

Moving Away from the “Master”: Américo Paredes and Mexican American Women Writers

Abstract Américo Paredes is a central figure and “master” in Mexican American and Chicana/o literary history. This chapter focuses on Paredes’s coming-of-age novel, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (1990), penned between 1936 and 1940 and during a time when women writers like Jaramillo were publishing their work and working within dominant regional narratives about the Southwest. The chapter situates the novel within and against the work of Mexican American women writers, and it links the fictional women characters in the novel to the real women writing at the time. This approach identifies a feminine “inter-space” between fact and fiction to stage a break from the aesthetics of place that Paredes represents. The aesthetics of Chicana/o critical regionalism overlap and are distinct from Paredes.

Keywords Chicana/o literature · South Texas · Mexican American women · Space

Américo Paredes is a central figure in Mexican American and Chicana/o literary history, a man of letters who authored works of poetry and fiction in the early twentieth century and became a folklorist, musician, and critical intellectual of the borderlands in the post-WWII era. The recovery and publication of Paredes’s poetry and fiction in the past three decades, particularly of his *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (1990), has secured even further his place in Chicana/o literary

and cultural studies.¹ Set in Jonesville-on-the-Grande, a not-so-subtle reference to Paredes's own hometown of Brownsville on the border between the USA and Mexico, the novel has become the subject of critical inquiry into American literary modernism and the Greater Mexico borderlands. Paredes penned the novel at a time when Mexican American women were publishing their work and working within southwestern regionalism, but he published it long after he became a "master" of the Greater Mexico borderlands. This chapter therefore focuses on *George Washington Gómez*, not because it represents the aesthetics of Chicana/o critical regionalism but because it offers a contrast to these aesthetics. By moving into the novel, the chapter ironically moves away from Paredes to uncover the alternative aesthetics of gender and place in the literature and culture of the Mexican American Southwest.

The debate between José E. Limón and Ramón Saldívar over the aesthetic value of Paredes's early fiction provides the impetus for this reconsideration and examination of the place of women in (and out of) his novel.² Saldívar sees Paredes as a paradigm for the transnational turn in American literary and cultural studies, his body of work signaling how "local histories are transformed into critical structures of feeling that link them to transnational designs" (2006, 12). Limón debates Saldívar's transnational approach and draws on Cheryl Temple Herr's (1996) notion of critical regionalism as "a theory, methodology, and praxis for recognizing, closely examining, fostering, but also linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities, especially as these stand in antagonistic, if also negotiated, relationships with late capitalist globalization" (2008, 167). Saldívar seems to argue the same thing about Paredes, whose work forms in-between local culture and global capitalism, but Limón debates the origins of Paredes's transnational borderlands, arguing that they formed long before he enlisted in the US Army and spent time in Japan, not in Asia but in South Texas (2009, 601). Limón's assertion comes in response to Saldívar's position that Paredes's Greater Mexico borderlands take shape "in Asia, not in the US-Mexico borderlands" (2009, 590). The debate opens a closer examination of Paredes's work, but it has also eclipsed even further Mexican American women writers who were publishing their work on local culture and folk customs at the time Paredes penned his novel. Sliding between Limón's critical regionalism and Saldívar's transnational borderlands, the chapter re-inscribes women's central place in Chicana/o literary history and in

Paredes’s transnational aesthetics, which come to fruition in the post-WWII era but begin to form in his inter-war novel.

By focusing more critically on the Mexican American women inside of the novel, this discussion unveils the women outside of it and their shaping of Paredes’s transnational aesthetics. The novel’s eponymous title signals the identity formation of Paredes’s protagonist in-between names and nations, a similar formation to that of the author himself, who also grew up in the Lower Border region of South Texas. In the introduction to the novel, former student and now celebrated Chicano author Rolando Hinojosa offers the following anecdote:

Some thirty years ago, around 1958, on the corner of Eleventh and Elizabeth, Brownsville, Texas’s main drag, stood Daddy Hargrove’s bookstore. It was the only store of its kind then, and my sister Clarissa and I walked downtown to buy (each) a copy of Américo Paredes’s *With His Pistol In His Hand* [sic]. Hargrove’s had dedicated its front display window to the book, a work by a hometown boy who had made good, so to speak. (1990, 5)

Hinojosa recalls the initial publication of Paredes’s *corrido* (ballad) study and the making of a hometown hero, reestablishing Paredes’s formidable place as an intellectual of the borderlands and revealing the specific region at the heart of Chicana/o literary and cultural studies.

Paredes wrote his novel between 1936 and 1940, during the height of literary regionalism and modernism, when poetry and shorter literary pieces populated both local and national literary presses. As Paredes relates to Ramón Saldivar in an interview, he was no stranger to the romantic regional discourses of the early twentieth century. In regard to J. Frank Dobie, Paredes explains:

Dobie was constantly in the news at that time. His books were being highly touted for the truth of their representations of Texas folklife. I wanted to know more about him, so after his talk I went directly to the library to read the newspaper stories about him ... Everywhere everyone claimed that he was the best authority on Mexico and the Spanish language. But he didn’t even know the Spanish language! (2006, 118)

Paredes attended one of Dobie’s lectures “at the time that I was writing *George Washington Gómez*,” he relates, “and so I decided to take

advantage of the opportunity to satirize him. I gave the Dobie character the name of K. Frank Harvey and got my revenge by making him look ridiculous” (119). By Paredes’s own admission, the novel mocks Texas’s leading folklorist, but in a less direct way he also counters Mexican American women writers through his fictional female characters.

