

Ethnic Writing/Writing Ethnicity: The Critical Conceptualization of Chicano Identity

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CHICANO LITERARY CRITICISM is an exciting and still-evolving discipline which is presently attempting to reconcile structuralist and poststructuralist theory with cultural theories and theories of ethnic and racial identity formation. Indeed, it is precisely this challenge to define Chicano ethnicity, sometimes with, and sometimes against poststructuralism, which makes the discipline cutting edge for literature studies in general. The question Chicano critics are attempting to answer is of broad concern to the study of literature at large: how does one conceive of ethnicity and people-hood in a discourse which increasingly asserts that individual subject-hood is a mythic construct? Because of the seeming poststructuralist occlusion of ethnic subjectivity, there is an agenda in Chicano criticism "to remap the borderlands of theory" (J. Saldívar 7). This is not to suggest that Chicano studies defines itself in opposition to post-structuralism, for this is precisely the type of theoretical border many Chicano critics are calling into question and crossing. Instead, as the term "remap" suggests, theoretical borders are being relocated or removed altogether.

Ethnicity, and more crucially, the notion of indelible ethnic "difference" function prominently throughout Chicano criticism, calling into question literary canons, theoretical models, and reading strategies. However, in current criticism, definitions of Chicano ethnicity are surprisingly rare and lean. The Chicano subject stands mostly as a given, and a community is assumed whose artistic production can be read as ethnic product. I am most interested here in how this reading takes place. How is Chicano ethnicity defined through the process of reading?

The aim of this article is to look at how Chicano ethnicity is formed, codified, and institutionalized in Chicano criticism. Specifically, I want to look at how the theme of resistance has become one of the chief characteristics of ethnic Chicano criticism. In the first section of the

paper I will trace the emergence of the theme from the work of Américo Paredes and José Limón. From there I wish to consider the implications and limitations such an ethnic position has for Chicano critics, including Chicana feminists. Gloria Anzaldúa and (more recently) Norma Alarcon have offered imaginative and rigorous revisions of Chicano critical identity, but it is Cherrie Moraga who has most directly critiqued the patriarchal structures within Chicano critical writing (the subject of this article), and her work will be useful here. Finally, I wish to look at how one critic, Ramón Saldivar, has coped with the theoretical imbroglio presented by the mesh of theory and politics, and the question of whether he has done so sufficiently will be raised.

BEFORE PROCEEDING FURTHER, it is necessary to provide some working, understanding of the term “ethnicity” itself. The term has been reconceptualized every so often, most recently in the January 1998 issue of *PMLA*, and currently its relevance as a category for literature is under question. I’ll not attempt a concrete definition of ethnicity, therefore, but rather provide a contextualized understanding which seems appropriate to the way ethnicity operates in the present subject.

To begin with, race and genetic makeup, though undoubtedly significant for the ethnic subject, cannot be the defining category for ethnicity. Chicanos, for example, are racially akin to Mexicanos living south of the border; their ethnic difference is conditioned by the map as it is drawn around them. This simple observation is born out theoretically by Benedict Anderson, and it is performed in the proliferation of Chicano critical works which reference the map in their titles (the term “Borderlands” appears on the cover of three recent books currently sitting on my desk). Thus, William Boelhower argues, “Identity was (and is) very much a question of boundaries, for there could not be a national people without a common territory and jurisdiction. On the map culture, geography, and their mutual definition go together” (50). Likewise, Werner Sollors argues “ethnic groups in the United States have relatively little cultural differentiation, that the cultural *content* of

ethnicity...is largely interchangeable” (28). Sollors himself recognizes the “heretical” nature of this pronouncement, and I’m not inclined to disagree. Nonetheless, I sympathize with his urge to turn to *textualized* representations of ethnicity, because “mental formations and cultural constructions (the codes, beliefs, rites, and rituals)” are palpably performed “in imaginative literature of the most diverse ethnic provenance as well as in nonfiction, including academic discussions of the field” (Sollors 9–10). Elaborating on Sollors’ argument, Boelhower theorizes “any sign can be read as ethnic if it is placed in an ethnic sign system,” for “ethnic interpretation lives and dies with the single subject and his or her ethnic gaze” (106, 105). We look to literature for an understanding of ethnicity not because ethnicity is writable, but because it is *readable*. Writing (noun) about ethnicity, performs the writer’s reading of ethnicity.

