Transnational Personhood and the U.S. Minority Experience

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My contribution to the Personhood conference stems from recent work that I have completed on an edited collection of essays that commemorates and reassesses the claims of one of the enduring works of Chicana/o literary criticism, Ramón Saldívar’s *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990). In the introduction to that collection, I reflect on the ways in which that work’s claims and reception must be adjusted in order to account for what Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, labels the “transnational turn” in the study of U.S. literature and culture. Although the term “transnational” has saturated literary criticism for more than a decade, the meaning of that term varies significantly as it is invoked in different subfields. In what follows, I track the transnational turn’s trajectory in the field of Chicana/o literary studies, using Saldívar’s work as a case, in order to understand what is at stake when we begin to think about Chicanos and ethnic Americans not as U.S. minorities but as “transnational persons,” a term that Saldívar and Paula M. L. Moya coined in an introduction to a 2003 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to “Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary.”

*Chicano Narrative* is perhaps best known for advancing the “corrido paradigm.” The corrido was a form of balladry performed by Mexicans and Mexican Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border. Insofar as it opposes Anglo-American accounts of events that were of significance to Mexican American communities in the Texas borderlands, the corrido not only documented acts of cultural resistance but also celebrated them as heroic. The significance of the corrido was established by Américo Paredes in his foundational study *With a Pistol in His Hand*.
In his formulation of the corrido paradigm for understanding Chicano narrative, Saldivar combines Paredes’s understanding of the corrido with Fredric Jameson’s injunction in the *Political Unconscious* to view narrative as a socially symbolic act and Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of the novel as an assemblage of discourses whose cultural work might be best understood when compared to other social discourses. Just as Henry Louis Gates turned to African mythology and African American folklore to unpack the cultural work of the African American novel and Jane Tompkins and Nancy Armstrong turn to conduct books and homemaker manuals to explain the significance of women’s writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Saldivar discovers in the corrido a social discourse for illuminating the significance of Chicano narrative in the twentieth century.

For Saldivar, the corrido emerges as the basis and animating force of contemporary Chicano narrative. Saldivar identifies the corrido as “the dominant socially symbolic act” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as “the very ground of future Chicano narrative fiction” (32). Although the corrido would decline after the 1930s as the form for expressing “symbolic resistance,” “[o]ther expressive forms, in song, drama, lyric, and narrative begin to be appropriated by Chicano artists. Residing as a repressed element of the political unconscious, thereafter the corrido exerted symbolic force in the spheres of the alternative narrative arts” (41). Thus, the corrido exists in an analogous relation to its historical moment, the late nineteenth century, as Chicano narrative exists to the contemporary period: both are “self-consciously crafted acts of social resistance” (42). In this account of the corrido hero, we see a familiar figuration of the U.S. minority as both disenfranchised by and resistant to white power.

Although Saldivar later more fully develops a theory of the transnational in *The Borderlands of Culture* (2007), this dimension is already present in *Chicano Narrative* and sits
alongside the view of the Chicano as resistant protagonist. Paredes’s understanding of the borderlands as a transnational space spurs Saldivar’s critique of American literary history as well as his later development of the idea of transnational personhood. Saldivar’s enduring contribution in this respect was to mobilize these elements in a study of Chicano narrative framed in terms of the problem of “American literary history,” a “tradition” constituted—as is usually the case—through hierarchies of aesthetic value and processes of canon formation. Such hierarchies had a spatial as well as aesthetic focus, as U.S. literary studies traditionally positioned the northeast as the locus of U.S. literature and national identity. The result was a “unitary model of American culture or an American ideological consensus arising from a Puritan, New England, middle-class perspective of the origins of American literary history” (217). Saldivar was intervening in such entrenched models, but he was also calling into question a “revisionist” project that had arisen in the period leading up to Chicano Narrative’s publication. Scholars such as Sacvan Bercovitch and Werner Sollors were keying in on “dissensus” as a framework for a “new” American literary history, one constituted through a dialogue of conflicting views and interests rather than the “consensus” of old. Such a history would be “integrative,” with the focus on conflict revealing much, in Sollors’ words, “about the creation of an American culture out of diverse American pasts” (qtd. in Saldivar 217, with his emphasis).