The place of Mexican American women writers in the novel is not as evident as that of the Harvey-cum-Dobie character, but Cleofas Jaramillo offers a point of comparison. In a chapter from *Romance of a Little Village Girl*, “Spanish Folklore Society Organized,” Jaramillo relates how she founded *La Sociedad Folklórica* based on Dobie’s own Texas Folklore Society:

Recalling that J. Frank Dobie, president of the Texas Folklore Society, had invited me to join his society, it occurred to me that as we did not have one here in New Mexico, it would be an excellent plan to start one. We named it “*La Sociedad Folklórica*,” although I was not sure I had the correct word. “*La Folklórica*” is still the name of it today; and first rules which I drafted still govern the organization. These rules were that the society should be composed of only thirty members, all of whom must be of Spanish descent, and that the meetings must be conducted in the Spanish language, with the aim of preserving our language, customs and traditions. (2000, 176)

While Paredes turns Dobie’s discursive racism on its head, Jaramillo works alongside of and within the Texas folklorist’s regionalism, forming her own folklore society with a group of women who take Dobie’s (masculine) folklore and create its feminine counterpart, “*La Folklórica*.”

Jaramillo’s mandate that all “meetings must be conducted in the Spanish language” makes “*La Folklórica*” a repository of ethnic resistance to national culture and the English-only movement, as Marci R. McMahon has noted (2013), yet Jaramillo invokes Dobie in a way that prompts a more critical perspective of her folklore society, which overlaps with the Anglo Southwest and the Greater Mexico borderlands. As Chap. 1 of this study shows, Jaramillo is another starting point for understanding the literary and cultural history of the Mexican American Southwest. This chapter considers the place of Mexican American women inside and outside of Paredes’s novel, and it uses the debate between Limón and Saldívar to flesh out the hidden history of Mexican American women (writers). *George Washington Gómez* is on the border

of nations and names, forms and aesthetics, and women function as foils to the protagonist's coming of age, especially the mothers, sisters, and teachers who inscribe a fictional female and feminine "inter-space" within the novel's larger border space. In the context of the 1930s, the women inside the novel can and should be seen as lenses for the women outside of it who participated in the regional writing of the Southwest in the early twentieth century. The chapter thus reads the novel in a way that makes visible the alternative aesthetics of place at the heart of this study and in the work of Mexican American and Chicana/o artists and writers, overlapping with but overall distinct from Paredes's transnational aesthetics.

Paredes opens his novel in 1915, the year of the title character's birth and in the midst of the Mexican Revolution.³ Composed in five sections that chart the protagonist's coming of age, the novel ends after he goes off to college, returns with a pregnant Anglo wife, and is working as a government agent. Criticism regarding *George Washington Gómez* ranges from discussions of realism, naturalism, and modernism, to those concerned with issues of race, class, nation, and gender. For Christopher Schedler, the novel expresses a "border modernism" combining the "aesthetic features of both the *corrido* tradition and Anglo-American modernism" (2000, 154). Leif Sorensen calls it a "late modernist text" that leaves critics to "face the disturbing realization that by the end of the novel, Chicano/a literary emergence seems impossible" (2008, 113 and 135). As Héctor Pérez notes, Paredes juxtaposes the Mexican *corrido* tradition with the European *bildungsroman* to yield an unexpected storyline that was both behind the times and ahead of its time. The novel is steeped in the *corrido* tradition, following Pérez, but its "plot development and stylistics also evoke the form of American realism and naturalism, combining 'the old and the new' and looking 'both backward and forward'" (1998, 27). The novel's complicated sense of history and identity is precisely why *George Washington Gómez* matters to Chicana/o critics, despite and even because of its tragic ending and competing impulses. With less emphasis on the novel's form and more on the women who shape the protagonist's coming of age, this chapter puts Paredes's novel in a more direct dialogue with the Mexican American women writers who were at the time publishing their work on the Southwest. To this end, the chapter resituates the novel within its regional moment to flesh out more fully the critical significance of

women and regionalism in its narrative of competing fathers, forms, nations, and literary traditions.

Ramón Saldívar suggested some time ago a “fully gendered reading” of Paredes’s novel, which would not only concern the female characters in the novel, but “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*” (1993, 287). In *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990), Saldívar argues that the epic *corrido* (ballad) sets the terms for Chicano literature, with Paredes’s “*With His Pistol in His Hand*” signaling a paradigmatic moment in the making of Chicano narrative. Paredes’s short fiction exemplifies how the “heroic age of resistance ‘with pistols in hand’” is a thing of the past in light of the geo-political shifts that create the US-Mexico border (55). In his reading of the short story, “Over the Waves is Out,” Saldívar argues that, “in depicting the contradictory truths of patriarchal consciousness, Paredes’ story offers unconsciously an image, albeit as a negative truth, of feminist consciousness” (59). Sandra K. Soto takes a similar narrative perspective in her queer reading of Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*, which illustrates the marginality of girls and women in relation to the novel’s protagonist (2010, 120). Saldívar’s negative feminist dialectics and Soto’s oppositional queer aesthetics open up the present chapter’s more critical consideration of women and regionalism in Paredes’s novel, with Limón’s critical regionalism serving as a guiding principle. Mexican American women and girls dominate the domestic spaces of the home and school where the eponymous protagonist comes of age. These female-dominated domains form what this chapter calls an “inter-space,” where the themes of motherhood and sisterhood arise within and in tension with the overarching themes of fatherhood and nationhood.

