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Américo Paredes and His Audiences

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Américo Paredes and His Audiences

Dr. Lyon Rathbun

While scholars recognize that Américo Paredes addresses various audiences, they have not systematically discussed the communities of readers that Paredes consistently addressed as a public figure. Throughout his career, Paredes reached out to geographically opposite and culturally different audiences situated to the south and to the north of what he called "Greater Mexico." He reached out to these divergent secondary audiences as an extension of his central ambition to restore historical memory and political agency to his own Mexican-American community. While Paredes became a beloved cultural spokesperson for his own Mexican-American community, he acted as a cultural intermediary in addressing his secondary Mexican and Anglo audiences.

Scholars generally recognize that Américo Paredes's genius was rooted in his ability to cross cultural boundaries and to recognize the permeability of those boundaries. The very title of Ramón Saldívar's magisterial study, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*, suggests Saldívar's central thesis, that by crossing cultural boundaries, in a variety of directions, Paredes developed his "transnational" conception of "Greater Mexico." Likewise, in "Paredes, Guiding Force in Transcending Boundaries," Olga Nájera-Ramírez asserts that by constantly engaging borders, Paredes developed "a critical double vision that generated copious innovative theoretical insights" (69). Saldívar, Nájera-Ramírez, and other scholars appreciate how the content of Paredes's insights were rooted in his transcultural experience and imagination. However, they have not directly addressed how Paredes's hybrid cultural experience determined the various audiences that he sought to reach throughout his life as a writer and public intellectual.

Saldívar, and many other Chicano scholars, have good reason to assume that Paredes was writing for them. In working so consistently to raise up the historical memory of the South Texas borderlands, Paredes was, most immediately, writing for his own community.

Describing his intentions in writing *With a Pistol in His Hand*, Paredes explained in an interview, "To use legal terms, perhaps not correctly, I was writing a brief. I was being an advocate for my people. Enough had been said about them negatively that I wanted to point to

the exceptions, the remarkable ways in which their communities held together under great external pressures from discrimination and other social injustices” (Saldívar 70). Moreover, Paredes did personally inspire a great number of important Chicano scholars, such as Ramón Saldívar, José Límon, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Manuel Medrano, and many others. Yet these scholars, who received a kind of blessing through the attention that Paredes bestowed upon them, would be the first to acknowledge that Paredes was always seeking to reach an array of audiences. Indeed, Saldívar, Nájera-Ramírez, and others have been attentive to Paredes’s efforts to reach diverse audiences, especially academic and Spanish-speaking audiences.¹ But they have not described how Paredes’s efforts to reach disparate audiences extended from his ambition to restore historical memory and political agency to his own Mexican-American community.

Paredes’s life-long effort to understand himself and his community compelled him to address Spanish-speaking audiences south of the border and a broad, English-speaking, audience in the United States. After all, the Mexican-American community that comprised “Greater Mexico” blended south into Mexico, and north into the heartland of the United States. In writing *for* “Greater Mexico” Paredes needed to simultaneously address the broader audiences who extended out from the border-land into which he had been born. In reaching out to these secondary audiences, Paredes was acting as a cultural intermediary, bringing salient features of South Texas border culture to the attention of an increasingly broad readership. Acting as a cultural intermediary on behalf of readers who resided south and north of “Greater Mexico” was part of his effort to win recognition that the South Texas border-land is integral to the broader mosaic of American life.

