The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* and Chicano Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century

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The Caribbean revolutionary, writer, and theoretician C. L. R. James once noted that “[o]ver a hundred years ago, Hegel said that the simplest reflection will show the necessity of holding fast... the affirmation that is contained in every negation, the future that is in the present” (161).1 Doing “cultural studies” before the term, with all of its current proprietary implications, was in common use, James has much to say about questions of culture, writing, and politics, issues of vital concern today. James’s analyses are particularly instructive in the way they consider issues of cultural production in relation to personal consciousness and across national boundaries and historical eras.

The last few years, however, have been marked less by speculation on the future than by what Fredric Jameson has called “an inverted millenarianism... in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the ‘crisis’ of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc."

(“Postmodernism” 53). Given the recent, astonishingly sudden, collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, an event that Robin Blackburn has called “sufficiently comprehensive to eliminate [Communism] as an alternative to capitalism and to compromise the very idea of socialism” (5), one might understandably be tempted to add to this list, in premature gesture of dismissal, the end of Marxism, or of revolution. “Taken together,” maintained Jameson in 1984, “all of these [ endings] perhaps consti-
tute what is increasingly called postmodernism” (“Postmodernism” 53).

If in the wake of these millennial endings we are indeed on the threshold of something like George Bush’s fabled “new world order,” the beginning of the post–cold war era has shown us that we are also still very much in the depths of an old disorder. The social, economic, political, and psychic crises that were momentarily elbowed into the background by the recent, short-lived euphoria accompanying the end of hot and cold wars now seem again to characterize the present. We are left still to wonder what a truly “new world order” might look like in a post–cold war, post-Marxian, postcolonial, postmodern, indeed, “postcontemporary” era.

Resisting the temptation to prognosticate, I wish to return to James’s notion of the “future in the present” as a way of reading a recent Chicano novel for what it might teach us about the processes of cultural and subjective formation in our “postcontemporary” age, and for a hint of what affirmations might sublate present negations. Situated on the time-space border between North American and Latin American world experiences, Chicano and Chicana discourse generally is a prime instance of what has recently been termed “border writing,” that kind of postcontemporary discourse that, according to Emily Hicks, exhibits a “multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory” (xxiii). The multidimensionality and nonsynchronicity of “border writing” emerge from its capacity to see from both sides of one border and configure a concept from within two cultural contexts. “Multidimensionality” and “nonsynchronicity” are thus differential variations of James’s dialectical “future in the present.” Since Chicana scholars, artists, and writers have been in the avant-garde of the recent flowering of Chicano literary, visual, and performance arts, I will address momentarily the issue of gender in relation to Chicano cultural studies. In light of James’s argument concerning the future in the present, however, I wish to focus on a writer who is now widely recognized as having articulated the terrain of Chicano cultural studies and established the very ground for “border writing”: Américo Paredes.

Paredes’s best-known contribution to American cultural history is perhaps “With His Pistol in His Hand” (1958), a study of ballads of US-Mexican border conflict. In late 1990, Paredes furthered his study of the border by publishing a novel, George Washington Gómez. Written between 1935 and
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1940, the novel lay deferred by the pressures of everyday life for 50 years before its appearance. Set at the beginning of the century, written near mid-century, but published at the end of the century, Paredes’s novel addresses as a curiously polytemporal text the central social issues of our era. As a product of the Great Depression, it speaks from the past to the present. Paradoxically, it also expresses from that past the constitution of the present ethnic subject and the formation of what Norma Alarcón has recently termed “ethno-nationalism,” issues that James had already characterized as elaborations of the future in the present. Bordered by dissymmetries of space and dispersed in nonsynchronous stages of material history, the Chicano subject’s “identity” and the patterns of its formation as a subject may be seen, as Paredes’s novel shows, as effects of the discontinuous network of strands made up by the discourses and practices of politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, and language itself. In George Washington Gómez, we thus have a prefigurative instance of the state of Chicano literature and the Chicano subject at the end of the twentieth century. Paredes’s novel offers “the future in the present” in ways that both prepare for his own future ethnographic and literary historical work and also anticipate the links between the sociopolitical and ethicosubjective in contemporary borderlands representations of identity. The novel pulls from the residual elements of traditional culture the patterns that conceive the subject and interrogates those patterns in the light of its dominant, modern formation to suggest other, as yet untried, designs for imagining a new ethnic consciousness.

In an essay on “The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture,” Paredes maintains that the material, nonessential nature of the transformative Chicano consciousness is a by-product of the real “conflict—cultural, economic, and physical—[which] has been a way of life along the border between Mexico and the United States” (68). Following Paredes, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo reminds us that borders are hardly innocent spaces but rather “sites where identities and cultures intersect” (149). Gloria Anzaldúa, in sharp addition to both, notes that “[t]he U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (3). Rosaldo and Anzaldúa thus agree with Paredes that in those borderland contact zones between conflicting cultures, identity becomes a central prob-
lematic, linked explicitly to racial and economic, as well as to psychological and ethical, categories.