The first section of the novel, “‘Los Sediciosos,’ The Seditionists,” is the most significant in the way that it frames the protagonist’s identity struggle in male-defined and masculine ways, opening with a landscape view of the *llano*, “spread as far as the eye could see ahead and to the right. To the left it was bordered by the chaparral, which encroached up the flats in an irregular, wavering line” (Paredes 1990, 9). Four Texas Rangers come into view, “Along the edge of the chaparral,” in search of seditionists who have joined Anacleto De la Peña’s resistance movement. Two Mexican characters then appear in a “cloud of dust” on “a buggy drawn by a pair of smart-stepping mules” (9). In this way, Paredes quite

literally encircles the space of his novel within a masculine, male-defined orientation of landscape, but most of the novel's action takes place in the home and school where the protagonist moves in close proximity to his mother, sisters, and teachers. These fictional female characters offer a way of reading the real Mexican American women writers who at the time were publishing their work on local folk customs and cultures of the Southwest and appealing to the popular demand for quaint narratives about the region. When read primarily through this lens, Paredes's novel points to a more critical regional tradition already in formation. In fact, when read from this perspective, Paredes writes women out of the landscape of regional writing and imagines a blanket space in which to rewrite his own version of South Texas history, culture, and folklore from a transnational perspective.

From the outset, two levels of masculine conflict frame the narrative, between the Texas Rangers and Mexican seditionists and between Mexican fathers who are largely absent from the main action of the novel. Despite their absence, the biological and symbolic fathers overdetermine the protagonist's fate, and the novel introduces them in juxtaposition to each other in the first scene. After letting the two suspicious-looking Mexicans pass in their mule-drawn buggy, one Texas Ranger relates how "Lupe the Little Doll," the passenger holding a rifle, is a "business man. He steals money. Or cattle. He wouldn't join up with a crazy bunch like De la Peña's and their Republic of the Southwest. There's no money in it" (10). Just then, a car pulls up with a "gringo" doctor and a light-skinned Mexican man, Gumersindo Gómez, whom the doctor calls a "good Mexican," on their way to deliver a baby (12). Lupe and Gumersindo are brothers-in-law and Lupe will soon disappear into Mexico to lead De la Peña's resistance movement, his seditionist reputation the cause for his brother-in-law's wrongful death at the hands and rifles of the Texas Rangers. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues that the opening scene presents the problem of race as a two-fold conflict between Anglos and Mexicans, on the one hand, and an internal battle within the Texas-Mexican community between the "good Mexican" and "bad Mexican," on the other (2004, 150–151). Article 11 from the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo presents a critical context for reading the novel's critique of race and racial character, following Saldaña-Portillo, who points out that Gumersindo is "dangerously deceiving" and more threatening to the South Texas racial order because he crosses the color line (150). The novel consciously draws on the

border as a site of male-defined and racial conflict, but the more immediate context of the 1930s offers another perspective from which to interpret the male-defined and masculine struggle of the eponymous novel and hero, tilting the novel away from the territorial (masculine) conflict of race and war and toward a more (critical) regional reading of women and gender.

In an iconic naming scene that follows the opening scene and precedes Gumersindo's death, the mother's wish becomes the fulcrum of the title character's journey into manhood. As Pérez points out, the mother represents "a certain deterministic attitude toward women in this culture which the narrative will continue to develop" (1998, 34). Fittingly named María, the mother embodies what María Herrera-Sobek in *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990) calls the "archetypal image of the mater dolorosa," a passive type of woman who upholds the masculine authority of her husband and son (9). María demands an important name for her son, faltering and blushing in a passive aggressive manner befitting the Mother of Christ, and Gumersindo chooses the name George Washington to appease his wife's desire that their son have "a great man's name," so that he grow up "to be a great man who will help his people" (Paredes 1990, 16). Gumersindo declares that his son is going to be like "the great North American, he who was a general and fought the soldiers of the king," and this makes the maternal grandmother think of Father Miguel Hidalgo, the leader of Mexican Independence (16). When Gumersindo pronounces the baby's name, "Wachinton. Jorge Wachinton," the grandmother responds, "Guálinto ... what a funny name," then repeats it three times before she can say it, "with the pride of one who finally succeeds at a difficult task" (16–17). Here, the novel puts into motion the conditions under which the protagonist will come of age, with the father endowing him with an Anglo name and the grandmother re-baptizing him with an "Indian name" (Saldaña-Portillo 2004, 154). Most important is the passive manner in which the mother prompts the protagonist's dual and dueling names, as she sets the feminine and female terms for his conflicted entrance into the social symbolic order.