Paredes’s efforts to reach geographically opposite and culturally different audiences cannot be fully understood without appreciating the circumstances of his early life. From a very

early age, Paredes was oriented south, towards Mexico. As a young man, alienated by the Jim Crow subordination of Mexican-Americans in Texas, Paredes thought of himself as Mexican. Late in life, he explained, “My brother and his friends made me think of myself as a Mexican rather than a Mexican-American. At the time, I thought of myself as *mexicano* who happened to be living in Texas” (Saldívar 125). Américo Paredes was born into a family that had long been active in Mexican politics. His grandfather had fought against the French in the 1860s; his father had moved to Brownsville, Texas, leaving several brothers in Tamaulipas, after joining the Catarino Garza revolt against Díaz in 1891. Until Américo Paredes was fourteen, he preferred to spend his summers working and playing on his uncle Vicente’s ranch, located outside of Matamoros, where he soaked up the stories and songs that he would dedicate his life to appreciating and understanding. “Everyone had little boats hidden in the reeds,” Paredes later recalled. “We would stay there [his uncle’s ranch] for three months living like a Mexican, listening to the old people tell their stories . . . there I was living in another world” (Medrano 12). These experiences were so deeply woven into Paredes’s consciousness that he dedicated *With a Pistol in His Hand* to the memory of his father’s adventures with Catarino Garza; likewise, he dedicated *Texas Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* to the storytellers and balladeers he had heard as an adolescent on his uncle’s ranch.

With the outbreak of World War Two, Paredes was so rankled by “the way *mexicanos* were treated in Texas and the rest of the Southwest,” that he was tempted by the urgings of friends “to renounce my US citizenship and become a Mexican citizen.” But Paredes was as repelled by the arrogance of Mexican nationals as by the jingoism of North Americans. “I wasn’t exactly taken,” Paredes recalled dryly, “by what I saw of Mexican nationalism either” (Saldívar 91). Angered by Mexican snobbery, but tied to his own Mexican heritage, Paredes

would feel an enduring urge to explain himself, and his mixed cultural heritage, to Mexican audiences. But Paredes also felt an urgency to address English-speaking audiences as well.

Spending his summers in Mexico, Paredes was attending English-speaking schools in Brownsville, where he began seizing every opportunity for self-expression that Brownsville could offer. Even as he embraced his Mexican heritage, Paredes was intent on mastering the English language. “The protest writer that I knew best when I was a boy,” Paredes remembered, “was Perales, who wrote *En defense de mi raza* in Spanish. Who read it? Spanish-speaking Mexicans. It didn’t affect the Anglos. I thought that was the reason that I had to write in English. I was trying to read a wider audience” (Saldívar 141). As a high school student, Paredes was already intent on earning a Ph.D. in English at the University of Texas at Austin (Medrano 20). Throughout his adolescence and early adulthood, Paredes was grooming himself, as a journalist, poet, performer, and scholar, to reach English-speaking audiences. Oriented in contradictory directions, Paredes eventually learned to embrace the opposing sides of his heritage and identity. It was through inventing the character Guálinto in *George Washington Gómez* that Paredes first developed his notion, which would become central to his later scholarly writing, those individuals, and whole cultures, could be a composite of identities that do not necessarily fit harmoniously together. Looking back, Paredes explained,

I refer to it as a checkerboard of consciousness. The idea came really from my own experiences on the border. Now if I had been born on the Mexican side, never having much to do with Anglos and Anglo-American culture, I might indeed have been able to experience myself as only one personality, even if it was a personality hostile to Anglo America. But even as a young boy, I had daily contact with that other world, especially through my school teachers. Some of

them, whom I loved, showed me a great deal of respect, and affection even.

(Saldívar 136)

Paredes's "checkerboard of conscience" was at first a painful existential burden. But as Paredes began finding his voice as a writer, the ability to see into the cultural worlds lying on either side of his border community became an asset, the basis of his deepest intellectual insights – and of his impulse to reach diametrically opposite audiences. Paredes was able to develop his hybrid view of the world because he had experienced some nurturing from both the Mexican and the Anglo sides of his heritage, an anomaly that occurred because he had grown up within the blended cultural milieu of Brownsville, Tx. – Matamoros, Mex.