This scene of conflict and the narratives of its resolution have their special place in American history. Because of their historical and geopolitical positioning as the easternmost outpost, first of colonial New Spain, and then of the newly independent Republic of Mexico, the people of the present-day South Texas region—people of Mexican culture—argues Paredes, experienced first the conflict with Anglo-American culture that would soon affect all of the Mexican borderland settlements of the Southwest, prefiguring the history of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. In Texas by 1835, the Anglo-Texan fight for independence from Mexico had left Mexican Texans dispossessed foreigners on their own native land, culturally Mexican, politically American, in reality not quite either. Like their ancestors sent to settle the South Texas region in 1749 to fill the gap between the central Mexican seat of government to the south and the far-off Anglo-Texan colonies to the north, the inhabitants of the present Lower Rio Grande Valley came to live, and experience their everyday lives as inhabiting, “an in-between existence” (Paredes, “The Problem of Identity” 73).

After 1835, this sense of being caught in the middle intensified and became a hallmark of Mexican-American identity. Paredes’s “With His Pistol in His Hand” was a study of the border ballad tradition—the corrido tradition—that arose chronicling this history of border conflict and its effects on Mexican-American culture. Paredes there noted that “[b]orders and ballads seem to go together, and their heroes are all cast in the same mold. . . . During the Middle Ages there lived in some parts of Europe, especially in border areas, a certain type of men whose fame has come down to us in legend and in song. . . . People composed ballads about men like these; legends grew up about them, and they became folk heroes to be studied and argued about by generations of scholars” (xii). As the oral folk history of nineteenth-century Mexican-American resistance to Anglo-American political and cultural power, affecting both subjective and collective identity construction, the Mexican-American corrido functioned as an ideological expression of what Raymond Williams, in another idiom, calls the “residual” cultural order. “The residual, by definition,” says Williams, “has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the
present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (122). These lived “experiences, meanings, and values” of traditional Mexican-American communities (effectively formed in the past, but still active in the present cultural process) expressed in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century corridos centered on folk heroes who represented the community’s collective resistance to the new dominant Anglo power. Typically in the corrido of intercultural conflict, a hard-working, peace-loving Mexicano is goaded by Anglo outrages into violence, causing him to defend his rights and those of others of his community against the rinches, the border Spanish rendering of Texas “Rangers.”

Paredes’s novel, George Washington Gómez, is set against this history of cultural-political conflict chronicled in the US-Mexican border ballad. It takes especially as its moment the 1915 uprising in South Texas by Mexican Americans attempting to create a Spanish-speaking republic of the Southwest. Dismissed as “Mexican bandits” by Anglo historians, the sediciosos (“seditionists”), as they came to be known, were acting under a carefully considered revolutionary manifesto, the “Plan de San Diego,” that called for a union of Texas Mexicans with American Indians, African Americans, and Asian Americans to create an independent border republic of the Southwest. Answering deep-seated feelings of anger and frustration over Anglo oppression and injustice, the seditionist movement of 1915 was an early expression of the feelings evoked later by the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and an early enunciation of coalition politics among internal Third World groups in the US.

In 1915, bands of armed men under the leadership of Anciceto Pizaña and Luis de la Rosa raided Anglo military posts, ranches, railroad lines, and depots throughout South Texas. In the end, the seditionists were overwhelmed by the American military forces brought in to quell the uprising. Resistance was followed swiftly by terror, as the Texas Rangers set out to enact reprisals against the entire Mexican-American population of South Texas. In the aftermath of the seditionist uprising, hundreds of innocent Mexican-American farmers and ranchers were slaughtered by Texas Rangers, summarily executed without trial at even the smallest hint of possible alliance with, or even sympathy for, the seditionists. The result was that South
Texas was virtually cleared of landholding Mexican Americans, making feasible the Anglo development of the region into its capitalist agribusiness formation in the 1920s. Paredes’s novel situates us in the midst of this historical scenario, taking its tone, however, not from the celebration of the tragic corrido hero, doomed to honorable but certain defeat with his pistol in his hand, but from the pathos of those innocents from whom was exacted the cost of defeat.

Richard Johnson has claimed that one may arrive at a functional definition of that slippery term “culture” indirectly by focusing on related key words, such as “consciousness” and “subjectivity” (45). “Identity” is, of course, linked to these terms as well, as the signifier of differentiation within consciousness and subjectivity. “When we name things,” says Paredes, “we give them a life of their own; we isolate them from the rest of our experience. By naming ourselves, we affirm our own identity; we define by separating ourselves from others, to whom we give names different from our own” (“The Problem of Identity” 78).

