José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico.*

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The name and work of José David Saldívar hardly need special introduction particularly to the scholars of US ethnic, specifically Chicano, cultural production. In the wake of Gloria Anzaldúa's pathbreaking attempt at mapping the US Southwest in terms of the borderlands—la frontera—a number of very informed, theory-laden and culturally competent studies have arisen, chief among them the works authored by José David Saldívar. We may note how with each subsequent study, in addition to contributing to by now formidable archive of ethnic, Chicano and Latino studies that are by definition based in the United States, Saldívar has pushed the limits both of his archive and, very often, of his methods and methodology creating in turn an exemplary scholarly record. His conceptual shifts and turns are thus reflexive of a larger fate of the discipline couched within US ethnic studies but beginning to signify in wider, transnational terms.

The exemplarity of the shift that could tentatively be termed a transition from the borderlands to trans-America is illustrated in the sequence of his books. In his 1991 study, *Dialectics of Our America*, he relies both on materialist (mostly Marxist) and discursive (particularly Foucauldian) parameters in outlining his field of analysis while still sounding the full implications of the term “our America.” It is both here and in a collaborative volume he has edited with Héctor Calderón, *Criticism in the Borderlands* (1991), that we see a larger design of introducing Latin American literature as mediated...
by Chicano border narratives and merging with US “minoritized writers” seeping into the mainline US cultural production, and vice versa.

3 In his 1997 monograph, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, this intention is even more pronounced and sustained by putting into sharper relief the items of borderlands vernacular, oral, folk and pop-culture production. Here the genealogy runs deeper than the underlying history of the US-Mexico border that has energized the momentous initial revisions in Chicano and ethnic studies of the 1980s and the early 1990s. During the 1990s the priorities have changed reflecting also the need to reposition the endeavors by Chicano and Latino scholars pushing them evermore towards international and transnational contexts. If in his previous projects Saldívar has reached the point of installing the border and its metaphorical extension, the borderlands, as a signature cultural process, it is in his latest book that he continues to chart new signposts for this intellectual journey. In that sense, the book reiterates some points already well established in his previous works as it furthers the project of internationalizing the borderlands complex by bringing in the categories of empire, conquest, coloniality and geo-politics. Here, in a much more sweeping move but in a logical continuation with his previous studies, he proceeds to internationalize American studies and different US national cultural narratives by tracing them back to their trans-American sources and influences. In the process a strong argument for a common literature of the Americas arises.

4 Fuller implications of such a move are elaborated in the appendix to the present book comprising Saldívar’s recent interview. There he articulates his ambition not only to blur the boundaries among different disciplinary practices but also to complicate the reading of his putative object of study (the Americas, part of the Global South, etc.) by deflecting from standard operating procedures focused on an articulation either from within the discipline or related disciplines or from Europe (183). He calls for “a fully globalized study of the Americas” that would take place “within a Wallersteinian world-system scale and unit of analysis” (184). His other goal, shared nowadays with a growing number of scholars from the Americas, is to work with the question, “Do the Americas have a common literature?” (188).

5 Let us thus turn our attention to his latest book where his interest once again reorients the reader towards considering long-term commonalities and diachronic fault lines subsisting in the Americas and proposes to obviate geo-political borders in favor of outlining and mapping cultural, symbolic and submerged political signs and developments supporting a different geo-political logic of the Americas from that emanating in the north. Constructing a new critical arena, termed respectively trans-Americanity, global coloniality, Greater Mexico and subalternity, implies a different emphasis and requires a specific mode of reading for each of these terms. Although taken jointly all these concepts work powerfully to unsettle the logic and solidity of the nation-state model both in politics and in American studies, their varied uses and varying emphases carry attendant risks. These are resolved in more or less satisfactory a manner in Saldívar’s latest work.

6 In order to appreciate Saldívar’s critical gesture, we need to bear in mind and stay with one of his main premises stated in the preface, that from the point of view of world-systems theory, it was “the vast machinery of the Americas” that played a key role “in the making of modernity, coloniality, and the world-system” (XIII). By making clear how and, in particular, why he insists on expanding his field of analysis to encompass not only the
northern part of the continent but even more so Greater Mexico acting as a nexus, a tie between the Global North” and “the Global South” (XIV), and extending over into the southern parts of the continent, Saldívar attempts to show how this vantage point occasions either the necessity to expand our critical canons or produces profoundly new, challenging readings of the familiar, canonical texts. In Saldívar’s own words, “This study investigates the enabling conditions of narrative ... by postcolonial, subaltern writers and the various ways in which their stories of global coloniality of power seek to create an epistemological ground on which coherent versions of the world may be produced” (XX). This would suggest an even wider alliance that remains to be charted perhaps in one of his following studies. This ambitious undertaking, not without its risks as well as rewards, underscores Saldívar’s choice of texts as laid out in book chapters. We thus find on the pages of the book and in Saldívar’s readings interesting couplings of trans-American texts, or texts that precisely in their juxtaposition, rather than standing on their own, testify to the process of trans-Americanity and show us an inkling of a larger literary system extending beyond the realm of any one nation-state, in particular the USA.

