

## LATINO/BORDER STUDIES

*The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary.* By Ramón Saldívar. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 525. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$89.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Among the most important developments in Latino/a Studies of the past decades is a new emphasis on projects of literary recovery, which has moved the field away from a more exclusive focus on works published since the 1960s and toward a concern with the legacy of a longstanding Latino/a presence in the United States. At the center of these developments is Américo Paredes, the influential novelist, poet, journalist, and folklorist, who documented the culture of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands for nearly half a century. Not only has his scholarship enabled an understanding of ephemeral cultural forms that might otherwise be lost to history, but his novels, short stories, and poetry have also been recognized for their literary accomplishment, as well as their revealing portraits of Mexican American culture. Yet despite his indisputable importance, Paredes had never been the subject of a full-length scholarly study until 2006, which saw the publication of José R. López Morín's *The Legacy of Américo Paredes* and Ramón Saldívar's *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*. It is a formidable challenge to undertake the first such project of its kind, and the considerable length and generic hybridity of Saldívar's book reflects the burden of Saldívar's task.

Although *The Borderlands of Culture* tells the story of Paredes's life, it is by no means a conventional biography. However its subject is certainly interesting and significant enough to merit such attention. A pioneer in the emergent field of Chicano/a Studies, Paredes's work as an ethnographer was informed by his experiences as a resident of Brownsville, Texas, where he was born during the Mexican Revolution and witnessed first-hand the political tensions and social upheavals that transformed this vital region over the ensuing decades. His perspective on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands was enhanced by the years he served in the U.S. Army as a writer for the *Stars and Stripes* and the Spanish-language daily, *El Universal*, during the post-war occupation of Japan and the opening days of the Korean War. While Saldívar incorporates many of these details into his book, he also makes clear that his work departs from the traditional parameters of biography, explaining, "I am not presenting the life of a 'great man,' although Américo Paredes was surely a most remarkable man. Instead, I wish to *depersonalize* that life by seeing it in context as a life pattern, a social aesthetic, and an act of remembrance" (p. 15). In other words, Saldívar aspires to commemorate Paredes by situating his accomplishments in the context of the politics and aesthetics of transnational modernism, rather than focusing on the nuances of individual personality.

As its title suggests, a pivotal claim in *The Borderlands of Culture* is that Paredes's thought is guided by a "transnational imaginary" that allowed him to articulate relations between North and South America at a moment when the study of

American history and culture was oriented toward the East-West trajectory of Manifest Destiny and transatlantic relations between Old and New Worlds. It was from this vantage that Paredes derived his understanding of borderlands culture and sought to envision alternatives to the traditional rhetoric of citizenship and liberal democracy. Although Saldívar acknowledges that Paredes at times fell prey to the patriarchal assumptions of his moment, he argues that Paredes's embrace of this transnational sensibility was far ahead of its time, anticipating key aspects of post-modern aesthetics, as well as the current "transnational turn" in American Studies.

Individual chapters pay sustained attention to Paredes's work, locating it in relation to broader cultural developments of its time: Saldívar reads his novel *George Washington Gomez* as a representation of the complexities of Mexican American assimilation in the 1940s; his book of poetry, *Between Two Worlds*, as a document of "subaltern modernity" written from the perspective of a bilingual, migratory subject-citizen who lives in the borderlands, and who challenges the normative visions of freedom articulated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Norman Rockwell, and the oppositional politics of Paredes's activist contemporaries, George I. Sánchez and Emma Tenayuca; his short story collection, *The Hammon and the Beans* as representative of the challenges of Mexican Americans' quest to become national subjects, and of the comparative approach to the borderlands that emerged from Paredes's experiences in East Asia; and Paredes's overseas journalism as a document of his growing recognition of parallels between the anti-imperial struggles of the borderlands and occupied Asia. Throughout, Saldívar remains committed to situating Paredes within his historical moment while also showing—with an insistence verging on overstatement—how Paredes's acute understanding of power relations, vernacular forms, and transnational sensibility often led him to insights that were far ahead of his time.

Given Saldívar's personal connection with Paredes (the book opens with a moving account of how he accompanied an aged Paredes on his final visit to the place of his birth) and belief in his insufficiently recognized importance to American literary and cultural study today, it makes sense that *The Borderlands of Culture* tries to do many things at once, providing exhaustive coverage of Paredes's work from a myriad of theoretical and historical perspectives. It suffers from that ambition, which has produced a work that is too fragmented and far too long to appeal to readers who might not come to it with a prior understanding of Paredes's life and work. Saldívar adopts a varied critical style that makes sense as an attempt to replicate the hybridity of Paredes's own techniques and to capture his life and work through a variety of angles, but the juxtaposition of biographical details with densely written theoretical language is more jarring than illuminating. Saldívar's decision to include a 78-page transcript of an interview he conducted with Paredes in 1995 can be seen as an attempt to allow his subject to speak in his own voice. But the interview is too lengthy and redundant to make for good reading by any but the most dedicated Paredes scholars. One comes away wishing that Saldívar had done some judicious editing, while making this valuable document available, in its entirety, to specialists with a particular interest in Paredes's life story.

Because of the compelling nature of Paredes's biography, and the importance of his work, it is unfortunate that this book does not seem destined to address readers who do not already have an extensive interest in Paredes, or perhaps the slightly larger community of American Studies scholars currently interested in questions of transnationalism and border cultures. What Saldívar does accomplish exceedingly well is to establish many possible directions for future writing on Paredes's life and work and, for those who are willing to read selectively, many fine arguments for what Paredes's accomplishments mean for American literary and cultural study today.

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*Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America.* By William Anthony Nericcio. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 248. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

Linguistically, conceptually and visually, Nericcio's *Tex[t]-Mex* is a colorful work. A self-described "post-Movimiento Chicano" this book should be an informative reading for most Chicana/o Studies students and scholars, as well as those interested in Cultural Studies, film and media studies, and popular culture. The overall purpose of Nericcio's book is to examine the nature and pervasiveness of stereotypes of the Mexican in U.S. culture. Nericcio makes clear that by analyzing stereotypes he does not mean to reveal "real Mexicans." An interesting question that he (and by extension, his readers) must deal with but cannot resolve is the question of that reality: If what people are surrounded by daily in the media are negative representations of Mexicans, then do not Mexicans in fact become these stereotypes? Each of five chapters focuses on the realm of visual representation (movies, movie stars, cartoon characters, and comics) and what one may argue are key parts of U.S./U.S. Latino popular culture. Throughout, he interweaves his ruminations on pop culture characters with discussions of theory by intellectuals like Derrida.

Nericcio begins his archive of stereotypes with an analysis of picture postcards of the Mexican Revolution and their use in U.S. popular culture. He then does a brief literature review of Chicana/o stereotypes in film. However, his reading is arguably more useful to those who are interested in Chicana/o stereotypes in all media, and not just in film. Although he discusses movie stars such as Rita Hayworth and Lupe Velez, he does not provide a close reading of their films so much as discuss their status as Latina icons in U.S. media and what that means for Latinas/os in U.S. society in general.

Some of the more interesting chapters include the first one, which delves into the mind of Orson Welles through his work *Touch of Evil* (1958). Nericcio's reading of *Touch of Evil* examines the usual points of race, borders, border-towns, gender and sexuality, and violence. However, he interestingly focuses on the sexlessness of Charlton Heston's character and contrasts this with the Chicanos in the film, who