The Return of the Mexican Ballad: Américo Paredes and His Anthropological Text as Persuasive Political Performances

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This essay's principal argument is that a particular anthropological text and its author, largely ignored in wider anthropological circles, have played a central influential role in the formation and development of a Mexican-American political culture in our time. I refer to Américo Paredes and his *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958, 1971), a study of the Mexican ballad, or *corrido*, and its sociocultural context along the lower Texas-Mexico border. Although an important part of this book's significance stems from its superb scholarship and its anticipation of certain contemporary intellectual practices, in this analysis, I want to call attention to that influence which flows from the author's career and part I of his book as cultural rhetoric, as unified, contextually persuasive, textual performances. Paredes's life and his book, in their narrative organization and poetics, recall the aesthetic politics of their scholarly subject, the Mexican ballad of border conflict; through their artistic transformation of the ballad, they exert a compelling influence on a new generation.

It is not often that an anthropological study and the life of its author become persuasive, artistic, textual performances, if by the latter phrase we at least imply, following Jan Mukarovsky (1977), that a textuality partakes of what he calls "poetic designation," meaning the "every use of words occurring in a text with a predominant aesthetic function" (1977: 65) where this aesthetic function renders "the sign

itself the center of attention" (1977: 68). However, Mukarovsky does not wish to be misconstrued on two important issues: one, such a designation and function apply not only to formal poetry or other figurative language; "this function participates, at least potentially, in every human act" (1977: 69), whether poem, ritual, conversation, or anthropology; and, two, that this focus on the sign "itself," while weakening the relationship to any immediate reality, "does not preclude a relation between the work and reality as a whole; on the contrary it is even beneficial to this relation" (1977: 71). He summarizes and concludes in a statement that is a charter for this essay. "The aesthetic function . . . is potentially present in every utterance. The specific character of poetic designation, therefore, rests solely in its more radical exposure of the tendency inherent in every act of designation. The weakening of the immediate relation of poetic designation to reality is counterbalanced by the fact that the poetic work as a global designation enters into relation with the *total* set of the existential experiences of the subject, be he the creative or the perceiving subject" (1977: 72-73).

We are only too aware of the poetic designation inherent in traditional literary practice in its various genres. However, other human acts, and indeed "every human act," are beginning to receive increasing attention in these terms, including those discourses, chiefly intellectual, that often inherently and strongly define themselves with a claim to *non-poetic* designation. The analysis and the self-conscious *practice* of poetic designation in ostensibly non-poetic intellectual discourse, while not yet mainstream, gains increasing prominence, a tendency that Clifford Geertz, one of its exemplary practitioners and theorists, calls "blurred genres" (1980). We also think of Hayden White in history (1973, 1978), Harold Bloom in literary criticism (1982), and in anthropology, with Geertz, others including Boon (1982), Marcus and Cushman (1982), Bruner (1986), and Clifford and Marcus (1986).

I will also argue that, as practice, Paredes's poetically designated anthropology anticipates this contemporary trend toward "blurred genres"; my own essay pretends to be an ethnically keyed, theoretical intervention in this new trend. Thus, in union with Paredes, I want to help allay James Clifford's concern that ethnic marginality may be a necessary constraint on textual experimentation or its theoretical analysis.¹

Further, this essay proposes to be a modest effort to restore Mukarovsky's full formation, whose social intent is often repressed in

contemporary analysis.² There is, it seems to me, in such analysis, a too singular concern with the first half of his formulation, with the text as pure sign rendering it the “center of attention,” and a relative lack of concern with the poetically designated text “as a global designation” which “enters into relation with the *total* set of the existential experiences of the subject, be he the creative or the perceiving subject.” I want to take Paredes’s poetically designated text and his career beyond their obvious reference to an immediate reality (the Mexican ballad and a community of ballad specialists) to its more global designation as a persuasive, political cultural text that, marshalling the influence of the ballad, addresses and helps to form a generation of poets, intellectuals and activists all engaged in a political movement. I propose then to focus on the poetics of *With His Pistol in His Hand* and its author, firmly taking into account, to paraphrase Mukarovsky only once again, a near totality of the social experiences of those political, creative, and perceiving subjects involved in the textualization of this author and his work.

The Appearance of *With His Pistol in His Hand*

Paredes’s book is generally a continuation of a scholarly tradition of folk cultural studies on the Mexican-descent population of the U.S. Southwest. When published in 1958, it represented a sharp break with the interpretive politics of this tradition, which consisted either of a conservative formal textualism, as in the case of Aurelio M. Espinosa’s work on New Mexico, or a liberal utopian romanticism, as in J. Frank Dobie’s work on Mexican Texas (Limón n.d.). As I suggest in this section, Paredes offered a conflictual model of cultural process which took into account, at least implicitly, questions of class, domination, and cultural creation and resistance. In this respect his work was an early alternative in critical anticipation of a body of later, functionalist anthropological work on this population (Rosaldo 1985). However, as I began to suggest earlier, *With His Pistol in His Hand* is substantively a study of the Mexican border ballad or corrido as it appears and develops along the lower Texas-Mexico border, South Texas, since the Spanish settlement of the area in the mid-eighteenth century. More specifically, it is a study of the life, legend, and corpus of ballads generated by the activities of one individual, Gregorio Cortez. My interpretation of Paredes’s book requires the reader’s knowl-

edge and understanding of these events: what follows is the known history of the incident as set out by Paredes.