Even as the population of Brownsville has been continually replenished with a steady stream of new arrivals from the interiors of both Mexico and the United States, the city also had numerous Hispanic families – the Zavaletas, the Paredes, the Garzas, the Ballis, the Treviños – that still have branches on both sides of the river and roots stretching back to colonial times. And some Anglo families, like the Stillmans, have been in Brownsville since the late 1840s. The city has been shaped by the historical development of both Mexico and the United States and has been distinguished by a significant degree of accommodation between the landed Hispanic families and newly arriving Anglos (Montenegro 35). In 1936, cities across Texas celebrated the state's Centennial with collective expressions of state pride that included disparaging depictions of Mexicans as the racially stunted counterpoint to Anglo-Texan progress (González 29-66). In contrast, the city fathers of Brownsville inaugurated Charro Days, a holiday recognizing the city's Hispanic heritage. Other Texan cities found collective identity through contrasting themselves to the alien Mexican "Other." In Brownsville, citizens established a public identity through commemorating the cultural legacy that Brownsville shares with its sister-city, Matamoros. Despite being part of the Jim Crow South, the sister-city

of Matamoros could not deny its own bi-cultural heritage. Paredes himself participated in the first Charro Days festival in 1937, singing with his first wife, Chelo Silva, at the El Jardín Hotel (Medrano 32). While immediate family and friends kept him connected to Mexico, Anglo educators and journalists in Brownsville encouraged him to complete his education, to write, and to publish his work.

One of the teachers instrumental in helping Américo Paredes enter college was the Anglo dean of Brownsville Junior College, J.W. “Red” Irvine, who also served as principal of Brownsville High School. Late in his life, Paredes recalled:

Well, school ends and I get my high school diploma. That was it; nowhere to go. I was standing on a street in Brownsville with other kids, not looking for trouble, just standing around waiting for it to come around, I guess. But the dean and the principal drove by in a little Chevy with a rumble seat. And he saw me, stopped and backed up. It was late June and he called, and I went up and he said, “Are you going to college? I said no I don’t have the money, And he said, did you apply for a student assistantship? I told him, what’s that?” (Medrano 18)

Mr. Irvine instructed Paredes to submit a letter of application and arranged a campus job for Paredes that paid his \$150 semester tuition.

Paredes credited Mr. Irvine, and his two years at Brownsville Community College, with launching his writing career and developing the confidence to later begin his graduate studies at UT Austin. Paredes admitted, “I would not have had the guts, if I may say, if I had not had those two years of junior college, courtesy of Red Irvine” (Medrano 43).

Upon graduating from community college, Paredes began writing seriously, drafting *George Washington Gómez*, and also publishing articles, and even some poems, in the *Brownsville Herald*. The paper’s Anglo editor, Hart Stilwell, befriended Paredes, and exposed him, for the

first time, to the high literature of the interwar era. Paredes later remembered that “It was after I finished *George Washington Gómez* that Hart Stilwell, the editor of the *Brownsville Herald*, loaned me a few books. It was only then that I first learned about Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Wolfe, and Russian writers in the late 1930s and 1940s” (Saldívar 133). Implicitly, Stilwell held Paredes’s intellectual acuity and creativity in high regard. Paredes recalled that while Stilwell was himself writing a novel titled *Border City*, about the early labor movement in south Texas, “Stilwell was constantly trying to pick my mind for ideas for the book” (Saldívar 92).

One cannot imagine a Mexican-Texan publishing articles in a Waco, Texas, newspaper in the mid-1930s, any more than one could imagine a young black man of that era writing for a city newspaper in Mobile, Alabama.² Yet nothing seems out of joint envisioning Paredes reporting for *The Brownsville Herald*, where he wrote articles about Charro Days, bullfighting and Mexican-style rodeos, *Charreadas*, that displayed the exquisite horsemanship and roping skills of the Mexican vaquero. At the same time, he was also singing corridos and original compositions on a weekly program at a local radio station, KWWG (Medrano 31).