The issue of identity is raised from the first pages of the novel, as Gumersindo and María Gómez, María’s mother, and her brother, Feliciano García, discuss the naming of the child who has been born to them in the midst of the seditionist uprising and its bloody aftermath:

The baby . . . was feeding greedily at his mother’s breast. Born a foreigner in his native land, he was fated to a life controlled by others. At that very moment his life was being shaped, people were already running his affairs, but he did not know it. Nobody considered whether he might like being baptized or not. Nobody had asked him whether he, a Mexican, had wanted to be born in Texas, or whether he had wanted to be born at all. The baby left the breast and María, his mother, propped him up in a sitting position. She looked at him tenderly. “And what shall we name him?” she wondered aloud. (15) 

The answer to her question exemplifies one version of Chicano subject formation in the American West and Southwest, an American postcolonial variant of the “processes of subjectification” that Homi K. Bhabha has identified with colonial discourse and the formation of the colonial subject in general. We already know the literal answer to her question: the baby is the title character. Positioned as a subject by the material actions and symbolic rituals of the community into which he has been
born, the child also has a figural present and a prefigural future in the present underwritten by the relations of class and race in which he will live his life, as Paredes’s previously published work suggests. Indeed, the process of subjectification that we witness at the beginning of his story only makes concrete the abstract process of categorization that has configured the child even before his birth.

The other characters, María’s husband, mother, and brother, offer her a variety of names for the child, each pointing toward an alternative narrative within which the child’s destiny might be played out: first, “Crisóforo,” a name of grandiose and idiosyncratic proportions, is considered as a sign of his singularity; “José Angel,” a name serving as a sign of the continuity of traditional religious value, follows; “Venustiano” and “Cleto,” names alluding to the Mexican revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza and to one of the leaders of the ongoing sedition, are suggested as signs of revolutionary commitment; and even the father’s own name, “Gumersindo,” as sign of genealogical continuity, is considered but, oddly, rejected like the rest. Finally, the child’s mother speaks: “I would like him to have a great man’s name. Because he’s going to grow up to be a great man who will help his people.” Gumersindo responds playfully, saying, “My son... is going to be a great man among the Gringos...” and then adds in sudden inspiration, “A Gringo name he shall have!... Is he not as fair as any of them?” (16), introducing into this moment of subject formation the issues of race and color. We might see this moment as an exemplary instance of Althusserian interpellation (174), the process whereby an “individual” is appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial [and political] ideological configuration in which it is ‘expected’ once it has been conceived” (176). Once appointed as a subject, the configured individual may then respond to the pressures of ideology by functioning within the category of the subject. At issue immediately in the novel, then, are questions of “identity,” “subjectivity,” and “consciousness,” especially as these concepts relate to “culture.”

Trying to recall what “great men” the Gringos have had, Gumersindo considers before exclaiming: “I remember... Wachinton. Jorge Wachinton” (16). The grandmother’s attempt to say the strange name “Washington” comes out as: “Gualinto... Gualinto Gómez” (17). And so the name sticks. The clash of identities that is the substance of Gualinto Gómez’s life is instantiated at this originary moment where the
various discourses that might have ordered his life are signaled to us. The story of this child, a “foreigner in his native land,” will follow the commandments implicit in the ideologies unconsciously projected in his “very good name,” ideologies that will position him as a subjected representation of the imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence in the early twentieth-century borderlands of South Texas.

Each of the names, those considered and rejected, as well as the one chosen and immediately transformed into its dialectal equivalent, signals a different set of speech genres and promises to inscribe the child into a particular discursive history. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, speech genres, certain combinations of forms of utterances, underwrite permissible locations in lived life and, more importantly, serve as normative restraints on our most intimate intentions; they form the legitimate borders of what we can say and not say. The textual instance at hand represents two sets of such speech genres at work: on the one hand are represented the utopian hopes and dreams of the father and mother, who optimistically project a future of reconciled differences with their crossed references to the child’s promised Mexican and American destinies. On the other hand are the historically validated misgivings of the child’s uncle concerning these crossed destinies. As he leaves the scene of ritual naming, Feliciano, soon to be the child’s surrogate father, sings some verses from one of the most famous of the corridos of border conflict, “El Corrido de Jacinto Treviño”: “En la cantina de Bekar, se agarraron a balazos” (“In Baker’s saloon, some shots rang out”). Prefiguring the violent murder of Gumersindo by Texas Rangers in the very next chapter, the song activates an entirely different speech genre to guide the interaction between the child’s Mexican nurturing and American enculturing. The dialectics between these binary oppositions move the novel’s ideological plot but in decidedly unforeseeable patterns.