Until 12 June 1901 Cortez was a rather ordinary Mexican-American in Texas, an agricultural laborer like so many others who, from his own perspective, was witnessing the intensification of a largely Anglo-American and capitalist domination of Texas, including the predominantly Mexican-American region of South Texas. This domination of the native and increasingly immigrant Mexican-descent population took the form of class and racial subordination, the latter evidenced in part in the rough and ready lynching "justice" often administered to Mexican-Americans accused of crimes (Limón 1986). Such was the fate that Cortez undoubtedly expected on 12 June in the moments after he killed Sheriff W. T. Morris in Karnes County in central Texas in an exchange of pistol fire which also left Cortez's brother, Romaldo, seriously wounded. In his last official act, Sheriff Morris, an ex-Texas Ranger, had come out to the farm where the Cortezes, migrants from the border, were sharecropping. The sheriff was looking for reported horse thieves. Because neither he nor his accompanying deputy spoke Spanish well, if at all, they mistakenly accused the Cortezes of the thievery, and the sheriff drew his gun. Probably thinking they were about to be gunned down in cold blood, Romaldo charged the sheriff, not knowing that his brother had a gun hidden behind his back. Morris shot Romaldo but in the next instant was himself cut down by Gregorio, even as the deputy ran for his life and help. With the sheriff lying dead before him, Cortez knew that he faced certain Texas justice. Entrusting his brother to his family, Gregorio began a long horseback ride of escape to South Texas and the Mexican border. Along the way he evaded numerous posses through skillful riding and help from local Mexican-Americans. He also killed a second sheriff. Eventually, Cortez learned that the authorities had incarcerated his wife and children and were carrying out reprisals against those who had helped him. He turned himself in to the authorities near Laredo, Texas, where Mexican-Americans still had some measure of political control. Nonetheless, he was returned to Karnes County where, under constant threat of lynching, he was tried and convicted. In one of those paradoxes characteristic of Texas, he was eventually pardoned by an Anglo governor.

By 1901 the Mexican-Americans of Texas had experienced a half century of domination. Cortez's encounter with this domination and his largely successful, adventurous ride to freedom stirred the folk

imagination of this community; its folk singers turned to a traditional musical form—the corrido—to speak to these events. As a song narrative the corrido had as its ancestral form the medieval Spanish *romance* such as those of *El Cid*. Then, as now, this form served communities well in recording important historical events and artistically rendering their perspectives on these events. Soon after, or perhaps even during, Cortez's ride, the folk singers began to compose and sing the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, as Paredes says, "in the *cantinas* and the country stores, in the ranches when men gather at night to talk in the cool dark, sitting in a circle, smoking and listening to the old songs and the tales of other days" (1971: 33). They sang this song in the traditional octosyllabic metre with rhyming quatrains of *a b c b* and in duets of two guitars. One of the better versions of the ballad which Paredes offers as a representative text follows:

El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez

In the county of El Carmen
A great misfortune befell;
The Major Sheriff is dead;
Who killed him no one can tell.

At two in the afternoon,
In half an hour or less,
They knew that the man who killed him
Had been Gregorio Cortez.

They let loose the bloodhound dogs;
They followed him from afar.
But trying to catch Cortez
Was like following a star.

All the rangers of the county
Were flying, they rode so hard;
What they wanted was to get
The thousand-dollar reward.

And in the county of Kiansis
They cornered him after all;
Though they were more than three hundred
He leaped out of their corral.

Then the Major Sheriff said,
As if he was going to cry,

"Cortez, hand over your weapons;
We want to take you alive."

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
And his voice was like a bell,
"You will never get my weapons
Till you put me in a cell."

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand,
"Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!"

Cortez's epic encounter was neither the first nor the last of such encounters with Anglo-Texan authority, nor was it the first or last to inspire corridos. Ten years before Cortez, Catarino Garza, journalist and guerrilla leader, had taken up organized arms against the Texas Rangers and inspired a balladry. Fourteen years after Cortez, new corridos could be heard along the border about *los sediciosos* (the seditionists), bands of Mexicans who, again, rose up in armed rebellion in 1915–1916 against Anglo-Texan authority. In reprisal the Texas Rangers carried out massive killings of combatants and civilians alike, a practice that even an eminent champion of the Rangers, historian Walter Prescott Webb, felt obliged to criticize as an "orgy of bloodshed" (1935: 263).

In an attenuated form, the tradition of conflict and corridos continues through the present, although by the 1930s the intense conflict and the epic corridos of the past had diminished (Peña 1982: Limón 1983). Nonetheless, the subordination of the Mexican-descent community continued even while new leadership elements emerged to speak on its behalf, albeit in an assimilationist rhetoric. It was in the waning moments of the epic corrido and amid this new assimilationist ideology that Américo Paredes came to maturity. I shall say more of his life later; for now, I note that he is Professor of English and Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin.

When it appeared in 1958, *With His Pistol in His Hand* received its principal attention from the communities of folklorists and scholars of the West and certain elements of the Anglo lay public in Texas. It might have remained another circumscribed, scholarly book for specialists. However, in the 1960s the book found a sociopolitical context and a wider audience of socially-designated perceiving subjects that gave it a far more global meaning. The 1960s provided these when

the first significant groups of largely working-class Mexican-American youth attended colleges and universities in the Southwest, and joined with other youth in the political protest and cultural rebellion of the time. For Mexican-American youth, of course, there was a very particular focus on the continuing socioeconomic plight of their native community. This activity among this college youth became the Chicano movement which, in addition to its practical politics, also generated a great deal of intellectual and artistic work on the Mexican-American community (Gomez-Quiñones 1978; Ybarra-Frausto 1977). Published on the eve of this political, intellectual, and artistic florescence, Paredes's book proved to be not only a scholarly, anthropological folklore study but also a text written in such a poetically designated way that, almost as if by design, it became a powerful influence on a new generation of Chicano writers, intellectuals, and activists as they produced a new critical social discourse. The late Tomás Rivera, former chancellor of the University of California at Riverside and still the leading Chicano fiction writer, had this to say concerning his introduction to *With His Pistol in His Hand*. He writes of a time when he was a graduate student at a small state college in San Marcos, Texas between Austin and Karnes County.