Saldivar mounted a withering critique of this revisionist project, pointing out that its interest in “dissensus” and “dissent” applied only to those “among the ruling group . . . and to their legitimacy as members of the ruling elite state apparatus” (216). A seemingly counterhegemonic project, then, ultimately reconsolidated a unitary notion of American culture based on the same exclusions as before: of “working-class people, people of color, gays and
lesbians, women” (216). Saldívar challenged such parochialism and the forms of dominance it sustained by asserting the importance of including the U.S. Southwest—especially the border region—as one of the predominant coordinates of U.S. literary studies. Through this assertion, he disrupted the hegemonic geographical conceptualization of U.S. literary history.

As he signals through his own attention on the region’s deeply transnational history, taking the Mexican-inflected culture of the U.S. Southwest into account would entail much more than simply “adding” examples of Chicana/o literature to the dominant Anglo American corpus; it would demand the “reconstruction of American literary history” in a way that would fundamentally transform understandings of U.S. literature and culture (221). Today such an intervention in literary history and canon formation might seem of minor importance in making space for transnational analyses. But as Wai Chee Dimock reminds us, the fields constituting the humanities have most rigidly adhered to the boundaries of the nation in delimiting the parameters of knowledge production (223). Saldívar’s focus on the border region’s Mexican-inflected social and cultural history was a significant aspect of his argument for the transformation of the dominant literary canon, challenging U.S. literary studies’ reliance on the “nation” as one of its defining epistemes. ¹

In response to this characterization of Saldívar’s work, one might argue that his approach to border studies is better understood as “regional” rather than “transnational,” especially given that his analysis largely focuses on the U.S. side of the border. That is, what differentiates a description of a transnational approach to the border from one that views the border as part of the region known as the U.S. Southwest? Both the regional and the transnational are relevant for understanding Saldívar's work—his approach is regional in relation to U.S. literary history, but transnational insofar as his understanding of the borderlands is always already as part of Greater
Mexico, and thus shows that these two categories are not mutually exclusive when it comes to the U.S. Southwest.

Américo Paredes famously coined the term “Greater Mexico” in *With His Pistol in His Hand*, and further elaborated on the concept in his later essay, “The Folk Base of Chicano Literature.” For him, Greater Mexico indicates a Mexican national cultural identity that exceeds the U.S.-Mexico borderline, resulting in a transborder community of Mexican people united by shared cultural traditions, practices, mores, and memories. Saldívar’s discussions of Chicano narrative follow from this formulation: he takes as his key historical coordinates the “Texas Revolution” (1836), the U.S.-Mexico War (1846-48), the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and the Bracero Program (1942-1964), attending carefully to changing Mexican contexts and perspectives and their role in influencing and at times shaping Mexican American and Chicana/o narrative practices.

For example, in his now classic reading of José Antonio Villareal’s 1959 novel *Pocho* (often touted as the “first Chicano novel”), Saldívar elucidates the intertwined emotional and geopolitical transnationalisms operating in Villareal’s treatment of Juan Rubio, father of the novel’s young Mexican American protagonist, Richard. Saldívar primes us for his reading of this and other texts at the outset of his study, when he asserts that “history cannot be conceived as the mere ‘background’ or ‘context’ for [Chicano narrative]; rather, history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (5). “History” means Mexican as well as U.S., and Saldivar’s analysis of *Pocho* emphasizes the importance of the Mexican Revolution—the defining event of twentieth-century Mexico—for playing a part in animating the profound struggles of identity-formation faced by Richard. While Saldívar observes that the Revolution’s chief importance for the narrative comes in its “tremendous personal meaning” for
Juan (60), Villareal derives that meaning from the war’s specific sociopolitical meanings, which he characterizes in broad strokes. These include, in Saldívar’s words, grand dreams of “social justice and individual dignity,” both of which are symbolized by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