I have said, however, that such transpositions of texts that we have received usually in very different contexts carry certain risks and reductions. This is to some extent observable in the first chapter of the book, where Saldívar pairs off Alzaldúa’s Borderlands with Martinez’s adolescent Bildungsroman Parrot in the Oven and, perhaps less fortuitously, with Roy’s The God of Small Things. Of course it is legitimate to look for and try to establish a wider set of analogies but one wonders about the wisdom of overexpanding one’s geo-political reach when bringing in texts (such as Roy’s) that pertain to quite a specific and in itself quite a complex set of geo-political relations (the Indian subcontinent from the perspective of subaltern studies). In other words, the question is whether you can afford to deterritorialize a strain of “geopolitically located thinking” (1) and if so to what extent. The first chapter shows some impasses of this bold move, such as when Saldívar stretches the concept of diaspora, frontera and nepantla thinking (30), at the expense of, for instance, more emphatic logic of coloniality as one of the organizing principles in the texts. Also, in this section, unlike perhaps in some others as suggested later on, one feels that generic disparity works as a constraint rather than an epistemological gain.

In chapter two Saldívar suggests new frames for “trans-American cultural criticism” that are mediated through readings of José Martí, one of the outstanding figures in the emergent project of reworlding America, as John Muthyala has aptly put it in his eponymous book from 2006. Similar intentions were demonstrated and articulated in a spate of articles coming from the centre of the discipline (of American studies) and voiced during the 1990s and 2000s, for instance, in a number of ASA presidential addresses (from Kelley to Davidson to Fisher Fishkin to Emory Elliott). This opening up, however, was still, Saldívar keeps reminding us, beholden to the view from the hegemonic centre, while his attempt is to give a more central place to other critical voices particularly those coming from Latin America and the Caribbean as an especially charged space of cultural production in the context of “Nuestra América” and trans-Americanity. What is enlightening in this apparently “outernational” mode of reading, suggests Saldívar in this chapter (50), is to place Martí in dialogue and contestation not only with the hegemonic and dominant US context but to examine his critical distance from another analogous and competing modernizing project coming from Latin America, with which Martí had also stood in a productive tension, as clarified by Saldívar (37). It is in this chapter that, in our
view, more meaningful intersections take place that could serve as “examples of the new, stunning mapping out of diasporic and migratory black British and Puerto Rican/U.S. Latino scholarship” (50), much more so perhaps than in the first chapter. Saldívar’s insights in this section owe much to his own appropriation and critical reworking of Julio Ramos’s work on the Caribbean poet which came out in 1989 but is received in an English-speaking and still hegemonic cultural context of the USA some twenty years later. Martí is shown to have formulated in his fiction and non-fiction a powerful and layered notion of the US as an empire, analogous to that of Spain, and has thus launched “his iconic formulation of critical Latinamericanism” (55). It is crucial to realize that such a vantage point is claimed by Martí only as a result of his modernist alienation both from the hegemonic US pull and from paternalistic elites in Latin America, which then signals a position that is likely to be seen as paradigmatic for all subsequent intellectuals in trans-American vein. This position is also to be submitted to a critical reading, however. One could argue that here an incomplete process of cultural transmission has taken place still hampered by geo-political considerations.

Saldívar shows in chapter three even more substantial benefits of the grinding of his critical mill, in that he offers a dynamic and provocative reading of a small-scale, but no less imperialist for that, war that still remains occluded in US mainstream history, namely the War of 1898 that, as shown previously, has to be taken both as a moment of the transition of empire but also as an emergence of Martí’s “nuestra América.” Saldívar here applies the procedures and methods by which a trans-American criticism should proceed showing its specific results. It is here that the methods invented and applied by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group come to the fore and, much more substantially than in chapter one, demonstrate their relevance for the topic at hand. Here subalternity and its vantage point are presented through a hybrid, vernacular and semi-oral form of textuality spiced with a complex idea of authorship and (historical and cultural) authority as exemplified by “novelas testimonial of the War of 1898” (65). His book profits in this section from the work of numerous Latin American scholars of ethnography and history, whose work nevertheless is still either largely unknown in the context of US-based cultural criticism or mediated through translation or occasional paraphrase as is the case here. What Saldívar’s study thus reflects—but has no resources to resolve—is the way subalternity is a deep-rooted effect of the power of coloniality not easily redressed. Still the first step at least is taken by the author as he reads side by side the accounts of the same battle fought in the War as rendered in turn by Theodore Roosevelt and Esteban Montejo.