The instability of this ideological plot is signaled throughout the remainder of the novel by the continuing instability of the title character’s name. In crucial early scenes, before he enters the American schools, the child is Gualinto Gómez, with a name he and his uncle like to explain is “Indian.” These idyllic preschool years will later serve as the Edenic counterpoint, the largely untroubled duration of no time before the fall into history, that might ironically reemerge to save him for history. In the narrated present, however, once the child enters school, his heart and mind become the battleground for cultural hegemony:
So, . . . [Gualinto] began to acquire an Angloamerican self, and as the years passed, . . . he developed simultaneously in two widely divergent paths. In the schoolroom he was an American; at home and on the playground he was a Mexican. Throughout his early childhood these two selves grew within him without much conflict, each an exponent of a different tongue and a different way of living. The boy nurtured these two selves within him, each radically different and antagonistic to the other, without realizing their separate existences.

It would be several years before he fully realized that there was not one single Gualinto Gómez. That in fact there were many Gualinto Gómezes, each of them double like images reflected on two glass surfaces of a show window. The eternal conflict between two clashing forces within him produced a divided personality, made up of tight little cells independent and almost entirely ignorant of each other, spread out all over his consciousness, mixed with one another like squares on a checkerboard.

(147)

To raise the question of “identity” as this passage does is not to celebrate it or fix it as something that is knowable, and known, a priori. What follows instead in the course of the narrative of Gualinto’s history is a systematic exploration of the attempted standardization of the notion of “identity,” as much by the American school system that attempts to pass off ideology in the guise of truth as by the economic system that commodifies complex differences of identity by reflecting a single specular image in the “glass surfaces of a show window” in the marketplace. Equally operative, even if repressed from the conscious levels of the narrative, is the fixation of Mexican gender ideology that identifies Gualinto as a belated heir to the tradition of armed resistance represented most starkly by his uncle Feliciano. Given this interplay of determining discourses, figured in this passage by the cubist image of the “checkerboard” of a modernist consciousness, from this point on, “identity” will not be available except in the form of a mediation, one that includes the existential materials of daily life along with those psychological ones in which the identity-form is imprinted in the early versions of twentieth-century mass culture. The catoptric theater of reflecting showcase windows, as Walter Benjamin has argued in another but related context, is not accidental but symbolic, a representational stratagem. The magic mirrors of the marketplace are contrived
to confound identity and the subject’s relation to commodities mingled with its reflected selves in the object world.

As Paredes’s narrator later puts it: “Consciously [Gualinto] considered himself a Mexican. He was ashamed of the name his dead father had given him, George Washington Gómez. He was grateful to his Uncle Feliciano for having registered him in school as ‘Gualinto’ and having said that it was an Indian name. . . . The Mexican national hymn brought tears to his eyes, and when he said ‘we’ he meant the Mexican people. . . . Of such matter were made the basic cells in the honeycomb that made up his personality” (147). This initial characterization turns out to be romantically, not to say sentimentally, incomplete. It implies that we might be able later to read the identity of the subject in relation to its experience of the Mexican object world that fills its private, affective world. From this view, a particular experience of reality would determine the content of ideology; determining the position of the subject in the real would be enough to recognize the content of its ideology and its source. Paredes denies, however, that the identity of the subject may be understood solely by virtue of its “conscious” positioning for, as we learn, “[t]here was also George Washington Gómez, the American. He was secretly proud of the name his more conscious twin, Gualinto, was ashamed to avow publicly. George Washington Gómez secretly desired to be a full-fledged, complete American without the shameful encumbrment of his Mexican race. He was the product of his Anglo teachers and the books he read in school. . . . Books had made him so” (147–48). Gualinto’s “identity” and his constitution as a subject may be seen, then, as an effect of an immense network of strands that includes the state school and its lists of required readings but that may be termed more generally “politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 13). These other colonial contexts and revolutions crowd in those instilled by the oral tradition of the border corrido, dispelling the possibility of positing a single, homogeneous, and authentically determining cause for this subject. Still, Gualinto’s American self is not to be read simply as a latent repression of the Other ready to break through from unconscious levels of the psyche to overwhelm the manifest Mexican identity of his conscious self. The mediation between the terms is infinitely more complex than the classical scenario of “true” and “false” consciousness might imagine: “In school Gualinto/George Washington was gently prodded toward complete Americanization. But the Mexican side of his being rebelled. Immigrants from Europe can become Americanized in one
generation. Gualinto, as a Mexicotexan, could not. Because ... he was not an immigrant come to a foreign land” (148).

Without the security of knowing or even of feeling that he will encounter what he already knows, Gualinto, like “other Mexicotexan children” (148), lacks even the advantage of his parents, who, as combatants in a racial and class struggle against an invariable enemy, knew who they were. The narrative of the parents’ identity, troubled and painful as it might be, is nonetheless determinate, reinforced in the icons of Mexican material culture and especially in the expressions of folklore: jokes, popular sayings, legends, and songs. In the traditional corrido, for example, the most formalized expression of the organic patriarchal discourse that names this identity, the fate of the individual and of the community are not separate. Rather, they are bound together in a unitary structure, like the various stanzas of the corrido. For the parents, conceptions of identity and subjectivity imparted by the traditional social environment are contained, as Antonio Gramsci has noted, in “language itself,” “common sense,” “popular religion,” and therefore also “in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled under the name of ‘folklore’” (323).