While Paredes was beginning to reach a regional English-speaking audience through *The Brownsville Herald*, he was reaching a Mexican audience through articles, written in Spanish that were published in *La Prensa de San Antonio* as well as the Matamoros newspaper *El Regional*. Paredes recalled that he had “published some of my earliest articles there [*El Regional*], including a satirical piece I called ‘Diccionario modern mundial’ (‘Modern Global Dictionary’), all under the pen name of Guálinto Gómez” (Saldívar 90). The publisher of *El Regional*, Garza Flores, belonged to a Matamoros literary group comprised of Freemasons, intellectuals, and literary men whom were all friends of Américo Paredes’s brother who ran a successful business in Matamoros. The Matamoros reading group not only helped Paredes

publish in *El Regional*, but also keep him connected to the Spanish-speaking world on the Matamoros side of the river. “While it lasted,” Paredes recalled of the group, “we would meet to read poetry and discuss the latest in Mexican politics. We would read Rubén Darío, Amado Nervo, Federico García Lorca, Gabriela Mistral, and many other poets of the day” (Saldívar 91). Recalling that “The 1930s was the period of César Augusto Sandino’s revolution in Nicaragua,” Paredes added that he, and other members of the group, were also “very attuned to the political struggles in Latin America” (Saldívar 91).

Through his articles published in the *Brownsville Herald*, *La Prensa de San Antonio*, and *El Regional*, Paredes was acting as a cultural intermediary, bringing salient features of South Texas Border culture to the attention of a bi-lingual, bi-cultural audience that stretched North, from Brownsville to San Antonio, and South, from Brownsville to Matamoros. Recalling the early articles he had published in *The Herald*, Paredes explained,

. . . I was very much aware, that what we were taught in school at that time and what we knew in our hearts and what our elders told us was different. That our heritage was not being given the respect that it deserved so what I did in the Herald was milder, showing them, for example, that Juvención Rosas wrote “Sobre las olas” . . . but more important to me was to show what had been done, the injustices that had been done to our people and the value to our heritage.

Much of that fell on deaf ears until I finally was able to come here [UT Austin].

(Medrano 149)

It was as a professor at UT Austin that Paredes reached a broad audience in the United States, as well as in Mexico and Latin America. But that accomplishment rested on the precedent of having reached a regional audience, on both sides of the Rio Grande, as a reporter and raconteur in Brownsville during the 1930s.

Paredes found both his voice and his subject as a budding writer and bohemian hipster, singing in local watering holes with his talented first wife, Chelo Silva, who would go on, after divorcing Paredes, to have a successful career as a popular singer, touring extensively, and also recording for Falcon Records, Columbia and Sony (Medrano 33). But Paredes had never been outside the Rio Grande Valley, and he was still constrained by the parochialism of deep South Texas. It was only when he left Brownsville to join the army in 1944, spending six years in Asia, that he gained an array of experiences that would help him navigate graduate school and establish a platform from which he could express his cultural experience to a broad national and international audience.

In *The Borderlands of Culture*, Ramon Saldívar probably exaggerates in claiming that Paredes's sojourn in Asia was a catalyst for developing his conception of "Greater Mexico."³ But Saldívar convincingly demonstrates that Paredes was transformed by his years in Asia. As Saldívar puts it, "the wartime writings bear testimony to Paredes's own personal transformation from a border subject with regional intuitions into a transnational citizen of an emerging global system . . ." (393). Paredes never described himself as a "transnational citizen" and always clung tenaciously to his identity as a Mexican-American from South Texas. Yet in Asia, he continued to read voraciously and traveled widely – across Japan, China, and Korea. At the same time, Paredes was continuously publishing articles, in English, for *The Stars and Stripes*, along with a regular feature column, in Spanish, for the Mexican readers of *El Universal*, a paper published in Mexico City. Paredes returned from Asia as a man who was equal in rhetorical skill and worldly experience to anybody he would encounter at UT Austin.