None of this is to suggest that ethnic literature cannot exist in categorical form, or that the term “Chicano literature” is a subjective and irrelevant designation. Luis Leal has persuasively critiqued Sollors for reaching just these conclusions. Still, Leal acknowledges the underlying *readerly* nature of ethnic literature, when he quotes John Reilly to support his critique: “What we designate ‘ethnic literature’ are the products of authors who choose to feature the significance of ethnicity in their writings” (Leal 1994, 26). Ethnic writing is a choice, and results from the author’s own ethnic gaze inward, the reading of self as ethnic subject.

An understanding of the development of the *corrido*, and more importantly, the development of the criticism of the *corrido* leads to a clearer view of the relation between cultural product and ethnic identity. José Limón theorizes that there are “certain enabling conditions” which give rise to the *corrido*. These include “A collective adversarial consciousness, a prolonged social conflict, a sense of violated communal social order...[and], heroic actions by local heroes” (Limón 1992, 26). Limón is talking about the cultural and national tensions existing in Texas above the Rio Grande from 1848 into the early 20th century. Raymund Paredes succinctly explains the origins of this conflict and the conditions which engendered heroes:

The great divide in Chicano history is the year 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended twenty-one months of warfare between Mexico and the United States...[T]he Mexican residents of these areas had the choice of migrating southward across the new boundary or accepting American citizenship. Only two thousand people left their homes, while some eighty thousand remained, thus becoming, in the most literal sense of the term, Mexican-Americans. Although a distinctive Mexican-American literary sensibility was not to emerge for several generations, the signing of Guadalupe Hidalgo, more than any other event, required that the southwestern Mexicans begin to rethink their relationships to the old country and to the United States. (74)

The tension Texanos felt from having the map redrawn beneath them was augmented by the influx of westward migrating Anglo-Americans. “Guadalupe Hidalgo had guaranteed Mexican-Americans full rights as citizens but, in fact, they were frequently stripped of their property and subjected to severe discrimination. The Mexican-Americans expressed their resentment of this treatment in the large number of *corridos* that sprang from this region” (R. Paredes 75).

Thus, with the “enabling conditions” present, *corridos* were sung with increasing frequency at the close of the 19th century. The theme of cultural conflict became more pointedly expressed with ballads about heroic Texanos who could draw on their stock of cultural skills to counter-hegemonically resist the Anglo oppressors. Raymund Paredes believes that in the *corrido* “are the components of a nascent Chicano sensibility,” but he also acknowledges that these Texanos “still considered themselves ‘Mexicans’ and were likewise designated by Anglos” (R. Paredes 76, 78). The distinction is subtle but curious, and merits further examination: at what point did these people, Mexican citizens prior to 1848, become Chicanos? If Chicano culture is a border culture, its literature will reflect border themes, but when this identity began to crystallize is less clear.

Américo Paredes has taught us that “the *corrido* of border conflict assumes its most characteristic form when its subject deals with the conflict between Border Mexican and Anglo-Texan, with the Mexican—outnumbered and pistol in hand—defending his ‘right’ against the *rinches*” (A. Paredes 147). Paredes’ seminal work, *With his Pistol in his Hand*, seeks to define the most significant *corrido* for the history of Chicano culture, the ballad of Gregorio Cortez. The ballad narrates the true story of Cortez, a Texano rancher who shot and killed his brother’s assailant, a Texas Ranger. Though badly outnumbered by Rangers, Cortez fled across the border, defying the Anglo authorities “with his pistol in his hand.” The emergence of a *corrido* about the life of Cortez is not unusual, and in fact it comes in a long line of hero-based ballads. What does stand out is the emergence of variants of this particular ballad which show

a shift of interest from the story of Gregorio Cortez, which had become familiar, to the drama in Cortez’s situation, a situation which the Border Mexican identified with his own. From a ballad-story hero, Cortez became a symbol of the Borderer himself, the prototype of the hero of border conflict, not only on a physical but on a cultural plane. (A. Paredes 199)

