

# Border Folk Balladeers



# Border Folk Balladeers:

## *Critical Studies on Américo Paredes*

Edited by

Roberto Cantú

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To  
José Antonio Villarreal  
(1924-2010)  
In memory of his novels and our friendship



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# INTRODUCTION

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*Pin it down in time and place,  
then name it for what it was.*  
—Alfredo Véa, *The Mexican Flyboy*

*Border Folk Balladeers: Critical Studies on Américo Paredes* contains selected papers initially read at the “Conference on Américo Paredes: Border Narratives and the Folklore of Greater Mexico,” held at California State University, Los Angeles on May 6-7, 2016.<sup>1</sup> The conference’s initial aims were to commemorate and reexamine the sweeping range of Américo Paredes’ work from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, thus retroactively illuminating or helping to clarify the breaks and continuities from the sixteenth to the twentieth century in Mexican and Mexican American cultural history, with an emphasis on folklore and border narratives that revealed noticeable or even tangential thematic ties to Paredes’ scholarly work, poetry, and narrative fiction. Soon after the conference papers were presented, the 2016 presidential campaign was followed by the current White House administration, confirming that history is known for its sudden ironies and setbacks, on this occasion winding back our time-keeping clocks to a history prior to the Civil Rights Era. The contributors to this volume unhesitatingly expanded their original essays with a deep consciousness and awareness that we are now living in similar times when Américo Paredes was growing up in Brownsville, Texas. The result is *Border Folk Balladeers*, a book composed of eleven studies that treat methodically constellated areas in Paredes’ work, for example: theories of the Texas Modern; the Latin American critical tradition; border writing in world literatures; ethnography in minority communities; jokelore in *Uncle Remus con Chile*; and, among other critical studies, a comprehensive analysis of the international drug traffic

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<sup>1</sup> To view the full conference program, visit:  
<http://americoatcalstatela.blogspot.com/>

crossing into Mexico and the U.S. border, with an emphasis on narcoballads and narconovels (*narcocorridos* and *narconovelas*), the contemporary offshoots of the Texas-Mexican border *corrido*.<sup>2</sup>

The opening essay by Richard Flores takes us back to an early memory: his delight and relish when first reading “*With His Pistol in His Hand*” (1958), in particular the satirical rejoinders heaved by Américo Paredes on Walter Prescott Webb’s anti-Mexican writings that unreservedly expressed the prevailing sentiments in South Texas when Flores was growing up. The question of how an eminent Texas historian like Webb could have such prejudiced discernment of Texas Mexicans, and Paredes’ satirical parrying, are now reexamined by Flores as the embodiment of intellectual projects that, studied within a broader background, are identified as historically aligned and thus parallel contending forces in the temporal dialectic of modernity, emerging regionally as the Texas Modern. The analysis of Paredes’ critical stance toward modernity, and of Webb’s corresponding modern view of history as determined by science, rationality, and with an alleged destination toward progress, are examined in detail and separately by Flores, with the Texas Modern represented, on the one hand, in terms of different cultural notions regarding Texas-Mexicans—viewed as a people on the fringe, with a quaint sense of “honor,” and thus perceived as what is old, foreign, and folkloric--and, on the other, to Webb’s idea of Anglo-Texans, the “law,” the new, and a dominant civilization. Citing José Limón’s discussion of Paredes’ “critical modernism,” Flores observes the manner in which traditional cultures, with their emphasis on social bonds and communitarian relations, can reinvigorate an exhausted modernity that routinely represents ethnic groups as obstacles to progress, thus transforming social life into commodities, stereotyped images of others, and of fellow humans into mere things.<sup>3</sup> In this incisive and theoretically-informed essay, Flores does not intend to take sides with Paredes, much less with Webb; rather, his

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<sup>2</sup> Paredes’ major publications include “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), and books on folklore, poetry, and narrative fiction, such as *Folk Music of Mexico* (1966); *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (1976); *Between Two Worlds* (1991); *Folklore and Culture of the Texas-American Border* (1993); *Uncle Remus Con Chile* (1993); *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories* (1994); and the novels *George Washington Gómez* (1990), and *The Shadow* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> In “A Family Autobiography,” Paredes recalls his classroom experiences when Texas history was in question: “I used to attack the textbook history lessons that the teacher gave us [...] We were always arguing about what the textbook said about Texas and American history” (Saldívar 88).

objective is to engage in a work of intellectual recuperation that, conscious of the historical logic of modernity, empowers us to abolish and transcend the illusions and self-deceptions of a nation's greatness based on the fallacies of race and skin color, thus enabling us to reframe and re-evaluate such questions before we fully and consciously face the real intellectual engagements that our national and global modernities impose on us today.