One day I was wandering through the library and I came across *With His Pistol in His Hand* by Américo Paredes and I was fascinated. I didn't even know Paredes existed though we were only thirty miles away . . . but there was no communication at all, because there wasn't a Movement or anything like that. I checked out that book. I was hungry to find something by a Chicano. . . . It fascinated me because, one, it proved it was possible for a Chicano to publish; two, it was about a Chicano, Gregorio Cortez and his deeds . . . and, the ballads too. I grew up with the *corridos* in Texas. That book indicated to me that it was possible to talk about a Chicano as a complete figure. . . . More importantly, *With His Pistol in His Hand* indicated to me a whole imaginative possibility for us to explore. Now that also was in 1958, and it was then I began to think, write, and reflect a hell of a lot more on those people I had known in 1945 to '55. (Bruce-Novoa 1980: 150)

Taking Rivera's statement as a representative text for the Chicano movement, I now want to examine the persuasive poetics of Paredes's book to suggest interpretively how it could become such influential cultural rhetoric.

Given the account of Gregorio Cortez Paredes has given us in *With His Pistol in His Hand*, it is not difficult to see a general and simple

basis for the book's appeal to a new audience of young Chicanos. Seeing themselves in a renewed confrontation with the gringos, Chicano community activists would certainly find an inspiring model in the figure of Cortez, his pistol in hand, resisting Anglo authority. For Chicano critical scholars, Paredes's superb, counterhegemonic scholarship would also prove influential, particularly for a group that had precious few examples of such scholarship in its historical background. Finally, as Rivera demonstrates, Chicano creative writers certainly responded affirmatively to Paredes's fine, engaging depiction of Cortez.³

However, I submit that, in addition to its political, scholarly, and literary qualities, or better still, subsuming all of these, *With His Pistol in His Hand* and its author work as cultural rhetoric, as a total poetic global designation for the Chicano movement. We must understand this influence then beyond the artificial divisions of politics, letters, and scholarship. In their narrative composition, the author/text recall and transform the residual though still powerful social poetics of the Mexican ballad for social subjects who were still keenly aware of this native poetics. As Tomás Rivera attests: "I grew up with the corridos in Texas," and so did many of us. It is as if, through the possession of this traditional aesthetics, *With His Pistol in His Hand* and its author were composed as a transformed "ballad," and we, the participants in the Chicano movement, were able to read them as such. Drawing on this shared aesthetic, Paredes and his text may have played an important part in producing the form and character of the Chicano movement as a total cultural enactment. It was a movement that could and did respond to the corrido directly in its "naive" form⁴ but one that also needed and found a mediated and transformed corrido that would both evoke the traditional aesthetic yet respond to a new socio-educational reality. As a "model of" the past, this new corrido also offered a "model for" producing a political movement in our time (Geertz 1973).

My analysis will focus on those major elements in the book that, since its publication, have contributed to its rhetorical influence as another ballad of Gregorio Cortez.

The Return of the Mexican Ballad: The Author's Text

Paredes's book opens with an unusual dedication, one that is an important part of the public text. His dedication in free verse "to the

memory of my father / who rode a raid or two with / Catarino Garza”
continues:

and to all those old men
who sat around on summer nights
in the days when there was
a chaparral, smoking their
cornhusk cigarettes and talking
in low, gentle voices about
violent things;
while I listened. (1971: 6)

This poetic text at the beginning of the book is important because it establishes the author's relationship to his father and to an older generation and their folklore (a point to be pursued later); it also establishes the writer's special authority to recall and transform the past which, on those summer nights, would have included the singing of corridos. In his use of free English language meter and verse and in his evocation of his youth, the author is also establishing his authority to speak to the present generation increasingly educated in a modernist and post-modernist climate.

A brief introduction is next, as if the author is anxious to move us quickly to the main text; its precise economy, however, alerts us to the traditional model that will inform this text. The author uses his introduction to set up his rhetorical strategy in three ways. First, Paredes tells us: "This book began as the study of a ballad; it developed into the story of a ballad hero. Thus it became two books in one. It is an account of the life of a man, of the way that songs and legends grew up about his name, and of the people who produced the songs, the legends, and the man. It is also the story of a ballad, 'El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,' of its development out of actual events, and of the folk traditions from which it sprang" (1971: 3). This statement of textual division permits Paredes to present technical, formal scholarship and analysis of the Mexican ballad in a separate, second section, with the strategic rhetorical effect of making available to the reader, should he or she need it, the defining material for understanding this genre. At the same time, by bracketing this more technical, "scholarly" data in a separate and second section, he does not impede the narrative flow of part I for those who may already possess a good deal of the necessary and perhaps native knowledge concerning the corrido form. (For others, the result is an engaging, informative good story.)

Second, as if to alert us explicitly to the style of his text even as he provides useful information, Paredes also provides a brief and general definition of the corrido: "*Corrido*, the Mexicans call their narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking the name from *correr*, which means 'to run' or 'to flow', for the *corrido* tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishments" (1971: 3). I suggest that this is precisely what we will recognize when we begin the main text, a story told "simply and swiftly, without embellishments."

Finally, however, it will not be a simple story about just any balladry or for that matter, any Mexican balladry; it will be a story about the balladry of borders and conflict, particularly the border and conflict between those of Anglo and Mexican descent in the United States. With this third rhetorical move, Paredes locates his Chicano readers and appeals to their general experiential sense of this conflict in the same way that a traditional ballad singer along the border might say, as part of his brief introduction, "I'm going to sing a corrido about the americanos," and everyone would understand the social relation he was evoking as the context for his song.

Having just told us that this will be a book about corridos, Paredes next presents us with a partial version of one printed on a single page without commentary (1971: 6). We might say that, on one level, it is there as a useful example of what he will soon be discussing. In my interpretive terms, however, it also has the rhetorical effect of reminding Chicano readers of the style of our traditional folk form and of its sound for those who can read the musical notation that Paredes also provides (not included on p. 6). Moving to the next page, we have the model of the corrido fresh in our consciousness, a visible reminder of the tradition that Paredes is about to transform for our use.