Paredes’ use of the term “Border Mexican,” and then “Borderer” is provocative, suggesting a difference between Mexicans south of the U.S.-Mexico border, and those living just north of it. Paredes uses the term as a proper noun, implying its distinctness, but also its titular nature. The Borderer is culturally and socially distinct from Mexicans to the south and Anglos occupying the same space, suggesting an ethnic group. However, Paredes does not follow through with this distinction. How did Cortez become such a significant symbol? The question begets questions: what is the relation between culture and the society that produces it? Raymond Williams argues without literature and other cultural production, “the society cannot be seen as fully formed” (387). This suggests to us that the later variants of the Ballad of Gregorio Cortez are less a point of origin and more an organic development for

Chicano identity.

My questions of origin indicate an archival impulse which I recognize and wish to pursue. Boelhower regards such origins “myth,” but it is one that is “essential to the formation of a sense of ethnic community in that it marks the beginning of the history of the group and thus its individuality” (99). Paredes is too subtle in his study of the *corrido* to pinpoint cultural origins, but subsequent readers of *With his Pistol in his Hand* have done just that. Most notable of these is Jose Limón, formerly Paredes’ student at the University of Texas, Austin, and presently the most creative (and I believe important) Chicano scholar since Paredes himself. In many scholarly articles, and laced within some books, Limón credits Américo Paredes for establishing the necessary links between contemporary Chicanos and their history. In *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* (1992) Limón argues that the publication of *With his Pistol in his Hand* not only establishes the most formative trope for Chicano critical culture (the Ballad of Gregorio Cortez), Paredes’ book is itself a point of origin in the development of Chicano ethnic identity.

Limón’s thoughts on Paredes’ book are significant for introducing a creative and key conceptualization of Chicano ethnicity because Limón privileges reading as the primary process by which the Chicano comes to know him or herself. If Paredes’ study indicates the early cultural products of an emerging ethnic community, Limón’s reading of Paredes locates the precise origins of ethnicity, and it is with Paredes himself. In Limón’s own words, “Paredes’s scholarly anthropological study became a powerful influence on a new generation of Chicano writers, intellectuals and activists as they produced a new critical social discourse” during the 1960’s (1992, 65). As Limón sees it, a new generation of Chicanos just entering the universities, found *With his Pistol in his Hand* to be “a new kind of *corrido*, one whose complex relationship to the past enabled it to speak to the present” (1992, 65).

Limón argues that this community of young scholars—spread out at universities around the U.S., though united by their marginalization as well as scholarly interest in Chicano culture—came to idealize Paredes himself, form-

ing a *corrido*-like discourse around him:

When Chicano movement people gather and the conversation turns to the subject of Américo Paredes, one can often detect the gradual emergence of what I shall call an unsung proto-ballad/legendry of Américo Paredes. It is as if such conversations—a kind of Chicano movement oral tradition—construct the known life and career of this man into folklore. (1986 26)

Building on this narrative in a later essay, Limón proceeds to draw further links between the legendry of Cortez and that of Paredes. He reviews Paredes' near-mythic life, blending a variety of voices into a narrative which quickly reveals itself a mirror of Paredes' own masterpiece about "a border ballad and its hero." Limón quite self-consciously invokes his mentor's own work to model his study of the significant influence Paredes has had on a huge number of Chicano scholars. Not only does Limón document the influence of Paredes on subsequent scholars, he performs that influence by re-performing Paredes' original work.