José Limón turns his attention to Américo Paredes and the Latin American critical tradition, simultaneously recalling his extended friendship and mentorship under Paredes. Limón's emphasis targets the long and fruitful years of personal and intellectual engagements that transpired from 1967 to 1999, with the word "engagements" suggesting an acceptance of differing opinions more so than the conventional acquiescence to a mentor's authority. Limón proceeds to elaborate on the meaning of *valor civil*, defined as the civic principles that lead a person to engage in public debate and civic action, an idea left only as a commentary in his book *Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique* (2012). From the notion of *valor civil*, Limón traces the tradition of the public intellectual in Latin America as defined by Alicia Ríos, namely: someone who voices questions of the national and the continental, the rural and urban, tradition versus modernity, and memory and identity, among others. In a comprehensive reach from Argentina and Venezuela to Cuba, Limón ties Paredes to this tradition through a political history of Texas-Mexican intellectuals from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the present. The critical thread that weaves its way through Limón's essay is a question: Paredes could have--but did not--participate in the social struggle of Mexicans in the United States during key historical moments such as 1936-1944, and in the post-war years of 1945-1965. In terms of *valor civil* and the public intellectual, Limón's judgment is that Paredes' record as such is "mixed, ambivalent or altogether missing." This is as close as a former student and insider can get to Paredes' innermost world, and unquestionably Limón leads the reader authoritatively through seminal questions in what could be construed as the different and opposing but intertwined sensibilities: one regional (the Texas Mexican), and the other national (Chicano generation). After a wide-ranging summary of Latin American, Texas-Mexican, and Chicano public intellectuals, Limón narrates the joint work of Américo Paredes and Chicano historian and poet Juan Gómez- Quiñones as an illustration of a generational passing of the torch (hence the essays' subtitle: "the road not fully taken, the legacy continued"). Limón includes in his study a critique of the cinematic adaptation of Paredes' "*With His Pistol in His Hand*," released as *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (Robert Young, 1982), and points to the misrepresentation of the character of

Gregorio Cortez and his embodiment of the sense of honor and manly propriety of border Mexicans. In its broad tripartite composition, Limón's essay is a thus personal memoir, an ambitious affiliation between Mexican American/Chicano and Latin American intellectual history, and film criticism.<sup>4</sup>

Claudia Sadowski-Smith's essay charts the topic of *border writing* in the work of Américo Paredes and in three interrelated literatures: Chicana/o, U.S. cross-cultural, and global. The opening claim is that Paredes created a vocabulary for border writing with an emphasis on racial and ethnic conflict in Texas, thus grounding interdisciplinary forms and practices in literature, ethnography, and cultural anthropology that have inspired the literature and identity formation of contemporary Chicana and Chicano writers (e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa, Luis Alberto Urrea, Ana Castillo, and Reyna Grande, to name a few). Sadowski-Smith claims that Paredes' study of border *corridos* underscored, by historical necessity, the process of land dispossession of nineteenth-century Texas Mexican rancheros by large Anglo Texan enterprises, turning Texas Mexicans into farm laborers ruled by a colonial economic order maintained through social terror, racial violence, and periodic deportations. Sadowski-Smith's ground-breaking study develops two important topics: first, the placement of Américo Paredes' work in the context of the economic and political expansionism of the United States from Texas to the U.S. Southwest; second, her comparative approach situates Paredes' work at the center of contemporary global concerns involving impoverished societies, transnational migrations,

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<sup>4</sup> José Limón comments on the extent to which Américo Paredes and Juan Gómez Quiñones shared critical reservations regarding the film *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (Robert Young, 1982), considered by both to be a flawed adaptation of the legend of Gregorio Cortez as taken from "*With His Pistol in His Hand*." One should remember, however, that this film was not totally Robert Young's production: it is featured as a Moctesuma [sic] Esparza Production, with Executive Producers David Ochoa and H. Frank Domínguez; screenplay written by Víctor Villaseñor; director of photography: Ray Villalobos; and with the musical score partly composed by Edward James Olmos, an actor who played the lead role of Gregorio Cortez. In other words, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* was viewed and received by Mexican American audiences as a nascent illustration of the long-anticipated birth and development of Chicano Cinema. Questions about the equivocal and misleading portrayal of Gregorio Cortez as a timorous and monolingual Mexican, and not as an early twentieth century border Mexican who was bilingual and with a deep sense of honor, logically leads to personal and intellectual engagements regarding historical representation of Mexican Americans in U.S. film. For a critical appraisal of Chicano cinema, see my 1995 article on *Bound by Honor* (Taylor Hackford 1993), and "Foreword" (2011).

and the smuggling and group mortality of undocumented workers. Sadowski-Smith's essay unveils the degree to which global border-crossings have reached corresponding thematic representations in a growing literary corpus of U.S. cross-ethnic and global literatures, with tales of Mexican Indians and uprooted political refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador who cross into Arizona (Leslie Marmon Silko); of land dispossession of Native Americans in Canada (Thomas King); of the Kurds as "border" people, with memories of their ancient land known as Kurdistan but who dwell in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (Sherko Fatah); and accounts of thousands of unwanted immigrants from North Africa who die in the Sahara desert, or drown in the Mediterranean while attempting to reach the shores of "Fortress Europe" (Ville Tietäväinen). These narratives and tales of the crossing of rivers, walls, seas, and deserts by the world's economic and political refugees represent emerging realities that, according to Sadowski-Smith, were prefigured in the work of Américo Paredes, and will constitute major global humanitarian concerns in the twenty-first century.