Saldaña-Portillo rightly points out that Gumersindo "completely misinterprets María's words" (2004, 153), but it is equally possible that neither does the grandmother express the same sentiment as the mother. Unlike her mother or husband, María is a native of South Texas and a complicated female figure more critical to the naming scene than her

passive demeanor perhaps suggests. María’s complicated agency surfaces when one pulls back the novel’s racial outer-space and looks at its female “inter-space” where most of the action takes place. Soto’s reading of the novel is thus instructive, for it focuses on the protagonist’s two older sisters, Carmen and Maruca, who “‘speak’ from the (spatial and temporal) periphery of the naming, only to be silenced quickly, which foreshadows their inferior positions relative to Guálinto” (2010, 119). Soto suggests that this slight diversion in the naming scene is crucial to understanding the novel’s deeper gender critique, which Paredes inscribes in his contradictory depictions of masculinity (95). John M. González also points out how the sisters are more central to the novel’s course of action, especially Maruca with her teenage pregnancy and the public shame she causes for the family. To add insult to injury, Maruca becomes pregnant with an Anglo boy’s baby, her sexual transgression with “an enemy,” as González puts it, prefiguring “Guálinto’s own betrayal of the political interests of the Texas-Mexican community” (2009, 152). In the fifth and final section, “‘Leader of His People,’” Guálinto returns to his hometown after a 5-year interval married to Ellen Dell, the daughter of a former Texas Ranger. The ending raises more questions than answers about Guálinto’s people, but the mother’s complicated agency suggests women have a more formidable place in (and out of) the novel’s narrative arc and Guálinto’s move away from the borderlands.

Early in the novel, Guálinto walks hand-in-hand with his two older sisters as they venture into a dark clearing, the trio of siblings contrasting with the novel’s opening view of the *llano*, Carmen on one side, Maruca on the other, Guálinto in the middle. Maruca taunts and teases Guálinto for being too scared to cross a dark clearing, calling him a “*vieja*” (old woman) and shaming him back home where he hides under the porch and listens clandestinely to Don Pancho, Don José, and Uncle Feliciano telling ghost stories (Paredes 1990, 86–92). Interestingly, Guálinto’s place underneath the porch, listening, presents in fiction a portrait of the author himself as he appears in the dedication to “*With His Pistol in His Hand*.” In the dedication to his *corrido* study, Paredes memorializes “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” (1958). Indeed, Guálinto listens too and ends up sick with *susto* (fear), his place underneath the porch putting him in a precarious position in relation to the home and the patriarchs. This crucial and primal scene begins by

spatially orienting him in line with his sisters, and it ends in a way that shores up his (and perhaps the author's own) delicate disposition as a young boy more similar to the girls and women inside the home than to the men outside on the porch, who speak of things that scare the soul out of Guálinto.

Following Monica Kaup, the novel's juxtaposition of space and architecture illustrates the spatial divisions between the traditional Mexican home and modern American school system (1997, 375). As Kaup points out, architecture in Chicano literature articulates well the "Bachelardian analogy between the house and the imaginative life of the psyche, with its attendant comparison between lower and upper levels of buildings and consciousness" (374). Lene M. Johannessen's approach to space is comparable to Kaup's architectural approach, both introducing a more critical analysis of the home in *George Washington Gómez*. For Johannessen, a "threshold chronotope" constitutes an aesthetic practice in Chicano literature that connects texts across time and historical periods (2008, 16). The narrative gap between the fourth and fifth sections in *George Washington Gómez*, for instance, "constitutes the ultimate moment of crisis in and by itself. The silence, which so completely enshrouds the protagonist, is essential to the textual as well as the contextual integrity of the novel's structure" (Johannessen 2008, 95). Guálinto's place underneath the porch, however, seems to set into motion the protagonist's conflicted entrance into manhood and the narrative silence regarding women. Kaup makes visible the novel's employment of identity and space as a bi-cultural, bi-national, and bi-racial conflict between the home and the school, but Guálinto hides beneath the porch in a way that suggests his rite of passage is also a *w*rite of passage that takes place *within* the confines of his mother's home. The house signals a more feminine orientation of space than the chaparral Paredes remembers in his *corrido* study and that he draws out early in the novel, and so Guálinto's journey into manhood is also a move out of and away from the largely female and feminine "inter-space" of the borderlands.

The men on the porch in *George Washington Gómez* tell about the odd or supernatural. Don Pancho tells about a Mexican village in West Texas where the town drunkard beats his wife to death and ends up dying a brutal death in the jaws of a monstrous bear (Paredes 1990, 87). Uncle Feliciano tells about his encounter with a rabid young man who becomes like an animal under a full moon after being bitten by a beast—all stories

of men gone mad and alien to society. The three men then exchange stories about "a woman dressed in white" whose face causes men to die, much like Medusa in Greek mythology or La Llorona, the "weeping woman" in Mexican and Chicano folklore (91).⁴ Don Pancho tells one version of the story in which Donaciano, the milkman, runs into a strange woman who scares his cows off late one night, saying:

"Stop, you slut. Scaring my cows. You'll pay for this.' He ran after her and the woman just kept walking slowly. Old Donaciano caught up with her and was going to hit her with his stick when she turned. She raised the side of her shawl and let him see her face. Her face ..." (92).

Just as Don Pancho is about to reveal the woman's identity, Guálinto fearfully reveals himself, leaving the woman's face unmarked but marking the young boy's relationship to the female and the feminine. The juxtaposition of space in this scene thus sheds some light on Guálinto's disposition and suggests another way of understanding his gender formation.