As a military journalist and as an administrator for an international relief agency, Paredes held a social rank that he had never known in Brownsville. For six years, he interacted

with other professionals from across the United States, and from around the world, as a man of equal social standing and authority, not as a Mexican-Texan, a disparaged member of a subordinated community. Describing his travels across the war-ravaged cities of Northern China as a Red Cross administrator, Paredes evoked his felt-sense of altered status in remembering, “It was a strange experience being waked up [sic] in the morning by a boy who called me, a south Texas Mexican, ‘Master’” (Saldívar 100). Paredes’s altered social status dramatically enhanced the sense of authority and agency that he would exercise upon returning to the United States in 1950.

Exercising an exhilarating new sense of social clout and freedom, Paredes was continuously sharpening his rhetorical skills during his years in Asia. Between December of 1945 and August 1950, Paredes wrote *at least* seventy-four major articles and feature columns (Saldívar 349). Through these articles, as well as through fiction and poetry, Paredes was progressively enhancing his ability to massage the expectations of radically divergent audiences. Paredes wrote an entire series of short stories, the “Johnny Picadero Stories,” as an experiment in inventing Hispanic characters who would engage the interest of educated Anglo readers. Paredes recalled, “There was a small group of ex-soldiers who had stayed on in Japan after the war working in different capacities. They were all very good friends of mine. I’ve mentioned Horse de la Croix, I believe. It was for people like him that I wrote those stories.” When this particular audience of friends was no longer available, Paredes stopped writing the series. “Once I was away from that group,” Paredes explained, “I lost interest” (Saldívar 132). In effect, Paredes wrote the “Johnny Picadero Stories” as a playful exercise in conveying aspects of his own Hispanic heritage to the kind of cosmopolitan Anglo readers that he would engage so successfully when he returned to the United States.

Astonishingly, even as he was learning new ways of connecting with a broad audience of North American readers, he was finding new ways of establishing rapport with Spanish-speaking readers in Mexico. While writing for *Stars and Stripes*, and later working for the Red Cross, Paredes wrote two columns, “Desde Tokio” (“From Japan”) and “Desde China” (“From China”), for *El Universal*. For his Mexican readers, who had themselves experienced conquest by North American armies, Paredes could accentuate the destructiveness of the American war machine. Stating that “the specter of hunger haunts the streets of Tokyo,” Paredes explained, “Hunger is an offshoot of the insane war that bled Japan for fifteen years, changing the land from an orderly and tidy nation into a demoralized country, that is indescribably filthy, completely finished off by unrelenting bombardment . . . a land pulverized by the “American B-29 Superfortress” (Saldívar 359). Paredes could never have described the war as “insane,” or emphasized the destructiveness of American bombing, to the readers of *The Stars and Stripes*. Indeed, when Paredes did write an article about the trial of Hideki Tojo, the supreme commander of the Japanese army, that hinted at Tojo’s humanity, a Lieutenant in charge of publicity for the trials, “a prissy man with a venomous desire for revenge on the Japanese,” gave what Paredes described as “the dressing-down of my life – right there, in full view of everyone – accusing me and by implication the other newspapermen present, of being apologists for the Japanese criminals” (Saldívar 99). If this lieutenant could read Spanish, how would he have responded to Paredes’s depictions of American aerial bombardment for readers of *El Universal*?

Paredes’s six years in Asia prepared him for the final phase of his career, as a university professor, when he would make his greatest contributions as a folklorist – and his greatest breakthrough in reaching a broad audience that reached from Mexico to the United States, and from college classrooms to middle class living rooms. When Paredes began his graduate work

at Austin in 1950, Mexican-Americans could still not even enter a barber shop in the commercial district near campus (Nájera-Ramírez 73). Yet from the beginning of his graduate studies, Paredes interacted with his Anglo professors with the sure-footedness that he had developed working with a wide circle of Army and Red Cross professionals during his years in Asia. He entered the university as a worldly veteran, with experiences – and publications – that made him, in human terms, a peer of the professors who mentored him through his graduate studies.