In his essay, José R. López Morín acknowledges the importance of relevant scholarship on border conflict, on the Lower Rio Grande ballad tradition, and on the approach to folklore as performance; he chooses to take a different trail, however, crossing into neglected and unfamiliar areas of research in the work of Américo Paredes: namely, the latter's kindred affinities to Latin America's colonial history. López Morín's attention centers on the concept of "hybridity," opening an area of study into Paredes' life in the context of what he calls "a universal historical experience" in relation to persons belonging to two conflicting cultural groups and traditions, with one side viewed as superior and dominant.<sup>5</sup> López Morín's wide-ranging analysis of hybridity in the Américas guides his readers into questions of a people's human and civil rights, and to the ethical principles that guide the writing of history. His study focuses on Américo Paredes and El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (Perú, 1539-1616), the natural son of Spanish Captain Sebastián Garcí Lasso de la Vega Vargas and Inca Princess Isabel Chimpu Ocllo, hence a *mestizo* son caught between two worlds but fully aware that his Spanish side was considered superior to his Inca maternal side. The theme of "parallel lives," of Plutarchian lineage, focuses on the biographies of two writers-- Américo Paredes and Garcilaso de la Vega--who are closely examined by López Morín through a process composed of three phases: cultural vindication,

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<sup>5</sup> Paredes' ancestral background was diverse: Catalanian, Asturian, and Sephardim or converted Jew (Saldívar: 65-68).

integration, and the nature and scope of historical truth. López Morín closes his study claiming that El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Américo Paredes--folk poets of their people and culture--have created in their writings a cultural perspective that transcends national and continental frontiers, allowing for repressed ethnic societies to emerge as legitimate and rightful members of world history.

Manuel Medrano's essay opens with a caveat: his account will not be on Américo Paredes as a teacher, colleague, or mentor, but rather as a friend, a shared birthplace in Brownsville, Texas, and Paredes' legacy: a passion for justice and historical truth. In a *corrido*-like eulogy Medrano recounts the history of Brownsville as a *frontera* that was the homeland of the native *Coahuiltecos*, historically superseded by eras corresponding to New Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the United States. "Hybridity," Medrano claims, defines what once was and continues to be the reality of Paredes' homeland, with tales of racial conflict and moments of cooperation, interethnic marriages and spillover violence, of smuggling *tequileros* and, most recently, of *narcos* and the ferocity of drug addiction and breakdown of social life on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. Medrano is convinced that his friendship with Paredes took place at the right time, in spite of the fact that it flourished for only a few years and late in life. Medrano had launched an oral history project called "Los del Valle," with Paredes--a rightful member of such a group--just entering a life-phase inclined toward reflection, recollection, and nostalgia. In his account, Medrano evokes his memorable impressions of Paredes: as a storyteller; the five-minute standing ovation Paredes received at the 1987 National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference in El Paso; his interviews that began on September 1994 in Paredes' Austin home, and Medrano's publication of *Américo Paredes: In His Own Words: An Authorized Biography* (2010), a book based on Paredes' and family members' recollections, along with those of friends and colleagues. Medrano closes with his remembrance of the family caravan to the mouth of the Rio Grande at Boca Chica Beach, where the flowing current carried Paredes' and his wife's ashes toward what was once Nuevo Santander, Paredes' *frontera* origins.

John Holmes McDowell opens his essay with a salutation or acknowledgment of Américo Paredes as a teacher, mentor, and personal friend. For a more comprehensive understanding of Paredes' life and work on the Texas-Mexico border, McDowell proposes the concept of "transitoriness" (from Latin *transitio*, "a going across or over") as a conceptual framework. He asserts that liminal spaces of the "betwixt and between" turn either side of a border into boundaries or bridges, therefore

into spaces where choices are made either to retreat into the traditionally consecrated and exclusive cultural domain, or else into opportunities to escape from the certainties of cultural experiences on both sides of the border, thus functioning as a *transitional zone*. McDowell analyzes transitionality in three manifestations: first, in Américo Paredes as a native son of the border; second, in the corrido “Valentín de la Sierra” (a Mexican “Cristero” corrido that crosses the border not as a tale of a religious uprising, but in the hero’s profile as a brave man who responds to his captors with defiance);<sup>6</sup> and, third, in the expressive culture and verbal routines of Mexican American children in Austin, Texas, as studied through the Texas Children’s Folklore Project when McDowell was a graduate student in the University of Texas. An essay of insights and confident analysis, McDowell’s is a reflection on Paredes’ *romance of the border*, understood as “an idyll of an unbroken past” of family and community, webbed and unified by communal sociability and by the *décima* tradition, the poetic form of social cohesion and index of a complex literate culture, thus not reduced to the rustic and semi-literate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The film adaptation of the corrido “Valentín de la Sierra” (directed by René Cardona Sr., 1968), with a cast that includes Antonio Aguilar, Lola Beltrán, and Jorge Martínez de Hoyos, takes place during the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). The film portrays Valentín de la Sierra as a symptom of a growing revolutionary sentiment among the Mexican peasantry and *ranchero* society. The themes are akin to Tejano border culture in terms of filial reverence and piety; for instance, Valentín’s father (performed by Mexican actor Jorge Martínez de Hoyos) orders his son to fight Díaz’s dictatorship on the side of Mexico’s poor, and to leave him to his fate to be shot by the *federales*. Valentín, on the contrary, shoots *federales* and dies riddled by bullets, while his father escapes. Prior to his death, Valentín listens to a corrido composed in his honor (and sung by Lola Beltrán), thus fulfilling his death as told by the corrido, but set in the time of Mexico’s revolutionary era and not during the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1928).