All through the novel, Guálinto navigates between his mother's home and the female-dominated classrooms of his elementary and secondary school years, the classroom providing the setting for much of part three, "Dear Old Gringo School Days." Guálinto's lower-level first-grade teacher, Miss Cornelia, further inscribes his journey into manhood in female and feminine terms. Miss Cornelia is the most obvious link between women inside and outside of the novel, as many of the women who wrote about the Southwest in the early twentieth century also taught in the early school systems, like Elena Zamora O'Shea and Jovita González. María and Miss Cornelia operate within the novel's patriarchal and domesticated spaces in ways that replicate the masculine border, but they also signal the real women outside of the novel's narrative space, hemmed in by the patriarchal borderlands. "Dear Old Gringo School Days" begins with Uncle Feliciano registering his nephew for school and negotiating the terms of his "Indian identity," which will put his sister in a precarious position when she and Miss Cornelia meet for the first time at an event in honor of Armistice Day later in this section. During registration, when Miss Cornelia asks for the child's name, "Feliciano struggled with himself for a moment. Then he said firmly, 'Guálinto. Guálinto Gómez.'" Miss Cornelia responds, "Strange name, isn't it?" and asks, "Is it an Indian name?" Feliciano replies, "It's an Indian name.' He looked at Guálinto, then looked

away” (110). Saldaña-Portillo interprets this as a moment of resistance in which Feliciano “might offer his nephew a viable alternative, a psychic life lived in ‘savage’ resistance to the interpellative call for the disavowal of Mexican character” (2004, 155). The next exchange is perhaps even more telling, as Miss Cornelia asks Feliciano for the name of the child’s guardian, which prompts “a fleeting vision of his name in some government file. ‘Better put his mother’s name down there,’ he said, ‘María García de Gómez’” (Paredes 1990, 110). Feliciano leaves no trace of himself, and Miss Cornelia inks the mother’s name on the boy’s school records in a subtle gesture that links women and writing in the novel.

Guálinto’s first day of school further complicates this journey in female and feminine terms. As in the earlier scene with his two sisters and *susto* (fear), Guálinto’s first day of school finds him in a precarious position in relation to his female classmates. Miss Cornelia sits him in-between La India and Alicia, two classmates who make him cry:

In front of Guálinto sat La India. She was an overgrown girl of ten. Her nickname was due to her resemblance to the Indian pictured on the Red Indian pencil tables, down to the long black braids. All she lacked was the Indian’s feather bonnet, Guálinto thought. Once Miss Cornelia was absorbed in her papers, La India looked back at him.

“Poor baby,” she whispered, “he wants his mother.” Guálinto scowled at her. La India leaned to one side so she could see behind him. “Who sits in this row, Alicia?”

“Girls,” whispered Alicia, leaning her dead-white face over Guálinto’s shoulder, her thin lips twisted into a disdainful smile. (121)

Shortly after this exchange, La India asks Guálinto his name and he refuses to tell her, which prompts a female-orchestrated melee and “menacing babel around him” (122). In this telling scene, Guálinto loses his verbal abilities, setting in motion his antagonistic relationship with women and girls and highlighting their relationship to his name.

La India points to another way of reading the question of Guálinto’s “Indian identity,” not in the way the novel would have us read it but in a more critical regional way that considers the place of women both inside and outside of its fictional space. The issue of Guálinto’s name emerges during a knife fight with his rival, Chucho Vásquez, which takes place in a strange neighborhood and in the presence of Mercedes, a *quinceñera*

celebrating her fifteenth birthday. In “Dear Old Gringo School Days,” Mexican American mother and teacher come face-to-face in a kind of preamble to Guálinto’s climactic knife fight, only the women exchange words and facial expressions instead of knives in the street. The women meet for the first time at an Armistice Day event, where Guálinto earns the honor of reciting a speech by George Washington, “the father of our country,” as Miss Cornelia instructs her class (132). The Armistice Day event forms a moment in the novel where the “discursive speech genres,” as Saldívar calls them, come to a head in a spatial and linguistic showdown between María and Miss Cornelia. “Guálinto’s self-formation is powerfully formed by the public American sphere he has chosen to embrace,” says Saldívar, a condition caused by “the shifting relations of material and cultural production on the US-Mexican border” (1993, 286 and 287). The school event is important, for it is the first and only time mother and teacher meet face-to-face. From the outset, the speech plays on the patriarchal and patriotic conventions of the “gringo” school and the protagonist’s name, and the scene forges the formative and female “inter-space” that puts Guálinto at odds with himself.

Guálinto’s Armistice Day speech escalates his identity crisis in female and feminine terms, as he practices the speech for a week with another teacher, Miss Huff, who at the end of the program asks Miss Cornelia “to tell Mrs. Gómez how proud we are of her son. He did extremely well, far above his grade level.” Translating, Miss Cornelia adds, “I’m sure you don’t know what he said, but he recited a piece about George Washington. Washington was the founder of this country and a very great man.” María smiles and says in Spanish, “Yes, I know,” then relates, “That is my son’s name too. We call him Guálinto but his real name is Washington, George Washington Gómez” (Paredes 1990, 136). Recall, Feliciano has already instructed Miss Cornelia that Guálinto is an “Indian name,” so the haughty teacher giggles at María “like a little girl” while the mother stares “stonily at Miss Cornelia,” an interesting choice of words given Don Pancho’s story of a woman who turns faces to stone (137). Combined with Alicia’s “dead-white face” in an earlier scene, María’s face begins to etch out the features of the ghostly “woman in white” from the oral story Don Pancho tells earlier on the front porch. Miss Huff and Guálinto get caught in the crossfire of Spanish words and female expressions, a linguistic and spatial orientation that puts him in line with his Mexican-minded Anglo teachers and perhaps even explains his decision to marry a white woman in college. After the Armistice Day

event, Miss Cornelia begins calling Guálinto “‘Mr. George Washington’ whenever she spoke to him in class, emphasizing every syllable,” and he becomes “grateful to his uncle, who had told him to say Guálinto was an Indian name” (137).