To proceed further in understanding this transformation, we must move momentarily to part II of the book; here, we obtain a fuller definition of the corrido that we can use as context for the corrido-like quality of part I and for a comparison of the two corridos, that of tradition and that of scholarly prose. According to Paredes, a "scenic structure . . . is typical of the Border heroic *corrido*. The setting in motion of the action in a few swift lines, the introduction of the hero speaking out his boast in the second scene, after his first exploit, thus giving the whole narrative a middle-of-things feeling, the tendency to tell the story not in a long continuous and detailed narrative but in a series of shifting scenes and by means of action and dialogue—all these

are stylistic devices typical of the Border *corrido*.” And, in such ballads, Paredes continues, “a couple of stanzas get the story going and then the hero appears shouting out his boast or his defiance. From that moment on, the story moves swiftly to its conclusion, with point of view shifting rapidly from the hero to his adversaries and back again, and from one position in space to another if the action covers a great deal of ground” (1971: 187).

To this we might add the following, with which Paredes would not disagree. The corrido of border conflict is embedded in a history of social conflict, and therefore, as a text, it continually signifies and refers to the confrontation of larger social forces defined by ethnicity and class.

Armed with this extended definition of the border corrido, we can now closely examine part I of *With His Pistol in His Hand* and its author’s biography as they incorporate and transform this traditional poetics into a compelling rhetoric for our time. As a textual transformation of tradition, we should, of course, not expect *With His Pistol in His Hand* to be a ballad. Rather, as a text, it reveals the stylistic influence of its folk subject, drawing upon its simple power and transforming it for an audience. This audience draws upon its knowledge of this traditional poetics yet needs it transformed to speak to a new social and intellectual political climate.

The first chapter of part I called “The Country,” like the first stanzas of a corrido, establishes the setting and scene of the action in a relatively “few swift lines.” “Country” here, however, means more than the geographic locale of the story; it encompasses a careful delineation of the opposing social forces—Anglo and Mexican—which a traditional corrido singer could far more easily have assumed to be part of his audience’s everyday, intense, social experience. They would have immediately understood the full signification of stanza I of “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” where a sheriff has died, and stanza II, where the killer is identified as Cortez, although the particular details of the incident and its aftermath await the rest of the ballad narrative. In our time we require a few more words to delineate a social structure that, while somewhat obscured and mystified, still retains its force today. For as Paredes began to “sing” his corrido to his new audience, he did so within an ongoing social structure that produced segregated barber shops around the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1960s and sanctioned the use of Texas Rangers to break up Mexican farm worker strikes in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. And yet, as I’ve

suggested, like the corrido singer, Paredes is careful not to use too many words lest he lose his audience and distort the clarity of the situation. In only twenty-six simply and elegantly written pages, we who still appreciate corrido-like simplicity are told the essentials of what we need to know to grasp the full social significance of the Cortez incident which is to follow. However, our relative lack of intense social experience—our generation was never lynched—and, paradoxically, our higher education create our need for the longer opening “stanza” of chapter I.

As Paredes has noted, the traditional corrido usually introduces the hero in the next few stanzas in legendary proportions. “But trying to catch Cortez / Was like following a star,” which are maintained as the ballad narrative unfolds: Cortez directly addresses and taunts the pursuing Texas Rangers; three hundred surround him at a single moment, yet he escapes. These are the fictive elements permitted to the composer in the exercise of his poetic license. They draw on a larger store of legend with its own independent oral existence, which, present in the community’s consciousness, enhances their appreciation of the sparse, sung ballad.

Following the ballad pattern, Paredes introduces us to the legendary Cortez in chapter II called “The Legend,” our second “stanza.” Amplifying what the ballad suggests, the legend tells us that Cortez was a quiet, polite, good man: a fine horseman, a knowledgeable farmer, and a superb shot with rifle and pistol. He was living a quiet life along the predominantly Mexican border country when his brother, who “was just like the young men of today, loud mouthed and discontented,” persuaded him to leave the border country and to “move away from the river and go up above, where there was much money to be made” (1971: 36). This chapter then recapitulates the legendary proportions of the shooting incident in Karnes County and the dramatic flight southward told in the ballad narrative.

As in chapter I, Paredes takes a few more lines in his “ballad” to accomplish for his audience what a traditional singer in 1901 could assume about his, namely, that the legend of Cortez was in the people’s consciousness, and that they would bring it to bear in their appreciation of his sung ballad. Paredes’s audience requires a direct, elaborated, albeit economical prose version of the legend; this is his historically necessary way to “sing” his ballad.

Like much folklore, however, the corrido is not simply a narrative of totally mythic fictions. It is an historical account that, within a

mythos and an ideological perspective, permits its audience to discover a remarkable range of social reality. Whatever the fictive dimensions of this particular ballad, its audience learns that, in fact, Cortez had killed a sheriff in a place called Karnes County, and afterward claimed his right to do so in defense of his life and that of his brother. They also learn certain true details of the southward flight, of which the most general and important is that Cortez did outride and outshoot the vaunted Texas Rangers who, in fact, “captured” him only when he turned himself in after learning about the reprisals taken against his family and community.

Within his textual narrative constraints, it would have been next to impossible for Paredes to narrate legend alternating with historical fact: he does the next best thing, staying close to the corrido narrative conventions. He separates out the historical facts of the case based on primary research in chapter III, called “The Man.” Here we learn, interestingly enough, how remarkably close the legendary aspects of the ballad are to the emergent historical narrative as Paredes discovers and constructs it. In presenting his historical reconstruction, Paredes is also attentive to another corrido convention: telling the story “with point of view shifting rapidly from the hero to his adversaries and back again” (1971: 187). Unlike the Anglo historical reconstructions extant in 1958 and still not much improved, Paredes’s ballad narrative actually tells a great deal about the Anglo point of view and, like the corrido brings it to life, a favor rarely returned except in the dubious form of stereotypes. What we discover to some extent in the original corrido and to a larger extent in Paredes’s “corrido” is that Anglos are people; they show fear, doubt, anxiety, anger, fairness, meanness, pettiness, and generosity, although frankly, at that historical moment, where Mexicans are concerned, the negatives predominate. Using two chapters then, Paredes reproduces, in his more elaborated version with economical and simple words, the legendary and factual historical narration—the substance of the ballad—and brings it to a conclusion.