<sup>7</sup> Paredes’ claimed birthright to a literate class finds expression repeatedly in “A Family Autobiography,” a 77-page memoir and collective history that constitutes most of chapter 2 in Saldivar’s book (2006). In his account of the writing and editing of “*With His Pistol in His Hand*,” Paredes thanks his editor for tightening his manuscript, and yet it is evident that another “conflict” or distinction of a social nature, had been erased, namely: the literate *mexicano* with the eloquence and enabling education to compose *décimas*, in contrast to the farmer with access only to an oral tradition. Recalling the editing of his manuscript prior to publication, Paredes expresses a resigned agreement to the excision: “in the original manuscript, I had included a lot of discussion on the *décima* and other things that really did not belong” (113). Recalling his father as a tamer of horses, his four rebellions, and the resentful memory of family lands that had been taken away from him by white Americans, Paredes is very clear that his father “was never a

The *corrido*, on the other hand (a genre that occupied Paredes' interest as a folklore scholar), acquired its historical meaning as the cultural expression of the "intrusive disturbance" of Anglo invaders and the guitar-strummed resistance of Texas-Mexican border folk. Guiding the reader through three paths that allow for the fruitful crossing into the work of Américo Paredes, McDowell concludes with a claim: Paredes is our perceptive guide to the interplay and transitionality of the border's cultural possibilities for retreat or going across.

Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita look closely at Paredes' notion of "Greater Mexico" and maintain that it is a cultural construct that is often misinterpreted as having only one meaning, proposing instead that such notion in Paredes' life and work evolved over four decades (1950s-199s), with different meanings, and in response to historically-diverse situations that stem from life experiences and conflicted identities in a specific region: the South Texas border area. Viewed from a contemporary position, Sánchez and Pita affirm that the construct of Greater Mexico has ceased to relate to persons not born on the border or not first-generation persons of Mexican origin. The confusion stems, both critics claim, from an ideological interpretation by cultural nationalists who portrayed Chicanos as carriers of a quintessential "Mexican culture" and thus no longer emerging out of a specific and historically-determined regional situation. From such theoretical premises, Sánchez and Pita develop a broad study of Paredes' *corrido* scholarship ("*With His Pistol in His Hand*"); his novels (e.g., *George Washington Gómez*); short stories ("The Hammon and the Beans," "Ichiro Kikuchi,"); and poetry ("Alma Pocha," "Tres Faces del Pocho" and, among others, "The Four Freedoms"), examined with a will toward "totality" through the organizing concept of the essay's subtitle: conflicted identities.<sup>8</sup> Sánchez's and Pita's all-

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farmer or anything of that sort" (76). Thus, the deletion of "a lot of discussion" of the *décima* tradition from "With His Pistol in His Hand" could be considered a loss to one's knowledge of turn of the century border Mexican society with its own hierarchy and sense of cultural heritage that was not inferior to the culture of white Americans.

<sup>8</sup> In discourses of totality and conflicted identities in relation to the identity of the *Pocho*, the name of Mexican American writer José Antonio Villarreal should not be ignored; after all, his first novel bears said question of identity on its title: *Pocho* (1959). Other noteworthy Mexican Americans have also been ignored by the Chicano generation. José Limón observes that Henry B. González's "sharp criticism of the Chicano Movement of the 1960" has possibly resulted in the absence of a book-length study of González--a war veteran like Villarreal, and governor of Texas in 1958. This neglect, Limón notes, is probably due to the Chicano Movement "which continues to have a dominant influence on

embracing study is thus a meticulous critical act in its deconstructive and historicizing scope, mostly on Paredes' own work, but at times on significant scholarship. For instance, Ramón Saldivar's book on Paredes (2006) is viewed as being overly immersed in theoretical discourses on globalism that locate in Paredes' construct of Greater Mexico the seeds of a "transnational imaginary" and a post-modern, post-national, fissured subject, therefore alien to the region-specific and experiential trajectories of Tejanos in the South Texas border.

Alfredo Mirandé's essay draws our attention to Américo Paredes' notion of "the politics of ethnography," and to his warning to ethnographers doing research on minority communities: on the one hand, the ethnographic data should not be interpreted literally, but rather as a performance, thus as a staged act by members of the minority community, or by a competent user of language with vested interests of his or her own who might want to playact and deceive the ethnographer (a "trickster"). Secondly--and to obfuscate matters even more--the ethnographer may carry unconscious negative stereotypes of the group under study, thus profoundly vitiating the ethnographic work. The fundamental question thus turns on the possibility of an ethnography of minority communities to be done only by cultural insiders--or is it open to outsiders as well? Building on Paredes' theoretical advice, Mirandé elaborates on similar views from a constellation of ethnographic cases done in different world locations, from Los Angeles and Mexico City to Manila, and found in the research of ethnographers such as José López Morín, Clifford Geertz, Renato Rosaldo and, among others, Beverly Newbold Chiñas. Within such a detailed ethnographic work set on a global scale, Mirandé expounds a sample of his folkloric work on a minority community: his long-term study of the Muxes of Juchitán, an indigenous third gender in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico. Juchitán is well-known for its culture of assertive and dominant females, and as a cultural and geographic area associated with migratory and trade routes since ancient Mesoamerican times, with distinct female lineages known for royal prestige and dynastic power.<sup>9</sup>

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contemporary Mexican-American Studies" (see his essay in this book, footnote 4). For my own critique of ideological readings of Rudolfo Anaya's narrative see my 1990 article, and my 2012 essay on José Antonio Villarreal's life and work.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed commentary on the history of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and that of local women rulers notorious since Mesoamerican times for their power and authority not observed in women in Aztec or Maya dynasties, see Carrasco (Vol. 1, 2001: 428). For gender roles in Mesoamerican societies, particularly in the Juchitán area, and its history of defiant uprisings, see Carrasco (Vol. 3, 2001: 192).