Throughout his first-grade year, Miss Cornelia targets the boy in her seemingly unfounded hatred toward him, suggesting to Sorensen that she represents an assimilated Mexican “who is doing her job by dissuading Mexicotexan students from continuing in school” (2008, 128). Sorensen further explains, “Agents like Miss Cornelia help to consolidate the dominant definition of Mexicanness as a rootless identity on US soil” (128). Indeed, Miss Cornelia instructs her students according to the dominant ideology of the time, but more symbolically she represents the dual and dueling theme of women and writing during the novel’s time. In a more material way, Miss Cornelia represents the Mexican American women who became schoolteachers, not a foreign or rootless character at all, but a formative female figure of and in the greater Mexican American Southwest. Along with La India, another major-minor female character in the classroom, Miss Cornelia inscribes the deeper narrative conflict of women and writing. La India especially carries major implications for the novel’s sense of itself, the name literally invoking Mexico’s nationalist discourses about the Indian, which Chicano nationalists would uncritically adopt during the Chicano Movement (see Chap. 5). Guálinto’s writing tablet points to a second national paradigm about Indians in the North American West, the image of the Red Indian almost so literal it defies a deeper reading of its symbolism. Considering La India leaves Guálinto speechless on his first day of school, her character represents something else beyond the issue of Indian identity—literally, on the surface of his writing tablet.

In the novel’s key scene marking Guálinto’s rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, he sneaks off to a knife fight with Chucho Vásquez. Guálinto beats Chucho more by accident than design, and afterwards he is asked about his name:

“What is your grace?”

“Guálinto.”

“Guálinto?” the old man said. “Never heard the name before.”

“It’s an Indian name.”

“Aztec,” said a man in spectacles. “Like Guatémoc. Am I right?”

“Yes.” Guálinto said eagerly, “you’re right.” (1990, 246)

The man “in spectacles” declares in a professorial way the resonance between Guálinto and Cuauhtémoc, the historic leader of the Aztec people, misspelled phonetically as “Guatémoc.”⁵ This explanation gives Guálinto a momentary sense of hope, the explanation suggesting again that the meaning of his name is more fiction than fact, prefiguring the discourses of the Chicano Movement but also revealing the fundamental crisis of women and writing at the root of his name.

The showdown between María and Miss Cornelia suggests that women and girls operate within, between, and against each other and the structures of patriarchy and national belonging in the female-dominated zones of the novel’s home and classroom. Guálinto’s socialization in these female-oriented spaces contradicts his presumed journey into manhood, which entails a series of unrequited romances. Johannessen points out how the working-class *quinceñera*, Mercedes, and the Spanish-identified María Elena Osuna are two female characters and love interests who reflect “Guálinto’s double consciousness” (2008, 89). When Maruca becomes pregnant in the fourth section of the novel, “La Chilla,” the story turns from a narrative of nationhood and fatherhood to the dilemma of paternity and teenage pregnancy. This plotline unfolds against the backdrop of the Great Depression and anti-Mexican sentiment in the 1930s, turning the question of race and nation to a question of female sexuality and single motherhood. As it turns out, Maruca and María Elena get pregnant by the same baby daddy, Buddy Goodnam, and his name returns to the opening baptismal scene in which the mother wishes her son to have a “great man’s name” (Paredes 1990, 16). Unlike her passive aggressive demeanor in the beginning, however, María turns to physical violence and verbal abuse against her daughters after learning of Maruca’s pregnancy, turning from mother to monster and lending a face to the faceless “woman in white” of Don Pancho’s ghost story, bringing her stony stare home where she inflicts violence against her daughters.

Uncle Feliciano takes a more noble approach to his niece’s situation by trying to arrange a marriage between her and the responsible boy, but this turns out to be a dismal failure. As the novel relates, Martin I. Goodnam, Buddy’s father, represents the Anglo politician in South

Texas who learns to speak Spanish and ingratiates himself with Mexican American voters. Martin's grandfather "came down with General Taylor" and "stayed on the border, learned Spanish, was baptized into the Catholic church, acquired the confidence of the Mexican population, and became rich" (Paredes 1990, 229). The Goodnam family name and history recasts the issue of name and racial character as a contest between "good" Spanish American daughter (María Elena) and "bad" Mexican American sister (Maruca), with women serving as pawns in the territorial conflicts and geo-political changes in South Texas after 1848. The dual (and dueling) pregnancies of María Elena and Maruca make visible the terms and conditions under which Mexican American women operate in relation to their fathers, brothers, and lovers, but it also turns the conflicts of race, national belonging, and economic crisis toward the domestic sphere. Buddy and María Elena end up eloping to California, leaving Guálinto and Maruca scorned in the borderlands (237), but Guálinto follows a similar path as Maruca and María Elena when he marries Ellen Dell. All three marry the "enemy," as González puts it (2009), and Guálinto even changes his name to George G. Gómez, rejecting all things Mexican and leaving no hero in the borderlands (Paredes 1990, 284). When considering the critical place of women inside and outside of the novel, this resolution also suggests that the borderlands are too female and feminine for Guálinto.