For the children, however, now “gently prodded toward complete Americanization,” rather than violently repressed for being Mexican, subjected to the interpellative work of both traditional Mexican folklore and the American ideological state apparatus, identity both is and is not what it seems to be. Both the American ideological apparatus and the Mexican folkloric enculturing networks acquire causal status by seeming to produce the effect of a primary, active subject. Gualinto the American would thus be seen as the product of a pluralist American melting pot ideology, while Gualinto the Mexican would be the shaped product of a sustaining traditional world. But as Paredes brilliantly shows, the apparently homogeneous, deliberative subject of borderland cultures emerges less as either a sovereign and causal, or dependent and effected, consciousness than as the doubly crossed “subject-effect” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 12) of both American ideological and Mexican folkloric systems.

These double Mexican and American culture systems each acquire within their own spheres a presumed priority by virtue of their apparent production of a formed subject. But this subject is then also taken to be an active causal agent, itself willfully capable of producing and reproducing the effects of both the American ideological and Mexican folkloric configu-
rations within which its own singular fate is said to evolve. Hence, what might initially have been conceived of as a double cultural systemic cause must now be regarded as the dual effects of a (bifurcated) sovereign subject. Yet simultaneously, the presumed sovereign subject remains the effected object of ideology and tradition. Within these doubly crossed catachrestic negations the sovereign Chicano subject, initially conceived as a formed effect and then as a forming agent, now appears instead as “the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 13). This metaleptic ground demarcates the social space of the bordered subject, encompassing both the figural construction of willed behaviors and the elaboration of ideological processes of subjectification. Now, if in the wake of this double deconstruction the category of the subject is to remain viable, it must be seen as a category at once essential and provisional, sovereign and bifurcated, a compelling form of what Spivak terms the “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (“Subaltern” 13). This doubly crossed figure is Paredes’s decisive proleptic rendering of the bordered subject of contemporary Chicano narrative.

Other types of national narratives constructed to provide the etiologies of identity, such as narratives of the immigrant experience, for instance, simply will not apply to the situation of such bordered, transcultured subjects. Standing in the borderlands of culture, these metaleptic figures exist on a much more problematic and unstable ground of heterogeneous determinations and crisscrossed negations: “Hating the Gringo one moment with an unreasoning hatred, admiring his literature, his music, his material goods the next. Loving the Mexican with a blind fierceness, then almost despising him for his slow progress in the world” (150). The rest of Gualinto’s story is concerned with what it would take, materially and psychologically, to imagine a new identity, how one could conceptualize what one can by definition not yet imagine since it has no equivalent in current experience. The novel attempts meticulously to imagine, in other words, the affirmation that is contained in every negation, in short, the future in the present. The conceptualization of identity that we are offered at novel’s end can thus in no way be taken as a precritically ideal one, even though it does remain, to a disturbing degree, sociologically and dialectically problematic.

Following these metaleptic, symbolic, and material transformations, identity now becomes in Paredes’s novel some-
thing akin to Juan Flores and George Yudice’s description of Latino identity in general, “a fending off of schizophrenia, of that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds and, perhaps, more significantly, of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced incorporation” (60). As Paredes’s narrator remarks: “The Mexicotexan has a conveniently dual personality. When he is called upon to do his duty for his country he is an American. . . . But while there are rich Negroes and poor Negroes, rich Jews and poor Jews, rich Italians and Poles and poor Italians and Poles, there are in Texas only poor Mexicans. Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest are divided into two categories: poor Mexicans and rich Spaniards” (195–96). The narrator elsewhere claims that “[t]he word Mexican had for so long been a symbol of hatred and loathing that . . . it had become a hateful and loathsome word” (118). Through a process of metonymic association whereby a descriptive signifier, Mexican, becomes a pejorative stigmata, middle-class sectors, anxious to dissociate themselves from the American denigration of the word and the culture, now became Spanish. This figural transformation obliquely suggests the continuing ideological dissimulation of Anglo-American hegemonic racial categories. By “conveniently” dividing “Spanish-speaking people” into two categories, “poor Mexicans and rich Spaniards,” dominant historical narratives encourage a particular social hierarchy. History and knowledge are not in this case, however, the disinterested production and representation of essential facts. They are instead the decidedly interested elements of “a subject-constituting project” (Young 159). In the face of such practices, a concrete manifestation of what Gayatri Spivak describes as the “epistemic violence” (“The Rani of Sirmur” 130) enacted on the colonized subject, the formation of the dual identity, Mexican and American and yet not either, is clearly not tied simply to coercive power structures or to essential features of race, class, or ethnicity alone. It is linked as well to vested constructions of specifically represented objects, with no existence or reality outside of their discursive representation. One is thus either “a rich Spaniard” or “a poor Mexican,” independent of biological or historical factors, for as social constructions the terms may not cross.