Mirandé's study is based on the Isthmus' third gender, and on individual interviews with Muxes or with Muxe family members, community residents, and with gay men so as to differentiate their views from that of the Muxes. How to make sense of the general acceptance in the Isthmus society of a "third gender" when societies in modern Mexico and the United States are defined by residual homophobic sentiments? A good storyteller himself, Mirandé develops a detailed account of his ethnographic work among the Muxes of Juchitán, and "performs" with irony and subtle jest the insight or end result of his research: it was not primarily the community under study that revealed its secrets, but those of his own self as an ethnographer, reaching his moment of self-knowledge and truth while admitting to his discomfort--that is to say, to the inscription of his "unconscious negative stereotypes"--with the Muxes' lack of punctuality, their undependability in relation to appointments, and to how his questions oftentimes led to playful and bawdy responses from Muxe respondents. As Mirandé reflects back on his work, he admits that "despite the fact that I am *mexicano* and speak Spanish, I was clearly an outsider who did not fully understand the local culture and language." Mirandé's "performative" lesson: the Other remains opaque and distant; the ethnographer (when lucky), returns home consciously and imaginatively transformed, thus as an Other.

From Américo Paredes' wide-array of ethnographic interests, María Herrera-Sobek spotlights humor and jokelore in *Uncle Remus con Chile* (1993), Paredes' book based on his bilingual and bicultural fieldwork in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The Tejano joking sessions, called "tallas" (derived from *tallar*, meaning to chafe, rub, and thus to tease), form a folkloric genre similar to the *caso*, a "happening" or event experienced by the storyteller. The joking sessions in this book by Paredes are composed of fifty-four male and three female participants, all from the Texas-Mexican border, but with Mexican nationals "from the other side" (Mexico). Herrera-Sobek analyzes the jokelore in *Uncle Remus con Chile* as humor that functions through irony and satire as a form of resistance and self-preservation in hostile political conditions in which Mexicans and Mexican Americans found themselves after the United States-Mexican War of 1846-1848. Jokelore, therefore, operates as a folk-level critical response to transnational and transracial discourses that have festered--and continue to divide--the United States, as manifested in the current White House administration. In her comprehensive critical study of *Uncle Remus con Chile*, Herrera-Sobek examines Paredes' jokelore through the lenses of Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), and of Derrick Bell's critical race theory applied at first by faculty and

students in NYU Law School, and soon thereafter by black, Latino, feminist, and LGBT scholars. The approach is revealing as it sheds light on important tenets in critical race theory that are pertinent to Paredes' analysis of race, class and ethnicity, both in Tejano jokelore and in the Uncle Remus folkloric tradition. As Herrera-Sobek illustrates, the Uncle Remus tradition is associated with African Americans and the racial prejudices among white Americans toward minorities in general. *Uncle Remus con Chile* is thus a triangulation of long-standing white American racial attitudes and prejudicial relations with blacks and Mexican Americans, written with an emphasis on 217 jokelore narratives spiced with a culinary metaphor: "chile" or "hot pepper" representing Mexicans. Herrera-Sobek commandingly guides the reader through the examples of wit, humor, and the razor sharp folk irony in Paredes' *Uncle Remus con Chile*. Herrera-Sobek concludes with two major claims: first, that Paredes' scholarship on the corrido, the jest, folk-naming, and folk food served the Texas Mexican community as extraordinary expressive means to unmask and challenge racism and any other form of discrimination; secondly, that Paredes transformed folklore studies from a field that viewed folklore as the sustenance of a group's equilibrium and the maintenance of the social system, into a crucial distinct perspective: namely, that Mexican American folklore in Texas was the result of a cultural conflict stemming from the US-Mexican War and of "two differential and stratified communities that [have] existed uncomfortably side by side."<sup>10</sup> Or, to cite one of Paredes' references to other border traditions (e.g., the ballad of Wallace), analogous to *tejano* border conflicts: "there was once 'a seed sown'" (1958: 107).

Monika Kaup's pioneering essay takes as its point of departure the Lower Rio Grande border *corrido* and the *corrido* hero in the work of Américo Paredes, and argues for a globalization of this expressive

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<sup>10</sup> Delineating the rise of Nazi Germany as a defining moment for Border Mexicans, Paredes considers the Second World War as the materialization of Lincoln's dreams of reconstruction and democracy for all Americans, including Texas-Mexicans: "Until the rise of Hitler in Germany and the beginning of World War II, a majority of Border Mexicans continued to think of themselves as a people apart [...] But with the advent of World War II greater numbers of north-bank Borderers began to think of themselves seriously as Americans. Like *the unreconstructed Southerner--whom he resembled in some respects--the Border Mexican was surprised to find that the peoples of Europe and the Pacific thought of him as just another American. In World War II, the Anglo-Texan and the Texas-Mexican fought in the same units against a common foe, an enemy whose acts in Europe made the worst Ranger painted by Border folklore look like an amateur"* (1958: 106-107, my emphasis).

tradition because it has crossed beyond border limits in its contemporary offshoots and afterlives: the *narcocorrido* and the *narconovela*. The intent is to see the *corrido* not as historically unchanging and a mere folkloric curiosity, but as a popular expression with its own dialectical force and will to cultural adaptability to a world with a harrowing drug traffic, social violence, and a growing number of people dependent on drugs. Paredes' scholarly studies of the Border *corrido* rested on the premise of cultural necessity and adaptation from the Spanish *romance* to the Lower Rio Grande border *corrido*, with one of its branching expressions being the *tequilero corrido*, with portrayals of smugglers as a representative voice in the border discourse of intercultural conflict. Kaup's comprehensive study takes us through Paredes' major works--the *Cancionero*, *George Washington Gómez*, *The Shadow*, folklore publications, and "*With His Pistol in His Hand*"--individually but as part of a totality in Paredes' publications, globalized and re-interpreted from the viewpoint of information systems, narco-theory, and literary theory (e.g., Manuel Castells, Juan Villoro, Northrop Frye, Georg Lukács) in relation to the recent history of drug traffic in Latin America and its literary representations in *narcocorridos* and *narconovelas*. With this layered and well-grounded analysis, Kaup turns our attention to Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* (2011), and Victor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* (2009), two significant *narconovelas* that, through an extraordinary mix of realism, fiction, and myth, take the reader into the world of drug lords and the people who form part of their "kingdom" and distribution network. Kaup's analysis is an exemplary case of interdisciplinary criticism, versed in folklore studies, literary interpretation, theoretical analysis, and documentary research.