The next two chapters are shorter occasional pieces which interrogate the vitality of the vernacular cultural projects to sustain, on one hand, the criticism of coloniality and offer a viable, bottom-up model of subaltern knowledge production and, on the other, to critically examine how the centre emanating the effects of coloniality still retains its hold on knowledge production and dispersal even though under attack from many academic and non-academic corners.

While previous two chapters read like a blueprint for a more complete project, chapter six presents a fascinating, rounded proof of the idea of trans-Americanity and transnational literary and historical currents in the Americas and Asia-Pacific, which turns out to be the next region to look out for both in cultural and even more so economic terms. It is in this intriguing mixture of memoirs and cultural history that Saldívar weaves a story of substantial if submerged connections between Asia and the...
Americas, and sometimes even between the two Americas by way of Asia-Pacific, as in the case of Américo Paredes. The other example is the work of Ronaldo Hinojosa as a strong instance of trans-American poetics. To scholars already to some degree acquainted with the enormous standing Paredes enjoys within the ranks of Chicano and ethnic studies scholars due to his interdisciplinary record, it will come as a surprise to consider him outside the purview of Greater Mexico, a concept that he invented and helped define (128), and place him in the space of post-WW II Japan squirming under the paternalistic hand of the US imperialist machine set out to reform society and the people. It is interesting to realize how Paredes’s minority position at home makes him attuned to US imperialist albeit benevolent efforts in Asia-Pacific.

12 Hinojosa’s work has so far been placed largely within a specific regional, almost local color context subsuming his cycle of tentatively called novels into an epic of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas. One thing is striking in this account of belated and skewed reception. Saldívar certainly makes a convincing case for considering Hinojosa’s work and literary and formalist influences in another setting, that of “Cuban-Gulf of Mexico roots and routes” as being formative for Hinojosa (124). This turnaround, so momentous in the US cultural space, that specifically ties some of Hinojosa’s stylistic, formalist and narrative solutions to Global South becomes much less so when we reflect on the fact, recorded by Saldívar, how already back in 1976 his Latin American counterparts, comprising the jury of the prestigious Casa de las Américas award, honored this official recognition of Hinojosa’s trans-American affiliation by bestowing award on the writer for his novel Klail City y sus alrededores (145-46). As was the case with previously occluded either critical, fictional or non-fictional texts, the terms of coloniality and Americanity still impinge dramatically on the scope and impact of one’s discourse.

13 In the final academic chapter of the book, another writer’s trans-American craft is laid bare, that of Sandra Cisneros and her curious, inimitable style that Saldívar attributes precisely to the impulses that he holds central to a development of a transnational and trans-American aesthetics. Cisneros is firstly “an experimental woman writer of color” (153), which then has to be refined by showing where her experimental verve stems from and what kind of geo-political vision it is infused by. Just as is the case with other minoritized writers both in Greater Mexico as well as in the mainline United States and further in the Global South, Cisneros works her way through to the notion of a borderlands poetics, such that arises almost by default from her plots, characters and settings. Together with Hinojosa and, more recently, Junot Díaz, she has become one of the standard-bearers in Saldívar’s emerging canon of “U.S. minoritized writers” flowing into “the Global South’s prose style and epistemology of lo real maravilloso” (137) there to join in with the likes of Morrison, Shange or Islas, with whose work Saldívar continues to engage.

14 The book is capped by an expansive interview of the author conducted by Mónica González García and reflecting the continuities and changes in Saldívar’s critical project that has taken him from the border to the threshold of an intercontinental space intersected by deep-seated lines of history that is still waiting to be uncovered and appropriately conceptualized. Saldívar remains committed to a very ambitious and expansive project, both in literal and metaphorical terms, since he proposes to intervene not only in the area of “Chicano/a cultural politics” (75) and “border thinking” but to legitimize and strengthen “an emerging trans-American studies” (75) that straddle the US, Chicano and Latino, Latin American and subaltern critical strains, respectively. In his
latest work Saldívar shows with varied success how this new critical orientation should be applied but also alerts us to its internal and external impasses.

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