But if the ballad and Paredes’s transformations of it come to a structural close with chapter III, we would seem to be left with a superfluous final chapter IV in part I called “The Hero’s Progress.” In this closing chapter Paredes simply reviews the fact and fancy, the variants and versions of the Cortez legend and balladry and demonstrates their intertwined relationship. This chapter, clearly intended as a summary, bears no narrative structural relationship to the preceding three chap-

ters. Yet, from my analytical perspective, it has the interesting rhetorical effect of reading like a conversation, albeit in English prose.

In this final chapter Paredes offers, in his own restrained prose, a summary of the conversations that men might have after a corrido performance as they evaluate the corrido, its hero, its circumstances and try to get at the truth. As a postnarrative review, Paredes's final chapter resembles this kind of polyphonic conversation and as such is as integral a part of his total performance as it would be for a traditional corrido sung to an audience. Hence, I would argue even the seeming "review" character of chapter IV recalls a corrido performance.

I have suggested that *With His Pistol in His Hand* constitutes a transforming narrative response to the aesthetic influence of its scholarly subject, the border Mexican ballad. I would now like to amplify this argument by suggesting that to this balladlike anthropological performance, we can add its author's biography. As a social text, it, too, responds and seems shaped by the influence of the border ballad.

The Return of the Mexican Ballad: The Author as Text

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—legend of Américo Paredes. Such conversations—a kind of Chicano movement oral tradition—seem to construct the known life and career of this man into a folklore narrative, combining ballad and legend. Like all narratives, this narrative varies from group to group and performance to performance. Certain motifs are sometimes stated, sometimes implied, but an overall narrative structure does emerge, one which recalls the thematic structure of the traditional ballad and legend.

As with the traditional ballad, these conversations first establish a time and place setting, and imply a social context for the appearance of the hero and the central narrative action. This initial narrative sometimes starts with a key incident of confrontation between the hero and the Anglo authorities (Gregorio Cortez and the Sheriff). An Anglo teacher tells the young Paredes that college is not for boys "like him"; has he considered attending vocational school? Or, an assimilationist, middle-class, Mexican-American publisher in San Antonio

refuses to publish Paredes's early, stridently ethnic, nationalist poems. Or, perhaps most dramatic of all, the University of Texas Press in the late 1950s refuses to publish *With His Pistol in His Hand* unless Paredes deletes all critical references to Walter Prescott Webb, J. Frank Dobie, and the Texas Rangers. Paredes refuses to do so, threatens to publish the book elsewhere, and the University of Texas Press finally relents. When the book does appear, a former Texas Ranger actually tries to get Paredes's address from the press so that he can "shoot the sonafabitch who wrote that book."

This conversational proto-narrative may then fill out the author's background and key aspects of his career in a way that is almost entirely factual and yet has the aura of legend. Our hero was born in the auspicious year of 1915 during the height of the Texas Ranger killings in South Texas. He is said to be a good and simple man, as was said of Cortez, but from the beginning he is a bit extraordinary. As a young man in South Texas, he is something of the bohemian, exceptionally attractive to women and highly respected by men; a well-known popular singer on radio programs, a prize-winning poet and a journalist; a man who could and did defend his family's honor. The narrative continues. The hero is said to be highly gifted intellectually, restless and curious about life beyond South Texas. Like Cortez, Paredes leaves the border country and eventually winds up in central Texas near Karnes County at the University of Texas at Austin, after spending a few years as a correspondent in Japan and China after World War II. "Did you know that Don Américo covered the Chinese Revolution?"

When he does arrive at the University of Texas to study English and creative writing—his central career goal—it is not before another confrontation with those who dominate. This time it is the U.S. government, which initially refuses a visa to his wife, who is a Japanese national. For a moment Paredes thinks of living in Mexico. But the obstacle is overcome, and his advanced college education begins; he has had one year of community college work. Already in his mid-thirties, he has children; by overloading his course schedule, he completes his B.A. with highest honors in two years, an M.A. in one, and the Ph.D. in two more years in which he teaches several sections of freshman English to support his family. During this period he also publishes a few scholarly articles and writes a prize-winning novel. He also completes a dissertation on the balladry and life of Gregorio Cortez (later *With His Pistol in His Hand*), and after teaching one

year in El Paso, he is invited to rejoin the Department of English at Texas as a faculty member.

As a faculty member during the period 1958–66, Paredes engages in intellectual politics, continually attacking the dominant society's disparaging view of Mexican-Americans by demonstrating the latter's active historical presence through careful, creative scholarship such as that of *With His Pistol in His Hand*. He also tries to promote social activism among the university's Mexican-American students, but an assimilationist perspective is still too prevalent among them, and they do not respond to his efforts. Like Cortez, Paredes finds himself engaging the opposition largely alone, although he does find a Romaldo-like brother in Professor George I. Sanchez, a progressive figure in his own right (Garcia 1989: 252–72).

Cortez arouses the consciousness of his community by riding and shooting his way toward them and receiving their help. Paredes's native ideological and cultural community actually begins to come to him in the mid-1960s as the Chicano student movement starts to develop in Texas and in other southwestern universities. The hero and his community struggle in mutual support around issues such as the farm workers, Mexican-American studies, and increased political representation. With this social activism, the dissemination of his book, and visits to other campuses, the hero's legend continues to develop to the present in the conversational form that I have sketched. Though neither a ballad nor a legend in any formal narrative sense, this conversation partakes of both and gives us a sense of a ballad and a legendary hero in formation.