In the book's concluding essay, Omar Valerio-Jiménez recalls that while majoring in engineering he felt the need to know more about the history of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas and northeastern Mexico, where he grew up. A chance encounter brought him to the work of Américo Paredes, who was also born in this border region. This fateful encounter led to a career change: Valerio-Jiménez found his calling in history at the University of California, Los Angeles. As part of his graduate studies, he pored over Paredes' scholarship on the border *corrido* with a research emphasis on political ideology, ethnic identity, and nationalism expressed in such folk genre on behalf of *tejanos* (Mexican Texans), and *mexicanos* (Mexican citizens) during the nineteenth century, but with background historical documentation of the region dating back to the eighteenth century. The fruitful outcome was his book *River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (2013). Valerio-Jiménez reflects his on Paredes' work and on his own major

findings, with an analysis of several corridos that date back to the nineteenth century in the South Texas border region. The critical force in Valerio-Jiménez' essay converges on historical context, biography (corrido heroes), and on the Mexican Texans' experience after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, with contested citizenship, transnational ties, and intercultural conflict as the fundamental political and social relations in Texas that were determined and ruled by a history of violence, dispossession, and resistance.<sup>11</sup> Valerio-Jiménez dwells critically and insightfully on corridos sung in honor and memory of three historical figures: Juan N. Cortina, Ignacio Zaragoza, and Ulysses S. Grant. First recovered and analyzed by Américo Paredes, these corridos are now re-

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<sup>11</sup> There were American voices against the U.S. war of aggression against Mexico. In his "Speech in the U.S. House of Representatives on the War with Mexico" (12 January 1848), Abraham Lincoln argued that President James K. Polk's declared war against Mexico had been unnecessary and unconstitutional, further declaring that the justification of the war based on the hostilities allegedly initiated by Mexico, and the much-lamented American blood spilled on U.S. soil, had been "the sheerest deception" by President Polk (1989: 162). Lincoln followed with a demand that President Polk answer to the American people with the truth, as is fitting in a democracy where moral integrity and accountability are of paramount importance: "Let him answer fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with *facts*, and not with arguments. Let him remember he sits where Washington sat, and so remembering, let him answer, as Washington would answer [...] And if, so answering, he can show that the soil was ours, where the first blood of the war was shed--that it was not within an inhabited country [...] then I am with him for his justification [...] But if he *can* not, or *will* not do this--if on any pretense, or no pretense, he shall refuse or omit it, then I shall be fully convinced of what I more than suspect already, that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong--that he feels the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him" (168). Doris Kearns Goodwin interprets Lincoln's quest for distinction in his speech on the Mexican war and President Polk's actions as having been motivated by his freshman congressman's condition, yet indicates that in "the years ahead, Lincoln would write frequent letters defending his position" (122). Paredes has left a record of the mob rule and injustices on Border Mexicans at the hands of white Americans that took place shortly after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: "After 1848 the Nueces-Rio Grande Area--the northern half of the former province of Nuevo Santander--became part of the United States. A pre-Civil War type of carpetbagger moved into the territory to make his fortune, using the Texas legend as his excuse for preying on the newly created Americans of Mexican descent. The Mexican's cattle were killed or stolen. The Mexican was forced to sell his land; and if he did not, his widow usually did after her husband was 'executed' for alleged cattle rustling. Thus did the great Texas ranches and the American cattle industry begin" (1958: 134).

examined under a different lens by Valerio-Jiménez as testimonies of nineteenth-century *tejanos* and their embodiment of multiple identities, regional pride, and nationalist sympathies both to the United States and Mexico. The determining factors in *the tejano* consciousness were thus plural and transnational: (1) the post-annexation trauma experiences of violence and the criminalization of innocent *tejanos* and Mexicans; (2) the dispossession of *tejano* lands; (3) Mexico's war against French intervention; and (4) the US Civil War in which *tejanos* participated, some in favor of the Union, some on the side of the Confederacy. This last national conflict brought to the minds of *tejanos* the unresolved issues in the United States, such as slavery, citizenship, and political participation. According to Valerio-Jiménez, after the US Civil War the folk genre known as the border corrido began to flourish in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas and in northeastern Mexico, with the hero fighting for his citizenship rights "with his pistol in his hand."