The novel builds its sub-plots around the tension between "Spanish" and "Mexican" identifiers dividing the Mexican American community, and this juxtaposition especially comes to a head right before news breaks of Maruca and María Elena's dual pregnancies. At the end of part three, Guálinto and his classmates are graduating from high school and planning a senior class party at La Casa Mexicana in Harlanburg, a town adjacent to Jonesville. The character Elodia emerges as a figure of resistance to the South Texas racial order during Miss Barton's senior class party, but in the end she becomes a site where the novel's ambivalent politics of women and regionalism surface. As the senior class gathers outside the nightclub, the bouncer refuses to allow entrance to the "three Mexicans," Orestes, Elodia and Antonio Prieto, who "want to crash the party" (Paredes 1990, 172). The bouncer allows María Elena and Guálinto to pass, but Guálinto chooses to identify with his Mexican friends and forges a united front amongst the four, who Elodia begins calling "*los cuatro mexicanos*," or "the four Mexicans" (177). This forging of the four friends makes for a rather confusing conclusion when

Guálinto returns to his hometown with a new name and an Anglo wife, who also happens to be the daughter of a former Texas Ranger (283). Meanwhile, Elodia and Antonio Prieto marry after high school and open "a ridiculous parody of the restaurant-nightclub in Harlanburg" (291). When Guálinto-cum-George returns to his hometown at the end, he at first finds himself "in a surge of affection and nostalgia," but when Elodia takes the head of the table and calls everyone to order, the novel's incisive critique of and regionalism becomes evident (291).

Elodia tries to recruit George to their political campaign to put a Mexican American into office, but he refuses her offer in a way that highlights his assimilation and anti-hero complex (292). She calls him a "*Vendido sanavabiche*," a "son-of-a-bitch sell-out" (294), but the novel also suggests that she too has "sold out" to the consumer culture of the Lower Border region with her "ridiculous parody" of La Casa Mexicana. Described as "the only woman present" (291), Elodia calls the men to order and directs the conversation in a way that turns the female "inter-space" of the mother's home into a female-directed "outer-" of mass consumption. In this way, Elodia and the other female characters in the novel suggest another way of reading Guálinto's recurring dream, which opens the fifth and final section, "'Leader of His People.'" For Saldívar, the dream signals Guálinto's "political unconscious" (1993, 285), while for Johannessen it "persists as a reminder of his cultural past" (2008, 99). The dream finds Guálinto leading an army against Sam Houston, who capture the American general after the battle of San Jacinto, hang the Mexican general Santa Anna and the "Yucatecan traitor, Lorenzo de Zavala," making it so that "Texas and the Southwest will remain forever Mexican" (Paredes 1990, 281). Guálinto's dream resists Anglo American domination in South Texas, but also troubles the novel's ethnic allegiance and "Indian identity," as it finds Guálinto organizing his men into "a fighting militia" and training them "to exterminate the Comanches" (282). He awakens and thinks to himself, "Again, the same mother-loving dream. The third time this past week. Goddam ridiculous, having the daydreams of his boyhood come back to him in his sleep" (281). These waking words discursively link the symbolic violence against Indians in the dream to the novel's antagonism toward women and the feminine, suggesting that the dream's significance lies in what is absent and not present in his dream space.

Considering the formative place of women in Guálinto's coming of age, their absence in the dream is indicative of the novel's gender trouble

and a telling sign of what the novel truly resolves in Guálinto's imaginary. The dream suggests its significance lies outside of the male-dominated fantasy of territorial violence and inside the female, domesticated space in which the protagonist comes of age. Here, Elodia becomes a telling sign of the novel's search for another aesthetics, for at first she operates within the female-dominated "inter-space" of the classroom but eventually breaks out of the gendered binary that relegates women to the kitchen or the chalkboard. Elodia works within the modern tourist economy and ethnic trappings of the Southwest, much like the writers who were publishing their work and working within southwestern regionalism at the time Paredes penned his novel. Rather than celebrate Elodia's place at the table or even join the bandwagon to take over local politics in Jonesville, Guálinto rejects the whole thing, perhaps a reminder that the male-defined *llano* at the start of the novel is a thing of the past. No longer confined to the home like Guálinto's mother or sisters, or to the school like his Anglo and Mexican American teachers, Elodia becomes a public woman participating in the consumer culture of the Lower Border region. Paredes thus writes women out of Guálinto's recurring dream, a very conscious decision that creates a blanket space for rewriting the literary landscape of the Mexican American Southwest, since Mexican American masculinity seems doomed to assimilation or acculturation, with a woman heading the table and kicking back beers with the men.