With the betrayal of the Revolution, represented by the murder of Villa and Zapata, Juan’s values become “radically polarized” as he comes to understand his identity through rules of ethical conduct specifying that one must “live and die with dignity, with pistol in hand if necessary, or else existence has no value at all” (60). These patriarchal values become reified in Juan, defining his view of the world and of himself long after the “glory” of the revolutionary days has passed (61). Juan’s “frozen” revolutionary past is of “intractable and alien value” (62) for Richard, who finds himself in a U.S. context that demands assimilation, an imperative expressed in the novel by the U.S. education system. His father’s unwavering valuation of a Mexican-inflected patriarchal will to power and the U.S. culture’s expectation that he simply become “Americanized” cause Richard great torment as he develops his political, cultural, and social consciousness. The story that follows focuses precisely on the profound tension between these cultures as it plays out in Richard, and on how that tension gives rise to the “Mexican American.”

Villareal’s treatment of Mexican American subject formation unfolds in the U.S. national space. However, as Saldívar demonstrates, the Mexican Revolution’s political and cultural meanings, mediated through their internalization by Richard’s father, play a profound role in Richard’s development as a Mexican American. Thus, while the novel initially appears on track to engage Mexican ideologies, it soon becomes clear that those political ideologies matter to the extent that they inform the emotional transnationalism at the heart of Richard’s emerging and
tormented sense of identity. Through Juan, then, Villareal offers a representation of how Mexican politics and culture—transformed into codes and mores—might play out in Mexican American subject formation. This process exemplifies Moya and Saldívar’s “trans-American imaginary,” and underscores their injunction that “‘American’ fiction must be seen anew as a heterogeneous grouping of overlapping but distinct discourses that refer to the U.S. in relation to a variety of national entities” (1).

Scholars often use the notion of the "transnational subject" to indicate individuals involved in prolonged circumstances of circulation among distinct national localities. In this figuration of the transnational subject, we often imagine two types: the privileged knowledge worker who rides the waves of flexible capital toward greater wealth, and the undocumented worker whose travels result in his or her denationalization. However, *Pocho* exemplifies a different understanding of the transnational, one that Saldívar and Moya capture in their development of the concept of "transnational persons," meaning individuals "whose lives form an experiential region within which singularly delineated notions of political, social, and cultural identity do not suffice" (2). This formulation communicates the important sense in “transnational” does not just refer to the movement of people, but also the ways in which people who are anchored in locales cannot be understood only in terms of the experiences, social formations, politics that are based within a single nation.

For Moya and Saldívar, the transnational person *par excellence* is the U.S. minority subject. The concept of the transnational person allows to imagine the U.S. minority not only in terms of marginalization, resistance, and a pursuit of the full rights and privileges of citizenship, but also a person whose cultural, social, and political everyday life often makes sense only within a large transnational imaginary constituted by competing national histories, familial
stories of migration, and the consumption of popular media from these locations. What are the consequences of this category for how we interpret history, literature, and other forms of expressive culture?