Excelling as a student, Paredes recalled that he was “encouraged by a number of people in the faculty to do a PhD.” His first advisor, Alex Sackton, became “a close personal friend” who suggested that Paredes take a course with the department expert in ballads and folklore, Robert Stephenson. It was Stephenson who first suggested to Paredes, “why don’t you work on songs from your own background” (Saldívar 109). The result, of course, was his doctoral dissertation, later published as *With a Pistol in His Hand*, a virtuoso work of scholarship that continues to inspire Mexican-Americans and that gave Paredes the stature to reach broad audiences in both the United States and in Mexico.

To publish *With a Pistol in His Hand*, Paredes had to win over initial readers who could easily have rejected the manuscript as inflammatory: His subject was a Mexican folk hero, eulogized in a ballad written in Spanish, who challenged the normative assumptions of Texas Nationalism and Manifest Destiny. Yet the compelling importance of Paredes’s manuscript was evident – even to Anglo readers who might have rejected the work on ideological grounds.

One important reader who endorsed Paredes’s dissertation for publication with the UT Press was Dr. Stith Thompson, head of the folklore program at Indiana University, and perhaps the preeminent folklorist in the world. Paredes remembered Dr. Thompson as “Mr. Folklore” in both the United States and Europe, whose endorsement of the manuscript for

publication “was almost like *un dedazo* [a divine appointment]” (Medrano 54). It is impressive, but not surprising, that an eminent Midwestern Folklorist would endorse *With a Pistol in His Hand* for publication. But it is stunning that Paredes’s manuscript was championed by Walter Prescott Webb, whose books had helped establish the hagiographic legend of the Texas Rangers.⁴

Frank Wardlaw, the director of the UT Press, explained in a letter to Paredes that his “penetrating analysis of the border country and its people,” along with his analysis of the role that the Texas Rangers had played in subjugating the Mexican people, “would be of great value and interest to the general reader.” Wardlaw went on to explain that Dr. Walter Prescott Webb, then chairman of the faculty advisory board, had endorsed the book, “despite finding himself the villain of the piece at several points.” Wardlaw explained that Webb “has always considered it a weakness of his book on the Texas Rangers that he was unable to give the Mexican attitude toward the Rangers, and their side of the border conflict, with any degree of thoroughness.” Although Paredes’s “presentation of the Mexican side of the border conflict will undoubtedly be heartily resented by many old-time Texans,” Webb had concluded that “it is a story which should be told” (Medrano 55). If *With a Pistol in his Hands* could win a sympathetic reading from Walter Prescott Webb, then the book was capable of winning a place for the Mexican-American experience in the historical imagination of the nation at large.

In writing *With a Pistol in his Hands*, Paredes was acutely aware that his key rhetorical challenge was to win the assent of socially established Anglo readers who were inclined to identify with the nationalistic version of American history. In a candid interview, Paredes explained:

The thing was that most of what our people knew was in corridos and in legends and oral history. And I wanted to bring those things to the majority because I

felt there were enough people of good will among the Anglos, which if they saw our side, they would really react. And in a talk I gave at Sacramento State . . . I said that the people who had awakened to a new era were the Anglos. Because it was about that time that Anglos of good will began to see our side, and we needed their help to be able to make ourselves heard. (Medrano 150)

As Paredes's most widely read work, *With a Pistol in his Hands* did enable many "Anglos of good will" to recognize the Texan-Mexican experience as integral to the nation at large.

In relation to its North American audience, *With a Pistol in His Hands* functioned as a vehicle of cultural mediation, bringing the experience of the Mexican-American community to the attention of a broad national readership. But for its Mexican-American readers, the book did something more profound: it restored cultural memory that helped empower the Chicano community with new collective agency. Describing his education in Brownsville during the 1950s and 1960s, Saldívar remembers that "references to Mexican-American history . . . had been altogether erased from our Texas and American history lessons" (8). It was only after the publication of Paredes's seminal scholarly works that the borderlands of South Texas became recognized as an integral part of the American cultural tapestry.