This confluence of subject-determining forces is ultimately forcefully represented to the eponymous hero when a former Texas Ranger says to him: “They sure screwed you up, didn’t they, boy? . . . You look white but you’re a goddam Meskin. And what does your mother do but give you a nigger
name. George Washington Go-maize” (284). Straddling the multicultural ground proves to be too much for Gualinto Gómez, who attempts to resolve these ambivalences by finally changing his name legally. He now forswears the bewildering unreality of his former composite names: the American “George Washington,” with all of its own now-mixed ethnic signals, alluding as the old Texas Ranger understands, not to the Founding Fathers, but to other, ethnic Washingtons, like George Washington Carver. And he rejects as well the American Indian sounding “Gualinto,” with all of its associations with familial, cultural, and local history. He takes instead the simpler, if not quite neutral, “George G. Gómez.”

In the wake of this scene of identity negotiation, Paredes offers one last dramatization of Chicano/Latino responses to the steering mechanisms of American society. Gualinto’s efforts first to resist the homogenizing pressures of the American school system and then to embrace his parents’ original dream that he be a “leader of his people” are both subverted when he becomes in the days just before World War II an officer in Army counterintelligence whose job is, ironically, “border security” (299): spying on newly emerging political organizations formed by his childhood friends. But this disowning of his family’s and his people’s history is achieved within a specific horizon of blurred personal and social experience. At novel’s end, Gualinto is curiously troubled by a recurring dream, which itself is a return of repressed boyhood daydreams. In the dream, he imagines himself leading a victorious counterattack against Sam Houston’s army at the decisive battle of San Jacinto in 1836, which had led to the creation of an independent Anglo Republic of Texas. In his dream, Gualinto rewrites history. With Santa Anna hanged and all traitors dispatched, in the dream “Texas and the Southwest... remain forever Mexican” (281): “He would imagine he was living in his great-grandfather’s time, when the Americans first began to encroach on the northern provinces of the new Republic of Mexico. Reacting against the central government’s inefficiency and corruption, he would organize rancheros into a fighting militia and train them by using them to exterminate the Comanches. . . . In his daydreams he built a modern arms factory at Laredo, doing it all in great detail, until he had an enormous, well-trained army that included Irishmen and escaped American Negro slaves” (282). On the verge of quite self-consciously losing himself as a pre-movement mexicano into the American melting pot, Gualinto’s political unconscious in the form of the collective memory instantiated by the sense of self mod-
eled by his father’s, his uncle’s, and his mother’s lives, returns to offer an alternative ideology and self-formation. In this return of the repressed (not of the classical unconscious but of historicity), the buried memories and daydreams of childhood erase Gualinto’s apparently resolved identity by reinscribing over that presumed identity the provisional quality of its instrumental form.

As we have seen, the discursive speech genres of birth certificates, educational degrees, career dossiers, service records, marriage licenses, or legal records bind Gualinto institutionally to a formidable identity discourse. But now the simpler structures of a precritical utopian dream emerge from the repressed to trouble the stability of his newfound bourgeois self. Gualinto’s self-formation is powerfully formed by the public American sphere he has chosen to embrace. He continues to be authored as well, however, by experiences and discourses of experience that by now have retreated into the unconscious fantasy structures of his life. At the point of complete denial of his Mexican past, Gualinto can thus in the aftermath of his daydreams and fantasies end up with a feeling of emptiness, of futility. Somehow, he was not comfortable with the way things ended. There was something missing that made any kind of ending fail to satisfy. . . . Lately, however, now that he was a grown man, married and with a successful career before him, scenes from the silly imaginings of his youth kept popping up when he was asleep. He always woke with a feeling of irritation. Why? he would ask himself. Why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep on fighting battles that were won and lost a long time ago? Lost by me and won by me too? They have no meaning now. (282)