Above I distinguished the transnational subject from the transnational person, but these categories might be better seen as overlapping. Indeed, transnational personhood in this account subsumes the transnational subject, a figure who has received scholarly attention that identifies some of the stakes invested in these categories. In his recent work on African American studies, Roderick Ferguson notes how the acceleration of global migration in the last two decades, particularly migration from East Africa, has ruptured the ways in which we think about the African American experience. For many new migrants, the historical narrative of African American history that begins with the middle passage, proceeds through slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, and ends with civil rights does not adequately account for their experience in the United States. At the same time, these past formations, in Ferguson’s account, should not be abandoned but rather placed into conversation with “prior and existing forms of migration,” which would entail “engagements with the diverse histories of colonization, war, national and economic decline in Third World countries, the maneuvers of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and immigration” (116-117). In this way, contemporary migrations are not just demographically significant but also epistemologically important, demonstrating “the heterogeneity and radical nonidentity of black racial formations” (116). In Chicana/o studies, literary critic Maria Cotera suggests that the era of the resistant warrior-hero as the defining subject of Chicana/o literature has expired as result of a “host of new protagonists” who have emerged as a result of new migrations and of recognizing the transnational character of the past. These include “injured aristocrats, migrant souls, queer bodies, and postmodern subjects,” and
what these new protagonists demand are new ways of reading texts and traditions (158-159).

Attending to transnational persons then necessitates the invention of new categories of analysis in order to more fully reckon with both the emergent protagonists and with the ways in which they force us to rethink tradition.

Attending to the transnational person also allows us to encounter the U.S. minority not in a situation in which she is marginal to the norms of the nation but instead central to the ways in which she figures her world. As the historian Mae Ngai notes, attention to the transnational allows us to render peripheral figures in the nation’s hegemonic narratives central actors in a their own stories. For Ngai, one advantage of this shift is that in highlights human agency where it is often downplayed or ignored (64). In this way, the category of the transnational person allows us to supplement the resistant protagonist who reacts to conditions of deprivation or injury with a more agentive figure who negotiates and builds a world by coordinating different national imperatives and cultural experiences.

The transnational person also alters our understanding of transnationalism itself. If transnationalism is most often associated with persons and objects that circulate through multiple sites in at least two different nations, the transnational person reveals spatial and temporal dimensions that are often ignored. In his work on hemispheric American studies, David Luis-Brown has distinguished a polycentric mode of transnational analysis from a centrifugal one. In the latter mode, which he associates with the work of Saldivar, the scholar zeroes in on a key person or location and investigates the multiple transnational connections that manifest there. In this way, the above characterization of the border as a regional and transnational space corresponds with the U.S. minority who is simultaneously embedded in the United States and connected to transnational circuits of history, culture, and politics. On a temporal axis, as the
example from Villareal’s *Pocho* reveals, the transnational person remains connected to multiple national spaces for generations. In literary fiction, writers like Junot Díaz and Cristina García explore the historical dimensions of transnational personhood. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Díaz demonstrates how the hero’s crisis in the present can only be fully understood within a transnational history that not only goes back two generations but, as the narrator suggests, extends even further to the long history of colonialism in the Americas. Similarly, in *Monkey Hunting* (2004), García situates the crisis of racial and national identity of Domingo Chen, a Vietnam War veteran of Chinese-Cuban ancestry, in the history of Chinese indentured servitude, Cuban slavery, and US-Cuban relations. In both of these stories, the relevant histories and traditions become fragmented to an extent that those negotiating them in the present day may be unconscious of their operations. This, though, may also point to the current appeal of transnational personhood: it makes us aware of how the nation can be a limit to knowing the long histories that constitute us.
Works Cited


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1 To be clear, Saldivar’s work was not singular or even the most influential in moving aspects of Chicana/o studies toward transnationalism. After all, Mexican American scholars had engaged in research that conceived of the U.S. Southwest as a transnational space long before the field of Chicana/o studies was even formalized as an academic discipline in the late 1960s. Américo Paredes’s concept of “Greater Mexico” is only the most famous of such work. Instead, the argument here is that Saldivar—while not normally associated with the initial rise of border studies in this period—was one of a constellation of scholars working in modes that shaped the field. His unique contribution was his use of a decidedly *literary* analytical framework, and the related intervention he was trying to make in the way that American literary history was written and taught. This latter point likely has played a role in obscuring the transnational elements of his work in *Chicano Narrative*, even as the book leveraged a Mexico-U.S. dialectic in its critique.