Implicated in Limón's theory and praxis are certain limitations on Chicano criticism as a whole. Limón's theory of influence partakes of Harold Bloom's patriarchal "Anxiety of Influence" theory, while his re-performance of Paredes reifies Paredes as the patriarchal father of Chicano criticism (Limón devotes an appendix to accommodating Bloom's theory with cultural criticism). In the process of codifying the *corrido* and institutionalizing Paredes, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* also establishes a patriarchal, phallogocentric paradigm for Chicano criticism. The archetypal critic is Gregorio Cortez/Américo Paredes—heroic defender of culture, fighting with pistol/pen in his hand. Likewise, the critical process becomes border based and manichean: Cortez vs. Anglos, Paredes overcomes academic racism, etc. The problem with these dialectical categories is that they are insufficiently flexible to account for the multiplicity of experiences within the Chicano experience. Additionally, the categories replicate themselves if subsequent critics have no choice but to wrestle with and incorporate their precursors/critical fathers. Chicano ethnicity, conceived dialectically as it is by Limón, limits

discussions of difference within Chicano life. If the resistance-based *corrido* is the master poem, and Paredes is the Father critic, how can one talk about issues of gender inequity, implicit in the *corrido* itself; how to talk about issues of economic class difference amongst Chicanos, a subject in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, and Luis Valdez's play, "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa"; these questions agitate Limón's scheme and merit further investigation. In *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* Limón proposes to study "the question of gender in culture. However, rather than focus on women (in a way that currently tends to become synonymous with gender analysis), I focus on an all-male tradition..." (2-3). Limón proposes that "the creative poetic and political impulses...can originate in patriarchy...[though] deeply conditioned by a psychopoetic acknowledgment of the strength of women, principally in the form of the maternal" (3). The bulk of the text implicitly or explicitly deals with and naturalizes patriarchy in the formation of Chicano culture, while only three and a half pages are relegated to the study of "the strength of women" under the subheading "Contradiction and the Corrido: The Repression of the Woman's Voice" (35).

Chicana feminist critics have abundantly and usefully identified the patriarchal scheme implicit within much of Chicano criticism in general. Norma Alarcon, for example, critiques "a past Chicano patriarchal interpretation of culture, which holds the potential for locking [Chicana poets] into crippling stereotypes" (Quintana 79). Likewise, Alvina Quintana suggests the way out of these stereotypes is for the Chicana writer to engage in "mediating and negotiating between two cultural systems, constructing a cultural and feminist identity as she works to deconstruct the predominantly male cultural paradigms that have worked to suppress a female perspective" within Chicano criticism (Quintana 74). In *The Last Generation* Cherríe Moraga performs just such mediations.

Although Moraga marks a clear border between Chicanos and Anglos in *The Last Generation*, she is not looking for a male hero to help her cross that border:

We are no Moses, no Malcolm, no Queztlacoatl,

but we are all our own gods. And our liberation won't happen by some man leading the way and parting the Red Sea for us. We *are* the Red sea, we women. (114)

Here Moraga acknowledges a predominant critical perspective: the leaders of the revolution are men. Not only does she challenge that assumption, she breaks away from the very concept of what a revolution might be. Male leaders (and *corrido* heroes) lead their people across borders (the Red Sea), but Moraga's act of resistance is *to be the border itself*. Moraga takes the trope of the border as a dividing line between cultures, and tropes it further; her metalepsis redefines the act of resistance. Rather than resist by challenging the other's perception of the border, Moraga internalizes the border, makes it her own, embodies difference and then lives it in wholeness. Moraga's trope of women as sea resonates with Hélène Cixous trope of the "propriety of woman": "it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts.' If she is whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes..."(1090). Moraga's definition of the Chicana includes the "wholes" of race, gender, and sexuality, despite the fact that each might conflict in some ways with the other. In fact, it is precisely because Moraga erases differences between the "wholes" by embodying them in her "Red Sea" self that hers is the ultimate act of resistance. Stealing the trope of resistance from traditional power-holders (men, Anglos) reconceptualizes difference as unity.