The Return of the Mexican Ballad and the Chicano Movement

One of the most active participants in and a better observer of the Chicano movement has noted the tendency of this movement to draw on historical models. "The entire Chicano leadership pattern, in fact, closely resembled the pattern of the Mexican Revolution, where revolutionary juntas and local leaders emerged. These leaders took care of their home bases and were supported by their own followers . . . all adhered to this basic pattern, inspiring intense loyalty among their followers" (Acuña 1981: 360).

We can expand this perceptive formulation by considering other

historical models and the Chicano movement as a social narrative—to see the movement as an unfolding social enactment that followed the model of the most potent Mexican narrative—the corrido—as it had learned it in mediated form from the widely popular Américo Paredes and his ostensibly anthropological text. Taking this author-text as one of several possible important cultural models, I want to generally trace its influence on the Chicano social narrative.

We may begin by noting that, like our legendary heroes Cortez and Paredes, these Chicano students were also from the border, if not literally from the U.S.-Mexico border, then certainly from the borders and margins of U.S. society. Although by no means from the most deprived sectors of U.S. society, they largely represented a wage-labor, working-class segment, particularly those from the literal border or even close to it—West San Antonio, Albuquerque, Phoenix, East Los Angeles, areas that reflected persistent socioeconomic marginalization. At a critical moment these students also experienced Cortez's journey. According to folk legend and to a considerable degree in historical fact, Cortez and his family had been drawn away from the border by the work made available as a result of the capitalist economic transformation of Texas. Similarly, as a result of new federal civil rights and educational aid policies beginning in the late 1950s, Chicano students found themselves attracted to the new socioeducational "north." For Texas students, as with Cortez and Paredes, such movement for opportunity was perfectly congruent with geography as they left the southern border area to come north to the University of Texas at Austin. (At the University of California at Los Angeles, the movement was east-west.)

This movement "north" brought many of these students into conflict with other aspects of the culture there. For while U.S. society presented new opportunities, it had not done so for the masses of Mexican-American society; the most telling evidence of this clear shortfall was (and is) the continuing plight of border society, and particularly the plight of the farm workers. Further, from the point of view of the students, who despite their own change in culture were still, in the words of the poet Juan Gomez-Quíñones, "just Mexican enough" (1973: 73), the colleges and universities receiving them were themselves sociointellectual embodiments of the same sociocultural power that dominated their parents and had lynched their grandparents. Not Sheriff Morris of Karnes County, but U.S. society, as these students

experienced it, was still a dominating force as it had been for Américo Paredes when he tried to publish his book.

For the students, the most direct confrontation came through the labor struggles of the largely Mexican-American farm workers in the mid-1960s in the Southwest. In Texas, the ballad narratives of the past took on special pertinence when farm workers from the border made a pilgrimage to Austin in 1966, only to be denied a hearing for their grievances by then governor John Connally, certainly as representative a symbol of Anglo-Texan class and cultural power as any symbolic anthropologist could have hoped for. To this denial Connally added injury, and stepped right alongside the models of history by sending the Texas Rangers to break up, with violence, farm worker strikes along the border; parallel confrontations occurred in California.

The student sector of the farm worker movement actively participated, and found its own beginning in these farm labor struggles; in Texas students had confrontations with the Rangers along the border. For, like Cortez, these students returned to the border not to escape but to engage; in so doing, like Cortez, they reestablished their links to their native community. (In Texas this meant literally following the general path that Cortez took as he rode south, except this time the path was taken in car caravans.) This initial participation and linkage with the home community soon widened as students lent their support to other issues in the society, particularly the serious deficiencies of public schooling. Soon Chicano college students throughout the Southwest were organizing strikes in the public schools to protest substandard educational conditions and, in so doing, enlisting public school youth in the movement (Foley et al. 1977). From the wider struggles in the larger community, the students also returned to the universities to bring them to account for their own denial of Mexican-American society, particularly for the failure of higher education to draw more Mexican-Americans into its ranks and to devote more intellectual attention to Mexican-American society and culture.

As in the ballad, legendary heroes to lead the struggle appeared early in the Chicano social narrative. Given the centrality of the farm labor movement, it is not too surprising that Cesar Chavez should be among the foremost of these—a “simple, good man”—but there were others as well, not always simple or good, whose rhetorical powers and personal charisma quickly lent them near legendary status. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales of Colorado, Reis Lopez Tijerina in New Mex-

ico, and José Angel Gutierrez in Texas were surely among these (Hammerback, Jensen, and Gutierrez 1985). And, of course, in the political world of intellect and letters there was Américo Paredes, whose personal “ballad” developed dialectically with this movement and whose written “ballad” *With His Pistol in His Hand* was, starting in the early 1960s, an influence upon it; countless Mexican-American students read it.

Paredes has suggested that the ballad of border conflict and its hero, such as Gregorio Cortez, epitomize “the ideal type of hero of the Rio Grande people, the man who defends his right with his pistol in his hand, and who either escapes at the end or goes down before superior odds—in a sense a victor even in defeat” (1971: 124). Something like this might be said—and it is only one perspective—of the Chicano movement in 1966–75. While it did “shoot” an institutional “Ranger” or two, its achievements were limited though real; farm labor legislation was passed; more Mexican-American political figures were elected; Mexican-American studies departments were established. Nonetheless, for many Chicanos various versions of a new social order did not come to pass, leading them to judge the movement a failure, though with some compensations of “a victor even in defeat.” Even as I write—and my words are perhaps a contribution—discussion and debate are taking place after the performance of our “ballad” (the movement) with its narrative of conflict between a community with its legendary heroes and a dominant social order denying this community. Like others after a performance of a traditional sung ballad, we, too, are asking and debating. “What was the meaning of this ballad?” “How good was it?” “Shall we sing another one?”