Flores and Yudice have argued that Latino “[s]elf-formation is simultaneously personal and social (or private and public) because the utterances and acts through which we experience or gain our self-images are reaccentuated in relation to how genres have institutionally been made sensitive or responsive to identity factors such as race, gender, class, religion, and so on” (65). In times of crisis, such as in the crisis of stability indicated by the name “postmodernity,” “‘private’ identity factors or subject positions may become unmoored from institutionally bound generic structures” (65). But in this case perhaps the issue has less to do with the stylistics and formalisms implied by “postmodernity” than with the configurations of identity put
at stake by the shifting relations of material and cultural production on the US-Mexican border in the first decades of this century. This “unmooring” of the subject position from the bonds of institutional ideology that might be more profitably associated with “modernity” and projects of modernization could explain why Gualinto’s present “childish daydreams” and “silly imaginings” leave him “with a feeling of emptiness, of futility.” It is for good reason that Theodor Adorno has claimed that “identity is the primal form of ideology” (148). Situated in the sphere of intimacy, these “daydreams” fuel a decidedly discomfiting “primal,” utopian self-formation that stands against the one that he has consciously “chosen” under the various signs of his interpellation. That is to say, the fantasy structures of the unconscious return, bringing a historical memory that has the practical function of designating an alternative, even if deeply latent and tenuous, content to the formed subject of history. As Jameson has noted, “Fantasy,” in this sense, “is no longer felt to be a private and compensatory reaction against public situations, but rather a way of reading those situations, of thinking and mapping them, of intervening in them, albeit in a very different form from the abstract reflections of traditional philosophy or politics” (“On Negt” 171). These alternative public spheres remain potential for Gualinto, situated as they are within knowledges formed by the anxiety of the clash between the everyday real and utopian fantasy. However, the fact of their continued existence, even if in such an attenuated form as daydream and fantasy, signals the possibility of other interventions in more opportune historical eras.

At least as significant as the precritical utopian impulse that emerges at novel’s end, disrupting any reading that attempts to forge a simple, Manichaean relationship between true and false consciousness, between resistance to or assimilation into Anglo-American culture, is one other latent emplotment, concerning the question of gender. In Paredes’s novel gender is articulated through and through with questions of identity formation and the creation of stable subject positions. A fully gendered reading would be concerned not only with the separate fates of Gualinto’s mother, María, and his sisters, Carmen and Maruca, as they fulfill their familial roles as mother, daughters, sisters, nieces, and wives; it would also be concerned with how that fate is legislated by Mexican-American patriarchal ideology, expressed most starkly in the guiding speech genre of the text, the corrido.

Rosaldo, Anzaldúa, Alarcón, and others have rightly pointed out that the corrido expresses a specific construction
of male mastery, linking ideologies of resistance and historical agency with ideologies of masculinity. Margot Backus and JoAnn Pavletich argue that the gender-coded icons and images that predominate in these songs help produce a male-gendered space that creates “only secondarily and by supplementarity a grieving female space occupied by women and children.” The weight of male icons and images is such that “the moments of greatest cultural, political, and aesthetic weight are, simultaneously, the most powerfully gendered” (7). As a socially symbolic act, the corrido both draws from and adds to the patriarchal constitution of Chicano culture. As gender-coded discourse, it identifies the Mexican-American community and represents it in monologically male terms.

Paradoxically, that same symbolic importance also enables an interrogation of the patriarchal constitution of traditional Chicano culture. So while the corrido links patriarchy and resistance, it also unconsciously joins patriarchal authority and defeat, since in the songs of border conflict the hero is invariably killed, captured, or exiled from his home (Backus and Pavletich 11). Reading Paredes’s novel as gendered discourse points to the ways this new dialectic, not now between patriarchy and resistance but between patriarchy and defeat, emerges in Paredes’s novel as historical inevitability, in the emplotted form of disillusion and loss. One might well argue, therefore, that given the single-mindedly, implacably male-dominated articulation of resistance in the corrido and corrido-inspired narratives, the characters represented in them could not but be defined by these ethical and political limitations. We come up against the borders of male-gendered discourse throughout the novel, but perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in the failed utopian vision at the narrative’s end. This link between the Mexican patriarchal discourse of the corrido and a certain political vision is surely one reason for the decline of the corrido as a viable resistance form in the 1930s and the rise of other genres that do not constrain themselves so readily by failing to interrogate patriarchal ideology.

With the end of the historical moment of armed struggle after the sedition of 1915, the interventions of resistance permitted in the symbolic, cultural sphere become all the more crucial. But to the extent that these emergent acts of symbolic social resistance continue to be articulated with uncritical, male-dominant, gendered discursive systems, and hence burdened by the limits of such systems, their own viability as enunciations of liberation will remain equally in doubt. The present flowering of Chicana writings, which in exciting and
sometimes troubling ways attempts to critique articulations of race, class, and gender, corroborates the bankruptcy of patriarchally invested Chicano social texts that fail to interrogate the procedures by which an authentically determinative subject-effect is produced. Gender factors, no less than those of class and race, create a heterogeneous field that problematizes the general notion of an undifferentiated Chicano subject.

