoing relationship with the folksongs of *danzas* and corridos. Moreover, the structure of the border folksong provides an understanding of the hybrid and transcultural quality that is the hallmark of Paredes's prose style. Greater Mexico's folk music, as we know, as a form of *norteño* cultural semiosis, is by nature intertextual and amalgamated, but Greater Mexico's danzas and corridos are particularly so. In *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero* (1976), Paredes describes the nature of how the border folksong as the *décimas* and *romances* originally from Spain migrated to Mexico and then north to Greater Mexico to mix with its more or less indigenous border musical styles—family music, *cantina-parranda* music, music sung on horse-

back, *conjunto* music, and so on. As a young boy growing up on the *ranchos* of South Texas and Tamaulipas, Mexico, Paredes (1995, xviii) recalls feeling no shame in listening to these songs, for the folksongs not only recorded the "long struggle to preserve an identity and affirm [one's] rights as a human being," but also focused on the long history of Greater Mexico's "intercultural conflict" and the borderer's resolve *de no ser dejado* (not to be refused). Thus envisaged, it was, for Paredes (1995, xxi), "quite an experience to sit outside on a still, dark night and hear [the] distant lonely music." Paredes is best understood as a border-crossing intellectual, equally at home as a folklorist, a cultural anthropologist-ethnomusicologist, a creative imaginative writer, and a social historian of Greater Mexico.

Like the amalgamation of Greater Mexico's border folk music, Paredes's first great novel, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (1990), written between 1936 and 1940, invokes and revises U.S.-Mexican border songs of intercultural conflict such as "Los Sediciosos" and "Ignacio Treviño." The novel, like the corridos of the early twentieth century, commemorates the proto–Mexican American uprising of 1915 that took place in the brush country of South Texas. Although it was similar to the famous West Coast uprisings of Watts and Los Angeles of some fifty years later, the uprising of 1915 differed because *los sediciosos* (the seditionists) acted in accordance with a declaration of grievances and intentions—what in Spanish was called a *plan*. In his novel, Paredes explores how the *plan* de San Diego, Texas, was called many things at the time both locally and nationally—a conspiracy hatched by communists, a machination of the German Kaiser, a utopian scheme on the part of local intellectuals such as Venustiano Carranza, or simply a wild and unruly plot by rancheros and campesinos on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.[4] As *George Washington Gómez* suggests, however, there was indeed a great deal of the improbable about the *plan*, too—especially as the novel's central protagonists Gualinto; his mother, María; his sisters Carmen and Maruca; and his uncle Feliciano looked back to the uprising and the execution of Gumersindo (María's husband) by the devious Texas Rangers with the clarity of historical hindsight. And like the corrido "Los Sediciosos," Paredes's novel had a tone of ambivalence to it, for like the corrido "Los Sediciosos" itself, *George Washington Gómez* was partly an epic ballad celebration of those Mexican



1. Photograph of Américo Paredes and Japanese friends, Tokyo, 1943. *Courtesy of Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries.*

Americans with the "resolve *de no ser dejado*" and partly a lyrical lament for the many thousands of victims of South Texas who, in Paredes's own words, were "executed" by the Texas Rangers (Paredes 1995, 33), who helped the U.S. military put down Greater Mexico's uprising.

As Gualinto—improbably named George Washington Gómez—grows up, he cannot help but admire the epic-like, male heroism of los sediciosos (since their acts of violence and resistance were directed at the hated death squads of *rinches* and their allies). His mother, María, and his Uncle Feliciano (along with the larger Mexican American community), however, largely know that they are victims of the repression because of the *plan*'s utopian and revolutionary dream of founding a multicultural Spanish-speaking Republic of the Southwest. (The *plan* had called for a union of Mexicans and Native American Indians, African Americans, and Asian Americans.) In counterpoint to Gualinto's largely masculinist view of the corrido's historia of "Los

Sediciosos," Feliciano poses early in the novel the contrapuntal alternative corrido "Ignacio Treviño" by singing the opening lines of the ballad in which the protagonist, a policeman in Brownsville, Texas, around 1911 finds himself caught up in local machine politics of the region, and the Texas Rangers try to assassinate him. Treviño, however, survives the hit and barricades himself in a saloon, and, as the corrido suggests, there are no casualties when the Texas Rangers show up, just so many shot-up *juíscle* (whiskey) bottles. Feliciano sings part of "Ignacio Treviño" to the Gómez clan to emphasize his rather realist views that the border troubles of the times only encouraged the Texas Rangers—to quote from the corrido again—"a puro matar (to kill and kill)" Mexican Americans. Thus, like the corridos "Los Sediciosos" and "Ignacio Treviño," Paredes's dialectical *George Washington Gómez* is not all praise-song of the leadership of the *plan* de San Deigo—Aniceto Pizaña and Luis de la Rosa—and their followers. While there is grieving, mourning, and melancholia for the victims of the Texas Rangers' brutal executions, Paredes's novel commemorates how there was also a "bloody swath" for which Greater Mexico's los sediciosos would be partly remembered.[5]