*Border Folk Balladeers: Critical Studies on Américo Paredes* sees the light of day thanks to the selfless mediation of a group of people that I would now like to thank. On top of the list, my heartfelt gratitude goes to the eleven contributors for their unceasing faith in this project and for their forbearance during the protracted editorial process that, at long last, has resulted in our tribute to Américo Paredes. I have no doubt that he would have been very delighted with the exceptional and richly varied essays that reinterpret his scholarly work, narrative fiction, and poetry from different disciplines and through diverse theoretical methods. I am also very grateful to Malaquías Montoya and his wife Lezlie Montoya for allowing me to illustrate the book's cover with his painting "Tierra Nuestra," so fitting in a book on Américo Paredes. I thank also the anonymous reviewers who generously accepted the task of reading the essays with expert eyes, promptly responding according to set deadlines. My extended thanks to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their professional and efficient editorial assistance, above all to Victoria Carruthers, my liaison with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and to the welcoming and remarkable team formed by Hannah Fletcher, Sean Hawley, Amanda Millar, Courtney Blades, and Adam Rummens. My acknowledged debt and gratitude to Velia Murillo, the Administrative Support Coordinator in the Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies, at California State University, Los Angeles, for her unwavering and effective assistance in copying the essays on more than one occasion. Lastly, but most considerably, I thank my wife Elvira, and our three musically-inclined children--Victoria Guadalupe, Isabel, and Roberto--for the happiness they bring daily into my life.

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**PART ONE:**

**BORDER THEORY AND THE LEGACY  
OF AMÉRICO PAREDES**

AMÉRICO PAREDES,  
WALTER PRESCOTT WEBB,  
AND THE ANTINOMIES OF THEORY

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I recall my first reading of Américo Paredes' *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), and the delight I experienced at the satirical but deeply influential criticisms Paredes levied against the writings of Walter Prescott Webb. I especially remember the remarks about Webb's "disparaging" statements about Mexicans, and Paredes wondering what direction his comments might have taken if not buffered by their academic context (17). I was unfamiliar with Webb's work, but it did not matter; Webb represented, for me, the entire anti-Mexican establishment I experienced growing up in South Texas. Finally, I thought, in this somewhat innocuous, if not (seemingly) apolitical text, was a rejoinder I could read and relish.

Recently, I began to think more critically about Webb's historical writings. How, I thought, could an intellectual figure with such a broad historical view have been so narrow in his understanding of Texas Mexicans. My reflections have left me with two thoughts. First, I have come to realize that Paredes and Webb are more closely aligned in their work than I previously understood; and second, this alignment could only be understood when Paredes, Webb, and their intellectual projects are reformulated through the axis of a third element, the social and ideological forces of modernity, or in its local inflection that I have termed the Texas Modern. I will present, in part, an argument for reconsidering the relationship between Paredes and Webb from one shaped primarily by ethnic and racial conflict to one founded on different understandings of and responses to modernity. It is my suggestion, therefore, and the thesis of this essay, that we cannot understand the relationship between Paredes and Webb without fully engaging the implications and limitations of the intellectual and social underpinnings of their work.

In juxtaposing the work of Paredes and Webb, I want also to suggest another, if not more critical, agenda: the production of knowledge in the

present. A task of intellectual recuperation, as this one is, requires that our findings not remain a project of the past but a reframing and re-evaluation of our work in the present. If, as I hope to demonstrate, the work of Paredes and Webb represents two distinct, even oppositional, moments in the production of knowledge in modernity, what might those of us working today learn about our own intellectual engagements.

## **The Texas Modern**

Modernity, as a process that underscores the transition from a previous set of values and practices to one reorganized through a set of scientific, routinized, and rational ideologies, is a complex social process. This process resulted from the attempts of numerous writers, philosophers, intellectuals and others to free the world from the confines of “tradition,” to establish scientific rationalism in place of “magic” and “superstition,” to understand and control “nature,” and to organize society through rationalized bureaucratic institutions. While it is clear that these achievements developed in uneven stages and, by some accounts, are still in process, it is also clear that these occurrences brought both promise and tragedy. One of the primary engines of modernity is capitalism, with its incessant drive toward the creation of new markets and its incorporation of earlier productive practices and relations into its guiding principles of wage labor, surplus value and commodity fetishism. While pointing to capitalism as an “essential” ingredient of the modern, I want also to clarify that modernity refuses linear or causal explanation and is better understood as a “complex structure” of multiple and uneven events, forces, practices, and ideologies that emerge in their own time and place and through the rhythm of their own development.<sup>1</sup>

As a way of understanding not only the general development of the modern but more so its local inflections, I want to introduce what I refer to as the Texas Modern. Yet even as I move to localize such a complex process as modernity I must also claim that we can delineate further the notion of the Texas Modern into various regional, temporal, and socially-distributed Texas modernities. While such a project is necessary, I will for this paper, refer only to the Texas Modern.

The Texas Modern is in fact much more textual and nuanced than the mere incantation of capitalism, technology, and reification. In fact, as I have written about it, the Texas Modern, like other social and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> My discussion of modernity is influenced by a number of theorists on the subject, including but not limited to Berman (1982) and Habermas (1989).

movements of modernity, consisted of a systematic "dismantling" of an earlier Mexican way of life, along with its values and social practices, and the reorganization of this society through new forces. This dismantling is key, I offer, for it suggest and points to the critical notion of "dissolution." The changes wrought by the Texas Modern were in fact two-sided: they brought about the dissolution of a Mexican cultural arrangement and its reorganization through the forces of new rational and technological social processes.<sup>2</sup>

Key to the transformations underscored by the Texas Modern can be found in what occurred between 1880 and 1900: the closing of the range made possible by the introduction of barb wire, the arrival of the railroad, and the beginning of commercial farming. After 1900, spurred on by increased immigration from Mexico, these changes accelerated, leading to increased social pressure and conflict.