Moraga's criticisms in *The Last Generation* significantly undermine patriarchal thinking for Chicano criticism, though she does not dispense with cultural agon. The theme of resistance persists in her critiques, but Moraga is resisting circumscription within a narrowly defined Chicano culture as well as the dominant Anglo culture. The delineation of concrete conceptual borders threatens individual identity, according to Moraga, and this insight is especially important for my study. Moraga forges an ethnic identity which is at once highly personal and broadly inclusive. Limón's theory of patriarchal cultural transmission is ultimately predicated on the personal relationship

of the critic to his and her immediate (personal) culture. Cultural heroes do exist, as Limón argues, but culture is finally known and internalized on a personal level, as Moraga shows us. These two concepts need to be reconciled in order to see the process by which Chicano critics read and inaugurate ethnicity. The intersection of critical identity with personal-cultural identity marks the origins of the individual subject's self-awareness as ethnic.

ANGIE CHABRAM HAS WRITTEN an important essay which explores the position of the Chicano critic with reference to contemporary mainstream criticism. Her interviews in "Conceptualizing Chicano Cultural Discourse" also provide the voice of the ethnic self within the Chicano critic. Chabram's subjects offer their own critical essays in *Borderlands*, but in her piece we learn of the formative critical culture which engenders their subsequent writings.

At the center of Chabram's essay are interviews with the editors of *Borderlands*, focusing on their experiences at Yale. Hector Calderón tells Chabram

I walked into an auditorium to hear Derrida speak, and I remember having people point out Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller. And the atmosphere was sort of: "Here is the word." The final answer was about to be given, and these critics were gathered to hear it. (Chabram 132)

But Calderón finds "the word" (post-structuralism) at once totalizing and exclusive, unable to accommodate his Chicano identity:

Another thing that bothered me about Yale, offended me even, was this notion that history does not exist. You know...That you can't write history anymore. That even the subject doesn't exist. Again, that seemed to exclude a whole croup of people who were very much involved with history...The Chicano Movement itself was not only making history at that moment, but it was a process in history, and there did not seem to be space for thinking about that within a framework that says: "there's no subject, there's no history." (132)

Jose David Saldívar, who also earned his Ph.D. at Yale and is the co-editor of *Borderlands*, puts a finer point on it: “It seems a bit ironic that just when all these [mainstream] critics are talking about the end of the subject...that we should have Chicanos...finally beginning to see themselves as subjects, as capable of action instead of just being acted upon” (Chabram 132). The tension between the Chicano critic’s ethnic position and his critical position is evident. On the one hand, Saldívar and Calderón are coming out of a culture in which “the possibility of a Chicano readership in the late sixties and early seventies was itself a revolution-ary idea” (Calderón 111): gaining a foothold in the Academy and access to its ideas becomes a counter-hegemonic act; on the other hand, as these two critics point out, the ideas the academy has to offer would ultimately sever the ethnic subject from his identity.

In their introduction to *Criticism in the Borderlands*, Calderón and Saldívar do not directly acknowledge this tension; rather, they write of “challenging conservative habits of mind...opening new perspectives on American literary history” (6). Furthermore, they offer an invitation to “readers—(Pan-) Americanists, cultural studies critics, feminists, historians, and anti-racists—to remap the borderlands of theory and theorists”; apparently, deconstructionists and other poststructuralists do not make the guest list (7). The reason for the make-up of this list is by now clear: Chicano literature demands to be read historically; the author’s cultural background is important; subjective identity matters. Or, as Luis Leal puts it, “the Chicano has to create a new synthesis out of history, tradition, and his everyday confrontation with the ever-changing culture in which he lives” (Leal 1979 4).