In his iconic "*With his Pistol in His Hand*," a study of the legends, cuentos, and corridos of Gregorio Cortez, a campesino, Paredes begins with a geographically astute chapter on the border cultures of Nuevo Santander and on the musical aesthetics of South Texas and the borderlands—what he called Greater Mexico. For Paredes (1995, xiv), Greater Mexico incorporated "all the areas inhabited by people of Mexican culture—not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the United States as well—in a cultural rather than a political sense." He then switched gears in the next chapters and produced an intellectual biography of Gregorio Cortez, a hero of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands who was falsely accused of horse stealing and murdering an Anglo-American sheriff in 1901. Cortez, however, outsmarted a posse of local death squads (the Texas Rangers) across half the State of Texas. Paredes ends this portion of the book by delving into a rigorous, rhetorical analysis of the corrido proper, which, he argues, broke down the normative, white-supremacist hierarchies of race and class in Texas. The Texas Rangers—the rinches—were not brave and invincible, as liberal historians such as Walter Prescott Webb and Frank Dobie and Hollywood movies starring the

dashing Gary Cooper memorialized, but foolish and cowardly ("All the rangers of the county / Were flying, they rode so hard . . . But trying to catch Cortez / Was like following a star"). The writing of Paredes's text, like the corrido itself, as José Limón (1992) first demonstrated, was itself as a "new corrido" of sorts. Indeed, Paredes's scholarly book was wildly creative, a decided alternative to conventional academic discourse and a self-conscious critique of it.

In the book's final words about corridos—Paredes's self-fashioning *despedida* (farewell) about how the border ballad of intercultural conflict had developed in South Texas in the decades between the manifest annexation of Texas by the United States in 1846–48 and the U.S. colonization of the Philippines in 1898, he noted that although the "traditions and musical patterns [in Greater Mexico's corridos] are Castilian," their "social and physical conditions . . . were more like those of [medieval] Scotland" (Paredes 1958, 243). This comparative, transnational move by Paredes some fifty years ago—where he connected socio-cultures divided by idiom (*lengua, idioma*), space, and time—was politically courageous and refreshingly anti-essentialist, as well as intellectually provocative.

The questions U.S.-Mexican borderlands scholars of Paredes's career have been grappling with for decades are many and complex: Where and how did Paredes's conceptualization of (trans)national culture come from? Did he simply pick it up as an undergraduate and graduate student in the English and anthropology departments at the University of Texas in the late 1950s, after he had returned from the Pacific theater and started studying corridos? Had he imbibed Greater Mexico's hybrid cultures of intercultural conflict in his native borderlands of Brownsville, where he was born and raised? Or had he conceptualized transnational cultures by paying attention to the local sonic danzas and corridos he grew up singing on the local radio stations with the Queen of the Boleros, Consuelo "Chelo" Silva, one of the first female Mexican American recording artists, whom he had married in 1939?[6] How had his Second World War experiences as a reporter for *Pacific Stars and Stripes* in Japan and, later, his experiences working for the American Red Cross in China helped him better understand his border multiculture? Until recently, these questions had not been fully comprehended or answered adequately by Paredes scholars of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands.

on, race has been a cipher for the debasement of humanism and democracy." See also Gilroy 2004; Kant 1960.

8. See Conley 1999; see also Lipsitz 2006; Oliver and Shapiro 2006. As early as 1935, Du Bois specified how, despite their low wages, white workers were privileged in public functions and facilities, in employment as police, and voting rights, with an accompanying dominance in local schools and courts (see Du Bois 1935, 700–770).

9. Arturo Islas Papers, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., folder 1, correspondence, 1974–75.

10. See Timothy Pfaff, "Talk with Mrs. Kingston," *New York Times Book Review*, June 15, 1980, 1.

11. My comments on Toni Morrison's voyage of the *damnés* near the end of *Beloved* profited from Baucom 2005; Fanon 1987; Gilroy 1993; Hartman 2007; JanMohamed 2005; Jimenez 2010; Kaplan 2006; Rediker 2007. I also broached the idea of the voyage of the damnés in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* in my brief and informal conversations with Toni Morrison when I was asked by Ian Baucom to serve as her faculty escort when she visited Duke University on January 30–February 2, 2008.

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1. On Paredes 1958, see Saldívar 1991; on Hinojosa 1976, see Saldívar 1985, 1–20.

2. See Américo Paredes's chronicles published in *Pacific Stars and Stripe*; his poetry in *Between Two Worlds* (1991), especially "Westward the Course of Empire" and "Pro Patria"; and his short stories "Ichiro Kikuchi" and "Sugamo" in *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories* (1994).

3. See Paredes 1995 for a representative sampling of the folksong corpus of *danzas* and *corridos* of the lower U.S.-Mexican borderlands.

4. For rich histories of the Plan de San Diego and *los sediciosos*, see MacLaclan 1991; Sandos 1992.

5. Ramón Saldívar (2006, 180) suggests that Américo Paredes's novel *George Washington Gómez* "repeatedly rejects the agency of the heroic figure of the historical present, but it also offers no alternative future plot to replace the hero's action either." In other words, Paredes contrapuntally bumps up the Global North against the Global South into the very naming and interpellation of the warrior hero of the novel, George Washington Gómez—as well as Protestantism versus Catholicism, capitalism versus anarchism, and assimilation versus multicultural transculturation.

6. Paredes's marriage with Consuelo Silva collapsed during the early years of the Second World War. In 1947, Paredes met Amelia Sidzu Nagamines, the daughter of a Uruguayan mother and a Japanese diplomat father, in Tokyo, and they married in 1948.