I have offered for interpretive consideration the interrelated propositions that Américo Paredes’s public career and his major anthropological text, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, formally and thematically mediate the influence of the Mexican border ballad and, in turn, become themselves cultural texts that help to shape the character and development of the Chicano movement. By no means were these the only influential cultural models. As Acuña has suggested, the social drama and heroes of the Mexican Revolution were also important, as were the mythic practices of the pre-Conquest peoples of Mexico and the drama of the Conquest itself. I am suggesting that closer to these students’ home culture is another cultural model—the corrido available to them as part of their folk tradition and represented to them by Paredes’s life and his corrido-like, politically and intellectually elab-

orated, simple and well-told story, both well known and appropriate to the students' liminal moment. Paredes's textuality had this particular mission: at this moment, it may be appropriate to assign it another for which it may also be an important text.

The Return of the Mexican Ballad and the "Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences": "A Last Word"

The purpose of Paredes's last chapter, called simply "A Last Word," is simultaneously to reaffirm the local character of the Mexican border ballad and to demonstrate its clear comparative relationship to world balladry. Of particular importance here is the close parallel that Paredes draws with Scottish balladry and political resistance to English domination. I submit that this chapter also had a rhetorical and instructive effect on its Chicano readership: always to attend finely to the character of the local experience of resistance while locating it as part of a larger pattern in the interest of generalizing and linking struggles. To this end, and in the interest of enhancing its hitherto localized reading, I shall offer my own parallel "last word" on Paredes's textuality by locating it among three broader issues that constitute part of what George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, in their subtitle, have called "an experimental moment in the human sciences" (1986).

I alluded above to the first of these, although for my purposes I approach it from a somewhat different perspective than does Marcus in an independent statement (1986). He correctly complains that ethnographers, in describing their various societies and cultures, have not "portrayed the role of these worlds in the sort of events and processes that make history, so to speak. . . . The world of larger systems and events has thus often been seen as externally impinging on and bounding little worlds but not as integral to them" (1986: 166). While Paredes's text is least satisfactory here—for example, we wish to know more about the particular character of the capitalist development that was transforming Gregorio Cortez's world—nonetheless, in his account of a folk world not in a pure state, but responding dialectically to imposed change through the creative process of corrido and legend, Paredes, writing in the mid-1950s anticipates somewhat a new trend toward this desirable sort of ethnography. From another perspective, his consistent effort to locate this local folk resistance in

relationship to other world efforts foreshadows a new desire to move beyond the bounds of localized ethnography.

The two remaining issues locate Paredes's text in perhaps sharper anticipation of this experimental moment not only in the human sciences but in literary criticism as well (if the distinction is even warranted). I refer to the personal role of the anthropologist, really the intellectual, in the production of his discourse and, to return to the place where I started, to the poetics of such discourse and its relationship to ethnic marginality.

Here we should recall Clifford's concern that ethnic intellectuals may be more constrained about textual experimentation in the production of their discourse; it is, he suggests, considerations of tenure and promotion and other forms of institutional acceptability that are constraining. Nonetheless, he is, "uneasy with a general notion that privileged discourse indulges in esthetic or epistemological subtleties, whereas marginal discourse 'tells it like it is.' The reverse is too often the case" (1986: 21). He is quite right; the reverse is often the case, and I have tried to suggest as much in the case of Américo Paredes in terms of both his writing and his career. I want to specify this relationship a bit more.

As his own example of the reverse case, Clifford points us to the ethnic works that Fischer discusses in an excellent essay on the ways that ethnic autobiographical writing can enhance experimental writing in anthropology. Fischer argues that such autobiographical writing offers to ethnographers models of desirable writing practices: "intertextuality, inter-reference, and the interlinguistic modalities of post-modernist knowledge," creative techniques that can "contribute to a reinvigorated ethnographic literature, one that can again fulfill the anthropological promise of cultural criticism" (1986: 202).

By intertextuality Fischer refers in part to the tendency in some ethnic autobiography to shape the present text as an often transforming repetition of "behavior patterns previously established toward some prior significant other," often a father figure (204). This is the psychoanalytical concept of the transference, "the return of the repressed in new forms" (206), which results in the generation of the ethnic text as the "conquest of an anxiety . . . that cannot be articulated in rational language but can only be acted out" (204). In a different version of this essay, I argue that *With His Pistol in His Hand*, as a kind of ethnic autobiography, textually reenacts this sort of relationship between Paredes as a younger writer and the ballad world of his father, whom

he clearly acknowledges as an influence in the dedication (noted earlier) only to transform him in the figure of Cortez (Limón 1992: 61–80). As Fischer also notes, such relationships are the subject of Harold Bloom's work on the poetics of influence (1973, 1975).

Interference and the interlinguistic modalities of postmodernist knowledge are, for Fischer, expressed in ethnic autobiography through its creative use of, among other techniques, "multiple voices and perspectives, the highlighting of humorous inversions and dialectical juxtaposition of identities/traditions/cultures, and the critique of hegemonic discourses" (1986: 202). I submit that Paredes's text—both the "ballad" he has written and the "ballad" about him—are exemplary in this regard. I have already noted the multiple voices and perspectives that enter into the construction of a corrido and the way Paredes's texts are also constructed in this polyphonic way. In *With His Pistol in His Hand* this polyphony also involves the clear dialectical juxtaposition of "identities/traditions/cultures," the more obvious one of Anglo vs. Mexicans and the varying identities within the Mexican-descent community itself. A few examples. In chapter II, "The Legend," a fictional traditional figure, recalling the singing of "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez," says, "That was good singing, and a good song; give the man a drink. Not like these *pachucos* nowadays, mumbling damn-foolishness into a microphone; it is not done that way. Men should sing with their heads thrown back, with their mouths wide open and their eyes shut. Fill your lungs, so they can hear you at the pasture's end" (1971: 34). And we discover that our mythic hero also has varying identities, including some not so mythic, which speak to gender differences and which Paredes handles with a kind of humorous inversion. For when Cortez is finally captured and brought to jail, *several* women show up to claim him as theirs even as his poor wife waits in the jail.