Elodia's place at the table marks the decline of the corrido hero, as Saldívar might point out, but La India and other major-minor female characters inscribe the gender trouble of women and writing from the start. In this sense, La India identifies that which is literally absent but figuratively present in Guálinto's dreamscape, which writes women out of South Texas. *George Washington Gómez* ends with an unfinished feeling, suggesting that the resolution and fulfillment of the protagonist's dream lie not in the Lower Border region, which finds a Mexican American woman at the head of the table, ordering men around and catering to tourists. As Pérez argues and Saldaña-Portillo reiterates, the novel is well ahead of its time, but is also deeply steeped in its own literary history. Paredes writes Elodia and other Mexican American women out of the imaginative space of his novel so as to rewrite the borderlands, foreshadowing his intervention in the discourses about the Southwest, long before he was a master in the field of Mexican American studies and during a time when Mexican American women writers were writing the region. When structured around the female zones of the school

and home, *George Washington Gómez* spells out the author’s need to escape the Greater Mexico borderlands in the early twentieth century, rejecting Elodia’s authority and place at the table and leaving no hero for the Mexican American community. When read from this perspective, the ending is not tragic because Guálinto has chosen to assimilate but because women have come to dominate both the public and private spaces of the Lower Border region. Paredes’s female characters thus point to a different spatial paradigm and aesthetics of place, pointing closer to home and within the space of the Mexican American Southwest.

NOTES

1. See the Prologue to Paredes (1991) and Saldívar’s interview (2006) for commentary on his recovered literature. See also Paredes (1994, 1998, 2007) for his other recovered literature.
2. This debate begins with Limón (2008) and is followed by R. Saldívar (2009) and Limón (2009). See J.D. Saldívar (1991, 1997), as well as R. Saldívar (2006) to contextualize the debate.
3. See Saldívar (1993) and Saldaña-Portillo (2004) for a discussion of the 1915 uprising in South Texas. They reference especially “El Plan de San Diego,” a manifesto uniting Mexicans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, American Indians, and Asian Americans against US capitalism.
4. See D. Pérez (2008) for a discussion of La Llorona (weeping woman) in Mexican American folklore and popular culture. See also Jovita González (1997) and (2000) for a similar ghost story and Guidotti-Hernández (2011) for an interpretation of González (1997) as an inverted version of the La Llorona tale. See Chap. 4 of the present study for an analysis of González’s ghost stories.
5. Interestingly, the man “in spectacles” shares an odd resemblance to Paredes himself, at least as he would appear years later. See the cover art to R. Saldívar (2006).

WORKS CITED

- González, John Morán. *Border Renaissance: The Texas Centennial and the Emergence of Mexican American Literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.
- González, Jovita. *Dew on the Thorn*. Ed. and Intro. José E. Limón. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1997.

- . “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul.” In *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul and Other Stories*. Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Project. Ed. and Intro. by Sergio Reyna. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000: 141–151.
- Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole M. *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping US and Mexican National Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Herr, Cheryl Temple. *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996.
- Herrera-Sobek, María. *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Hinojosa, Rolando. “Introduction.” In *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*, by Américo Paredes, 1990: 5–6.
- Jaramillo, Cleofas. *Romance of a Little Village Girl*. Ed. and Intro. by Tey Diana Rebolledo. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, [1955] 2000.
- Johannessen, Lena M. *Threshold Time: Passage of Crisis in Chicano Literature*. New York: Rodopi, 2008.
- Kaup, Monica. “The Architecture of Ethnicity in Chicano Literature.” *American Literature* 69.2 (June 1997): 361–397.
- Limón, José E. “Border Literary Histories, Globalization, and Critical Regionalism.” *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (2008): 160–182.
- . “Imagining the Imaginary: A Reply to Ramón Saldivar.” *American Literary History* 21.3 (Fall 2009): 595–603.
- McMahon, Marci R. *Domestic Negotiations: Gender, Nation, and Self-Fashioning in US Mexicana and Chicana Literature and Art*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013.
- Paredes, Américo. “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958.
- . *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990.
- . *Between Two Worlds*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991.
- . *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories*. Ed. and Intro. by Ramón Saldivar. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994.
- . *The Shadow*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1998.
- . *Cantos de adolescencia = Songs of Youth (1932–1937)*. Ed., Intro., and Trans. by B.V. Olguín and Omar Vásquez Barbosa. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2007.
- Pérez, Dómimo Renee. *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.
- Pérez, Héctor. “Voicing Resistance on the Border: A Reading of Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*.” *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 23.1 (Spring 1998): 27–48.

- Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. “Wavering on the Horizon of Social Being’: The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Legacy of its Racial Character in Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*.” *Radical History Review* 89 (Spring 2004): 135–164.
- Saldívar, José David. *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique and Literary History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- . *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Saldívar, Ramón. *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- . “The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* and Chicano Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century.” *American Literary History* 5.2 (Summer 1993): 272–293.
- . *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- . “Asian Américo: Paredes in Asia and the Borderlands: A Response to José Limón.” *American Literary History* 21.3 (Fall 2009): 584–594.
- Schedler, Christopher. “Inscribing Mexican-American Modernism in Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42.2 (Summer 2000): 154–176.
- Sorensen, Leif. “The Anti-Corrido of *George Washington Gómez*: A Narrative of Emergent Subject Formation.” *American Literature* 80.1 (2008): 111–140.
- Soto, Sandra K. *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-59261-9>

Gender and Place in Chicana/o Literature
Critical Regionalism and the Mexican American
Southwest

Vizcaíno-Alemán, M.

2017, XI, 142 p. 6 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-59261-9