Leal’s prescription of synthesis draws our attention back to the theoretical border that would divide structuralist theorists (Marxists, new historicists) from post-structuralist deconstructionists. In Chabram’s interview with Ramón Saldívar, we see one of the few Chicano critics who locates himself on the deconstruction side of the border. Describing his experience at Yale, Saldívar says, “It struck me that in the case of the Mexican-American you had precisely a concrete historical example of what Derrida was talking

about in abstract, philosophical terms” (Chabram 131). Saldívar’s implicit rejection of synthesis in his interview with Chabram is corroborated by his theorizing about Chicano narrative. In the introduction to *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* Saldívar writes:

Rather than passively reproducing images of reality, the task of the contemporary Chicano narrative is to deflect, deform, and thus transform reality by revealing the dialectical structures that form the base of human experience. In opting for open over closed forms, for conflict over resolution and synthesis, in proclaiming its very difference, the function of Chicano narrative is thus to produce creative structures of knowledge to allow its readers to see, to feel, and to understand their social reality. (7)

Saldívar’s thesis is fascinating for the way he accommodates “conflict” with the “structures of knowledge.” We find in Saldívar a theorist who aims to eradicate the theoretical border. Despite his Derridean background, Saldívar declares “*history* is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subject of [Chicano narrative’s] discourse” (5). Ramón Saldívar’s nuanced and flexible reading of history will allow me to attempt some theorizing of my own as we return to the question of how the Chicano critic, while attempting to wrest ethnicity from post-structuralism, locates ethnicity in reading.

In *Dialectics of Difference*, Saldívar theorizes about dialectical models in order to construct a resistant critical position. Arguing against Hegelian dialectics, Saldívar turns to Theodore Adorno’s theory of negative dialectics, which “negate[s] the possibility of an ultimate synthesis of subject and object in every conceivable concrete situation” (173). “Identity,” Saldívar continues, “is a contradiction”: “In opposition to a positive identity, fixed, namable, absolute, and self-satisfied in its stability Adorno offers a negative dialectic that proposes a critique of ‘every self-absolutizing particular’, even the absolute notion of the self as an autonomous, independent entity” (174). Ramón Saldívar’s agitation of a fixed identity directly contrasts Jose David Saldívar’s rejection of the end of subject-hood, but

his project of counter-hegemonic criticism is the same: “An unfixed, decentered identity alters the pattern by which a society must position the subject so that ‘it shall freely submit to its subjection’” (174). Saldívar’s dialectics of difference locates the dominant identity (“society”) on the same plane as the marginalized ethnic subject, and here his theory of ethnicity begins to reveal itself. Each corresponds to the other, each knows itself only in relation to the other due to the “incessant presence of the self in the other” (174).

We can hear in Ramón Saldívar’s theory resonances of Limón’s Bloomian paradigm for Chicano critical studies. Saldívar was certainly among the young college students who came of age in the 60’s and found *With his Pistol in his Hand* influential. We can likely extend the paradigm to Saldívar then: he too has taken up the call to resist, in this case the hegemony of dominant (Anglo) reading strategies. Said notes that his use of “negative dialectics” resists the categorizing of Chicano literature as “other” and makes a strong case for “the right of formerly un- or misrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined politically and intellectually as normally excluding them” (R. Saldívar 4). Saldívar not only assumes the critical position of his Chicano father, Paredes, with his counter-hegemonic theory; he also upsets the dominant Derridean rejection of ethnic literature (see Boelhower for example) by using deconstruction itself.

Saldívar’s lengthy study of the historical circumstances of Chicano identity are conditioned by his sense of the negative dialectic. He sees Chicano ethnicity as emerging from history, but only insofar as the Chicano subject is subjugated by a dominant Anglo oppressor. Saldívar’s definition of Chicano ethnicity is historically and politically based, and it is helpful to have it in front of us to discuss:

Unlike many other ethnic immigrants to the United States...Mexican Americans became an ethnic minority through the direct conquest of their homelands. Their internal differences, then, as pronounced as they may be, are counterpoised by their shared experiences as a “conquered minority” in a colonized land (G. Sanchez 1961, 123). Under these

circumstances, where a new cultural life was forced upon them after 1848 while they attempted tenaciously to cling to their traditional way of life, Mexican Americans developed a decisive sense of opposition to Anglo-American forms and institutions. (R. Saldívar 13)

The elision of internal difference here is not the same mistake we saw with Limón. Saldívar is not writing that differences within the Chicano community ceased to exist, or no longer mattered. Rather, because all Mexicans living in the Rio Grande valley were subject to the same ethnic gaze of the other—the Anglo oppressor—their ethnic *difference* was totalizing.