Modernity, therefore, and the Texas Modern in particular, restructured a Mexican ranching culture into one where commercial farming, based on wage labor, agricultural technology, and the bureaucratic institutions of the state, wedded to the emergence of Jim Crow segregation, led to the vast displacement of Mexican workers and the erosion of a Mexican ranching way of life.

One key feature of the Texas Modern is the explicit racial or ethnic conflation between a previous *Mexicano* social order and a new Texan economic arrangement. This results in the conflation of Mexican with what is old, foreign, and folkloric and the reimagining of Texan with the new, civilized, and cultured. At this point it is important to return to the work of Paredes and Webb and reconsider their writing through the analytic rubric of modernity.

### Corridos and Honor

Looking at the work of Paredes I will begin with the Lower Border corrido, a popular expressive form found on the Texas-Mexican border. It is no accident that Paredes marks the highpoint of Lower Border corrido production and performance between 1860 and 1930, a period coterminous with the rise of modernity in Texas. Paredes even isolates a special genre, that of the "corrido of border conflict" (1958) as one that emerges in direct response to the changes effected in this period of transformation.

As I began wading through the various ways of understanding this genre of Mexican folk song it occurred to me that one of the constant but

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaborated discussion of the Texas Modern see Flores (2002).

seldom discussed features of the corrido revolved around the notion of honor. In this case, however, honor does not merely reference a personal position or a particular practice but is a social frame through which a way of living and its constituent social relations are inflected. Honor invokes a series of practices that themselves mark a set of relationships, formalized according to a set of principles, patriarchy for one, that constitutes a tightly woven social construct. Here I want to suggest that one of the deeper structures at play in the corrido, and hence one of the signs of an encroaching modernity to which the corrido is a response, turns on the changing cultural and material practices known to us through the notion of honor.

Let me begin my discussion of honor with the story of Gregorio Cortez. I suggest that this story--from which we get the ballad, Paredes's monograph, and later the movie--is deeply structured by a lived sense of honor. Most tellings of the events of 1901 report the incidents that led to the shooting of Sheriff Glover by Cortez as one based on a problem of translation and miscommunication: Cortez when asked if he had traded a horse responded that he had not because he had in fact traded a mare. But the unspoken background of this encounter is that such an interrogation, in front of his family, challenges Cortez's honor. The claims made about Andalusian honor by Julian Pitt-Rivers (1966) also hold for South Texas: "[A] physical affront is a dishonour, regardless of the moral issues involved, and creates a situation in which the honor of the affronted person is in jeopardy and requires 'satisfaction' if it is to return to its normal condition" (26). In a world structured by honor, a man accused so boldly and publicly would take such an accusation as an affront to his entire social world. Add this to the fact that Sheriff Glover pulls a gun, adding physical threat to social insult, Cortez is left with little latitude but to defend his brother, his family, and his honor. Let's listen to the words of Paredes on this point:

For Gregorio Cortez was not of your noisy, hell-raising type. That was not his way. He always spoke low, and he was always *polite*, whomever he was speaking to. And when he spoke to men *older than himself he took off his hat* and held it *over his heart*. A man who *never raised his voice to parent or elder brother, and never disobeyed*. That was Gregorio Cortez, and that was the way men were in this country along the river. That was the way they were before these *modern times came*, and God went away. (35-36)

The depth of this passage, I offer, mostly escapes our twenty-first century sensibilities. The behaviors used to describe Cortez are not merely actions

of respect but deeply implicated social gestures that mark a larger arrangement of social comportment. Removing one's hat and speaking in hushed tones to elders marks a certain social posture and way of life. These are not empty markers but profoundly charged signs. And, as if to anticipate this very discussion, we find Paredes pointing to "these modern times," as the very force that set in motion the dissolution of the social practices of honor and issuing forth the period when "God went away." There is other evidence for this position as well; earlier in this text we find the following:

In the summer of 1954 I was present while a tough inspector of rural police questioned some suspects in a little south-bank Border town. He was sitting carelessly in his chair, smoking a cigarette, when he heard his father's voice in an outer room. The man straightened up in his chair, hurriedly threw his cigarette out the window, and fanned away the smoke with his hat before turning back to the prisoners. (12)

While I had read these words before, their cultural meaning lay at some distance. Honor, in its modernist form, is valued as a personal virtue. This is not so for Cortez, and the corrido community of South Texas, for whom honor is a highly public rubric that mediates self, family and the wider community.<sup>3</sup>

Paredes's concern with honor is not limited to the corrido but can be found in other areas of his scholarship,<sup>4</sup> in particular his essay "The United States, Mexico, and *Machismo*" (1993). For Paredes, the contemporary American understanding of *macho* serves as a debasement of its more organic associations in traditional societies. He states: "There is no evidence that machismo (in the exaggerated forms that have been studied and condemned in Mexicans) ever existed in Mexico before the Revolution" (233). Here, Paredes is referring to the emergence, both in the US and in Mexico, of an exaggerated manliness connected to the rise of nationalism. In the United States and Mexico, machismo has become "artificial," which is to say, a key expressive practice devoid of its social

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, Berger, Berger, and Kellner (1973:83) agree when they claim: "The obsolescence of the concept of honor is revealed very sharply in the inability of most contemporaries to understand insult, which in essence is an assault to honor."

<sup>4</sup> Paredes' understanding of honor also shapes his response to the film "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez." He commented, on more than one occasion, that the jail scene that depicts Cortez wailing for his family would never have taken place. Cortez was, in his words, a man of honor who would not conduct himself as such in public.