Providing a heritage that Mexican-Americans could embrace, *With a Pistol in His Hands* helped to make Américo Paredes beloved in his community. Manuel Medrano, another Mexican-American scholar from Brownsville, writes that Paredes had "sung and written for my mother's generation and his literary courage had inspired my generation What he had done for many of us for so many years was nothing less than heroic" (135). Clearly, Paredes's work left its deepest imprint in the minds and hearts of Mexican-American readers. But as was true during the opening phase of his career, Paredes could not address his primary audience

without simultaneously seeking to influence the contiguous communities of readers that lay north and south of “Greater Mexico.”

Throughout his career at UT Austin, Paredes was continuously corresponding with north American folklore scholars who could promote the study of Mexican folklore (Nájera-Ramírez 85). At the same time, he addressed a broad English-speaking readership about the place of the South Texas borderlands in the broader national culture. In “The Mexican Contribution to Our Culture,” written for a non-academic audience, Paredes uses the pronoun “We” and “Our” to create an inclusive national perspective, arguing that English-speaking writers – as well as average Mexican-Americans – are ignorant of the Mexican contribution to the American Southwest. In his conclusion, the pronouns “we” and “us” and “our” refer to Americans at large. He writes, “We can justly call the Southwest our own; we can look back with pride at the part our Mexican forebears played in its evolution. It is part of us, made up as it is of so many different peoples and with so many points of view that have here met and mingled into something worthy of being valued, something that is our own” (“Mexican Contribution”). Emphatically, Paredes was seeking to show readers unacquainted with the Southern borderlands that the region has made an important contribution to the whole nation.

Even as he was networking with North American scholars and extending himself to North American audiences, Paredes was also maintaining an active correspondence with leading folklorists in Mexico, promoting the study of Mexican folklore, and seizing opportunities to enlighten Mexican nationals about the Chicano experience. Through *Folktales of Mexico* (1971) Paredes explored a broad spectrum of Mexican folklore while providing a comprehensive survey of folklore scholarship in Mexico. Olga Nájera-Ramírez, who has studied Paredes’s interactions with Mexican and Latin American scholars, notes that Paredes regularly published reviews of Spanish-language publications and “made frequent mention of Latin

American scholars and their scholarship. This is but one way in which Paredes served as an interlocutor between Latin American and United States folklorists” (83). Paredes was acting as a cultural intermediary with his Spanish speaking audience, just as he was with North American readers.

In reaching out to Spanish-Speaking audiences, Paredes was particularly keen to promote greater understanding of the Chicano experience among Mexican nationals. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Paredes participated in conferences about “la problemática Chicana” that convened in various locals around Mexico. After attending a seminar on Chicano Studies in Mexico City, accompanied by an entourage of Chicano scholars and students, Paredes wrote his wife that he was amazed by how “things I used to say ten or fifteen years ago, received with polite tolerance, are now enthusiastically received by Chicanos and Mexicanos alike” (qtd in Nájera-Ramírez 86). Presumably, Paredes was gratified that his Mexican interlocutors were increasingly receptive to his well-known assertion that folklore in border regions springs from conflicts over inequalities and injustice. But Paredes remained rankled by Mexican haughtiness and never lost the urge to explain himself, and his community, to Mexican nationals.

In 1990, Paredes was awarded the Orden Mexicana del Aguila Azteca, the highest honor Mexico awarded foreigners – non-Mexicans – for their contribution to Mexican society or culture. The award both gratified, and needled, Paredes, who resented being considered “non-Mexican,” and used his acceptance speech to prick the perceived aloofness of his Mexican listeners. Telling his listeners that others had done more than he to improve the lives of “our people,” he went on to explain:

And we, the ‘Mexicans living on the other side’ as we are colloquially known, have existed since 1848. And for the better part of this period of almost a

century and a half, we Mexican-Americans have been objects of scorn, of social and economic discrimination – of abuses that sometimes have culminated in legally sanctioned murder.