If we read the main text of Saldívar's argument, however, we will have yet another incomplete accounting of the formation of Chicano identity. True, he shows us the rising awareness of difference, but not the rising ethnic sensibility of resistance which Paredes and Limón insist is crucial to understanding Chicano culture. Where in Saldívar's historical survey are we to find an account of the ethnic subject's awareness of and resistance to his own marginalization? Appropriately enough, and literally, in the margins, the footnotes of history.

Saldívar provides a particularly provocative footnote which does much to explain the readerly nature of Chicano identity. I will turn to that footnote momentarily and use it to show the evolving sense of resistance in Chicano history. But first it is worth observing that the information in question is marginalized to a footnote by Saldívar. Derrida has written that footnotes, "to the one who knows how to read...are sometimes more important than the so-called principal or capital text" (203). Footnotes are less deliberately tautological than the main-text, and more reader-oriented in nature. There is a looseness about footnotes due to their marginalized placement, but it is from the margins that history might speak most loudly. The footnote in question describes a process of reading and identification which runs counter to Saldívar's perception of subject-object relations. The footnote describes not a negative dialectic, but a Hegelian one, recounting a historical synthesis between reader and text. To this we now turn.

The footnote in question is appended to a poem Saldívar cites by Américo Paredes. The poem, “The Mexico-Texan,” is cited because it “tells in brief the history of the Chicano in the Southwest” (11). The poem parodies an already parodic stereotypical Texano voice, and tells the story of the emblematic Texano’s plight:

The Mexico-Texan he’s one fenny man
 Who leeves in the regin tha’s north of the Gran’
 of Mexican father he born in these part,
 And sometimes he rues it dip down in he’s heart
 For the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan
 He stomped on the neck on both sides of the Gran...
 (Paredes quoted in R. Saldívar 11)

The poem, partaking of the colonists’ voice, mocks that voice and asserts the plight of the colonized Texano, whose land has been usurped. Cloaked in derision, the poem is indeed “a brief history” of the Texano’s plight, and can easily be heard as what Genaro Padilla calls a “whisper of resistance” (Padilla 44). Despite its potency, Saldívar leaves the poem behind, moving onto a discussion of “history” in broad terms. But for the footnote, it would seem the poem had only “throw-away” value for Saldívar.

Here is what the footnote tells us: “the poem quickly caught on as an anonymous folk expression of popular resistance” (11). The poem was written in 1934, and “was picked up and circulated fairly widely in ensuing years, verbally for the most part” (11). The poem, popular for its defiance, appears in a Latino news journal in 1937, and again in a Latino yearbook in 1939. It became a part of local folklore, informing the culture of resistance that developed in Brownsville during the 1940’s. In a conversation with Américo Paredes, Saldívar notes the poem “was used in political campaigns, was anonymously reprinted a few times, and entered oral tradition locally. Collected in Brownsville as ‘folk poetry’ in the 1960’s...” (R. Saldívar 11). Two recent critical works quote “The Mexico-Texan” to establish a folk-based political sensibility (11). And of course, the poem appears as a point of reference in Ramón Saldívar’s theory of the dialectics of difference. The lengthy footnote, including the apparent conversation with Paredes, indicates that the poem is significant to Saldívar, but he

closes the footnote only by mentioning the interesting way oral poems become written texts.

I am struck by the uncanny triptych of “The Mexico-Texan.” The peripatetic itinerary of the poem replicates Limón’s theory of the spiraling influence of *With his Pistol in his Hand*. Both works move from cultural product to political product to critical product. Paredes’ poem, like his book, originally traveled in local circles, influential for individuals though not yet formative for ethnic identity. Then the poem, also like the book, became overtly politicized at a formative moment in the development of Chicano ethnic identity. Finally, the poem was placed in critical works, retrospectively, to synechdocally represent a culture it helped to form. Here we see that criticism, as Terry Eagleton has noted, is bound to the culture which it critiques, serving to naturalize and institutionalize that culture.