Humor, irony, and inversion, however, best serve Paredes in attacking hegemonic, Anglo, racist discourses about Mexicans in Texas; here too he borrows from the corrido tradition which often makes fun of Anglos. Paredes quotes the dominant Anglo historical authority on the subject of Mexicans. "Without disparagement," says Webb, "there is a cruel streak in the Mexican nature" (1935: 14). Webb attributes this partly to the heritage of the Spanish Inquisition and partly to Mexican Indian "blood," which, however, "when compared with that of the Plains Indian, was as ditch water" (1931: 125–26). Nevertheless, despite his "cruel streak," the Mexican is an inferior warrior; "the

whine of the leaden slugs stirred in him as irresistible impulse to travel with rather than against the music" (1935: 14). To all this, Paredes wryly comments: "Professor Webb does not mean to be disparaging. One wonders what his opinion might have been when he was in a less scholarly mood and not looking at the Mexican from the objective point of view of the historian" (1971: 17). Later, in his discussion of the shooting between Cortez and Sheriff Morris, Paredes ironically appropriates and juxtaposes Webb's observations in a new context. After Morris is shot, his deputy runs, according to Paredes, preferring to "travel with rather than against the music" made by "the whine of leaden slugs" (1971: 63).

Multiple voices, inversions, humor and irony, and the dialectical juxtaposition of "identities/traditions/cultures": these are for Fischer substantial elements of the creative imagination found in ethnic autobiography which can be of service to the writing of a new kind of ethnography. I suggest that, at least in some incipient anticipatory way, Paredes's book involves just such practices, as well as a larger juxtaposition, a blurring of genres between ethnic autobiography, historical ethnography and, as I have been particularly concerned to argue, between folk poetic forms and, to borrow a subtitle, "the poetics and politics of ethnography" (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

We need to consider as well another level of the juxtapositions of identities and traditions in the production of discourse. As I come to the end of my own discourse, I am becoming even more convinced, to return to Clifford, that when it comes to ethnicity, and experimental and ultimately subversive writing, the reverse *is* more often the case. From the margins of ethnicity, we may be able to obtain a more reflexive, innovative and critical discourse. We should not, however, be in an insular fortress—ethnicity peering in fear and suspicion at the "out there"—but work rather more as a guerrilla ethnicity, creatively and dialectically at the margins of various discourses. By the same reasoning, this approach need not be confined to the "traditional" ethnic groups, although I suspect that, under present conditions, they will be a more likely source. While certainly not a "trend," there seems to be increasing interest among nontraditional "ethnics" to locate in their respective heritages some resources for the development of new discourses: Harold Bloom returns anxiously to his Jewish Gnostic influences and analyzes the Jewish present (Bloom 1982); Frank Lentricchia recommends that "the intellectual of working class background, or more broadly of a background outside the social, racial,

ethnic, economic, gender-biased, and homophobic mainstream . . . retrieve his outsider's experience" and "bring it to bear in critical dialogue with the traditional confirmation he has been given" (1983: 8), referring, by way of example, to his own southern Italian origins. One also thinks of Raymond Williams's engaging discussions of his creative relationship to his working-class Welsh background (1979: 21–38).

If this kind of creative ethnic juxtapositioning in one's career is also an emergent part of the experimental moment in contemporary discourse, then here too we find Américo Paredes anticipating and providing an early model, doing so not as a propagandist for simple ethnicity nor as a community "activist" but as a literary intellectual, a *specific* literary intellectual, as Lentricchia would say after Foucault: "one whose radical work of transformation, whose fight against repression is carried on at the specific institutional site where he finds himself and on the terms of his own expertise, on the terms inherent to his own functioning as an intellectual" (Lentricchia 1983: 6). In the 1950s Américo Paredes was, and he continued to be, this kind of intellectual, drawing creatively on his own cultural background and bringing it to bear in critical dialogue with his traditional intellectual training. His writings and career represent a transformation of his political/poetic past—the corrido—in the service of a radical work of transformation in the present for the Mexican-descent community and as a possible anticipatory model for the emergence of a new critical discourse among intellectuals at large.

For the immediate future, it is for his poetic politics with persuasive reference to the Mexican-descent community in the United States, particularly its activist intellectuals, that Américo Paredes will be best known. This is a considerable achievement in the context of the restricted and transient nature of much contemporary intellectual work. Like his Texas-born and raised contemporary and fellow "outsider" C. Wright Mills, Paredes used and continues to use "the wit of the satirist, the passions of the partisan, the imaginative attention to detail of the novelist" in a fight against repression (Miller 1986: 83). Like Mills, Paredes too, is "a poet of political possibilities" (Miller 1986: 83). With one singular book and career, Paredes also might be described, though in the present tense, in something of the terms that Miller uses for C. Wright Mills: "Dramatizing his political vision in 'sociological poems' that he aimed at the widest possible readership, [he] reached a mass audience and—perhaps more importantly—inspired a handful of young activists. Through these students, who re-

vered his images and took his ideas to heart, he fostered a rebirth of democratic idealism . . . he left a legacy of vivid intellectual style, frequently brilliant social analysis, a beguiling icon of democracy and a seductive new rhetoric of vernacular radicalism" (Miller 1986: 101).

For this and more, we are grateful to Américo Paredes.

Notes

1. "It may be generally true," says Clifford, "that groups long excluded from positions of institutional power, like women or people of color, have less concrete freedom to indulge in textual experimentations. To write in an unorthodox way, Paul Rabinow suggests in this volume (Rabinow 1986), one must first have tenure. In specific contexts a preoccupation with self-reflexivity and style may be an index of privileged estheticism. For if one does not have to worry about the exclusion or true representation of one's experience, one is freer to undermine ways of telling, to focus on form over content" (Clifford 1986: 21).

2. This divorce of the sign from society as part of the "postmodern" and the "post-structural" has been the subject of critiques from various perspectives on the left (Anderson 1984; Jameson 1984; Lentricchia 1980; Rabinow 1986; Said 1982).

3. See Saldivar 1990: 26-46.

4. Indeed, this Chicano movement produced corridos of its own (Limón 1983).

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