Listeners, expecting the familiar story of Anglos abuses, must have been startled when Paredes singled out Mexicans, not Anglos, as perpetrators of injustice toward Mexican-Americans.

With evident emotion, Paredes continued:

We Mexican-Americans have lacked, until very recent time, the moral support of Mexican intellectuals During the second decade of the present century, while the rural police of the State of Texas was butchering hundreds of defenseless Mexican peasants in South Texas, José Vasconcelos was busy branding us as ‘pochos’ because of the way we spoke Spanish and ‘barbarians’ because we liked (and still do) to roast our beef over an open fire.

Showing how Mexican-Americans had endured abuses from both their Northern and Southern flanks, Paredes concluded his speech by defending the honor of Mexican-Americans, who had fought in four major wars during the 20th century, who “had never ceased to meet their obligations as American citizens.” Paredes did not need to mention that he himself was a veteran who had served the United States in wartime.

In his final words, Paredes poignantly expressed the unresolvable tension that had always undergirded his “checkerboard consciousness,” his identity as a Mexican-American. “I am North American. Nonetheless, my ancestors – who colonized what is today the south of Texas in 1749 – bequeathed me a deep affection for Mexico and her culture. It is then a double honor for me to have been awarded the Order of the Aguila Azteca” (quoted in Nájera-Ramírez 77). The award, like his identity as a Mexican-American, was a double honor – and a double burden.

As a man born between two worlds, Paredes could never stop trying to explain himself to the cousins, the neighbors, the fellow citizens who resided on both sides of the divide into which he had been born. Those explanations, in all their multifarious forms, are the gifts that Américo Paredes has bequeathed to all of his readers, present and future, which still have so much to learn from his well-lived life.

Notes

¹ For example, throughout *Borderlands of Culture*, Saldívar shows how Paredes influenced folklorists, and other students of culture. He also shows how Paredes used different rhetorical appeals writing for the Mexican readers of *El Universal*, and the North American readers of *Stars and Stripes* (344-395). In “Encaminándonos: Américo Paredes as a Guiding Force in Transcending Borders” Olga Nájera-Ramírez describes Paredes’s sustained efforts to extend himself to Mexican and Latin American readers (69-90).

² Between the 1870s and the 1930s, the heaviest concentration of lynchings in Texas took place in the counties along the Brazos River, between Waco and the Gulf of Mexico. Skove Nevels, Cynthia. *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007: 154. Hispanic men, along with Blacks, were victims of the racial violence that peaked, in Texas, during the early 1920s. Carrigan, William D., and Clive Webb. “Muerto por Unos Desconocidos (Killed by Persons Unknown): Mob Violence against Blacks and Mexicans.” *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*. Eds. Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2003. 35-74. Print.

³ Scholars generally agree that Paredes’s seven years in Asia were significant, but differ, quite dramatically, in assessing how his sojourn in Asia affected his later life and scholarship. In *The Borderlands of Culture*, Ramón Saldívar sees Paredes’s years in Asia as essential for developing Paredes’s conception of “Greater Mexico.” In contrast, José Limón argues that there is “no evidence anywhere” to support Saldívar’s assertion that Asia was “crucial” for Paredes’s conception of Greater Mexico, or “that his sojourn in Asia gave Paredes a ‘more richly textured’ understanding of the cultural and political conflict in the US-Mexico borderlands” (Limon 599-600).

⁴ Webb launched his academic career by writing a master’s thesis on the Texas Rangers in 1920, which he published, in a revised and expanded version, in 1935 as *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*. “Webb, Walter Prescott.” *Handbook of Texas*. Online.

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