Formulated as a potential for a future reconstruction in more self-consciously gendered narratives, the undoing of “George G. Gómez”’s apparently stable subject position at novel’s end marks the boundaries of the cultural borderlands that Chicano literature is at times problematically traversing at century’s end. In George Washington Gómez, this potential certainly remains precariously fragile. Fantasy might as easily serve to dissipate practice and undermine its intent; gender remains latent and repressed, the traces of its course deferred and displaced; and the unsettled quality of our hero’s identity marks the present unavailability of unified solutions. Still, the sublimation of the possibility of historical agency into the political unconscious at novel’s end does not represent the end of praxis but only its transference. Though we may not be able, finally, to specify in satisfyingly concrete terms through the figure of George Washington Gómez the nature of a completed Chicano subject position, we may at least articulate some features of its subject-effects. Through these effects we also glimpse the heterogeneous arenas through which future Chicano subjectivities might yet emerge into the realm of history. The ending represented in Paredes’s novel is thus hardly apocalyptic, nor even prefigurative of an “inverted millenarianism”; it is, rather, an early expression of the now widely explored complexities of Chicana and Chicano subject identity. As such an expression, Paredes’s novel works powerfully as a sign of the state of Chicano literature at the end of the twentieth century. It depicts the possibility of wrestling, from within the realm of necessity, the hope of freedom, which is but another way of articulating the future in the present.

Notes

1. Despite a resurgence of interest in James, many considerations of “cultural studies” continue to ignore his centrality for the present development of cultural criticism. American cultural studies has been particularly negligent of this important figure, preferring to focus instead on those versions of cultural studies that do not raise the difficult question of race.
2. See Alarcón; Calderón and Saldivar; J. Saldivar; and R. Saldivar. In addition to the works of these cited scholars, one should consult the now-voluminous bibliography on Chicana cultural production. See the bibliographies in R. Saldivar, *Chicano Narrative*, and Alarcón, “Chicana Writers.”

3. In 1989 Paredes was honored as one of five Americans selected as the first recipients of the Charles Frankel Prize of the National Endowment for the Humanities for lifelong achievement in the humanities. In 1991 he was named as one of the first Mexican-American recipients of the *Orden de la Aguila Azteca*, Mexico’s highest award given for efforts in human rights and the preservation of Mexican culture. Later that year, he was also honored by the Texas Historical Association for his exemplary contributions to the understanding of the Western and Southwestern frontier experience. Having devoted his scholarly life to researching the folk life and popular culture of greater Mexico and the American Southwest, Paredes has done ethnographic and literary critical work now being described as definitive on the folk poetry, folktales, and folk theater as well as on the proverbs, jests, legends, and riddles of the Mexican-American people.

4. Paredes’s latest work includes a volume of selected essays, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas Mexican Border*; a new study of Mexicotejano jokes, jests, and oral narratives, *Uncle Remus con Chile*; and a volume of poetry, *Between Two Worlds*.

5. The novel was written and completed, although not circulated for publication, during the period that Paredes worked as a newspaper reporter in Brownsville, Texas. Drafted into the Army during the war, Paredes served first as a political writer and then as political editor of *Stars and Stripes*, covering the end of the war in the Pacific, the occupation of Japan, the Chinese Revolution, and the beginnings of the Korean War. In 1950, Paredes returned to Texas to take the BA, MA, and PhD degrees in English at the University of Texas at Austin. After a year teaching in El Paso, Paredes joined the faculty of the University of Texas as an assistant professor of English. In these tumultuous and hectic years, the manuscript of the novel lay untouched. When Paredes retired from the University, he finally found respite from his many research, teaching, and professional duties to take up several unfinished projects, including the novel *George Washington Gómez*. I first saw the text of the novel in manuscript copy in 1986. The novel was accepted for publication with Paredes’s stipulation that it appear in unedited form, precisely as he had left it in 1940. From personal interviews with Paredes, July 1990. For further biographical information on Paredes, see Limón, “Américo Paredes” and *Mexican Ballads*.


7. For a full discussion of this history of conflict, see Montejano.

8. The viciousness of the Texas Rangers is well documented in both nineteenth-century sources by Anglo historians and by twentieth-century Chicano revisionist historians. See Oates; Samora; and Montejano. The myth of the Texas Ranger as the lone source of civilized order was a product of the
jingoistic histories written by J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb and consolidated by Hollywood.

9. An interesting counterpoint to Paredes's narrative is Hart Stilwell's 1945 novel *Border City*, which chronicles the same region in the same historical era from an old left, proletariat perspective. Paredes, who worked as a newspaper reporter under Stilwell, editor of the *Brownsville Herald* at the time, appears as a minor character in Stilwell's novel. Conversations with the author, July 1991.

10. "El Corrido de Jacinto Treviño" tells the story of a violent confrontation between the representatives of the old Texas-Mexican and the new Anglo-Texan power structures. Since the outcome of the struggle is preordained, the ends of the struggle are less important than the fact of its occurrence and the manner in which the Texas-Mexican figure enacts it. Feliciano sings verses from this song periodically to punctuate his own private resistance to cultural change. For text and analysis of this corrido, see Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican* 32, 69–70.

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