In the need to incorporate new classes and fractions of classes into cultural unity, to establish a consensus of social taste, construct common traditions and disseminate uniform manners, criticism becomes one fulcrum of a whole set of ideological institutions: periodicals, coffee-houses, aesthetic and social treatises...(Eagleton 19)

But criticism does not just exist on the same plane, sharing the same space as other cultural practices, as Saldívar’s footnote shows us. Criticism works to unify, consolidate, and naturalize a “distilled” culture—distilled in the sense that it intensifies culture at the same time it reduces culture. It is difficult to say in retrospect how “The Mexico-Texan” influenced the formation of Chicano identity during the 40’s or 60’s. But contemporary critical writing (I include the [by now self-conscious] Chicano novel) has the power to retrospectively emblemize history with ethnicity by grafting onto history the (lately regarded) cultural artifact.

The movement of Paredes’ poem from folkloric artifact of the political unconscious into the contemporary critical conscious is typical of the politicized, historically-based Chicano critical movement. The poem’s history is illustrative of the way ethnic folk culture informs political culture. True, the poem was a political act to begin with,

but during the 60's, Chicano activists asserted it, to use Teresa McKenna's terms, as a "root metaphor." It is during the Movement that folk culture "becomes transformed from a genre of cultural performance to the status of a root metaphor for the paradigmatic contestation between the Anglo-American 'other' and Mexicans on this side of the border" (McKenna 193). Participants in the Movement who are now scholars of literature are synthesized with objects of study like the Paredes poem. The root metaphor becomes a "metaphor of the text...furnish[ing] the terms in which the text can know itself" (Eagleton 19). Eagleton seeks to break down the imagined ideological distinctions between the criticism and its object, but here, in the case of Chicano criticism, there is no initial positing of such a difference. In the case of "The Mexico-Texan," the poem enters the scene with its politics already intact. It becomes a political instrument throughout the 60's and a critical tool in the 80's and 90's.

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez has the same itinerary as "The Mexico-Texan." The poem appears to Américo Paredes to be linked to his own personal identity, but at the same time representative of a broader cultural identity. Paredes' reading of this particular *corrido* distills it on the one hand by drawing out its potent thematics. At the same time, Paredes locates the poem in time and place, thereby increasing its accessibility. Subsequent readers of Paredes come to know the history of the southwest border conflicts via the *corrido*. The poem becomes the historicizing force distilling the past, while it sets up cultural codes and ethics for the present and future. Thus the *corrido*, read as history by Paredes, makes history during the sixties by serving as an ethnic model for Chicano activists. Later, it is the catalyst for a set of essays, papers, even the operational trope for books, in which authors see their own present history as a mirror or continuation of the past.

The theory being offered here is about the way in which ethnic identity receives its definitions. Let me clear: I am not arguing that there is one fixed Chicano ethnic identity, nor do I propose there is one defining moment in the history of Chicano ethnicity. Instead, I see in the criticism of contemporary Chicano scholars implicit definitions of

ethnicity. Some of the most influential critics of Chicano literature are studying their subject with an implicit perception of ethnic identity, but often that identity comes from the literature itself. Jose Limón knows this, and his reading of *With his Pistol in his Hand* as a strong poem is his attempt to locate Américo Paredes at the genesis of Chicano ethnicity, at least as it is currently manifested. The question lingers, how does one understand ethnicity? The emphasis of that question should be on the word *how* by now, for ethnicity is both an idea and a *process*. As Cherríe Moraga has shown us, ethnicity is fluid, political, and generally more inclusive than not. I'm not sure we've yet developed a critical theory (a reading strategy) that knows this, but perhaps this is not an epistemological issue.

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