



# INTERVIEW

## ON THE BORDERLANDS OF AMERICA: THE LIMIT(ATION)S OF GEOGRAPHY, IDEOLOGY AND DISCIPLINE (AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ DAVID SALDÍVAR)

BY MÓNICA GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA

When José David Saldívar entered the Department of English at Yale University as an undergraduate in the late seventies, he became aware of the fact that the discipline labeled as “American Literature” was barely related to the cultural experience he knew as part of a Chicano family, growing up close to the U.S.-Mexico border. After almost three decades reflecting on the national and continental limits and limitations of the notion of America, Saldívar has come to be considered one of the most prolific scholars in the questioning, bridging, and remapping of the disciplinary approaches to the cultures, politics, and literatures developed in the Americas. He has created a unique cross-cultural and transdisciplinary frame of analysis by merging “Latin American” critical terms, theory, and literature, including the notion of transculturation, Calibán as the defiant Ouramerican intellectual, as conceived by Roberto Fernández Retamar, and the storytellings of *Cien años de soledad*, with the works of Chicano/a writers and thinkers like Gloria Anzaldúa and U.S. and African-American authors such as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. The conversations cover all the coordinates of the continental map, a context which has allowed Saldívar to say about Chicano and Chicana writers that they, as borderlanders of “Greater Mexico” and “colonial subjects of the U.S. Empire--belong equally to the dialectics of the Americas, both within the Global North and the Global South.”

*Lucero* is pleased to have had the opportunity to converse with José David Saldívar, a scholar whose trajectory in Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies and Literatures was distinguished by the Modern Languages Association (MLA) in 2005. Our conversation also intends to encompass the American map in its entirety, embracing a variety of topics such as his first book *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991) –already one of the foundational texts of a fresh field called “Comparative Trans-American Studies”–, the boundaries of imperial history, the role of Casa de las Americas in modifying the geopolitics of knowledge, and the recent manifestations regarding the U.S. immigration law. We hope that this interview will open the space for scholars and especially graduate students to continue thinking on the subaltern and hegemonic remappings of the idea of America.

### “Our America” and the America that Is Not Ours

*Lucero:* Your first book, *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991), advances a crucial critique intended to remap the limits of “American Studies,” a task that also involved questioning additional boundary-disciplines such as “Latin American Literature” and “Chicano/a Studies.” Among other assertions, your book interrogates the notion of “Our America” because you say it is a cultural system which has been traditionally articulated only in relation to itself and to Europe. Furthermore, you state that it is necessary to rethink the term “America” so as to reach what you name a transgeographic notion of the American culture. In your perspective, what are the benefits of reformulating the idea of America as a transgeographic notion? In this context, why do you use the term “Our America” and not “Latin America”?

*José David Saldívar:* Some fifteen years ago, I completed the manuscript of *The Dialectics of Our America* and sent it to Duke University Press for

publication. I did not know at the time that the text would have as wide an audience inside and outside the United States (in Cuba, México, Latin America, and in Germany, Spain, England, and the European Union) as it has had, nor did I know that it would help in the jump starting an “intervention” in American Studies, or be cited as one the founding texts in what is today called comparative Trans-American Studies. I was trying to move the mainline institution of American Studies outside of the United States of America—the America that is not (only) ours—, and to move it more in the direction of a globalized study of the Américas (Nuestra América?), that is, within a Wallersteinian world-system scale and unit of analysis. Today, I would add the Peruvian historical sociologist Aníbal Quijano’s paradigm of the coloniality of power and Walter Mignolo’s riffs on border thinking to the mix. The life of the text clearly exceeded my intentions, and I’m fortunate that its publication by Duke University Press helped, over the past decade-and-a-half, smuggle me and my Chicano cultural criticism into the critically cosmopolitan worlds of Havana and Casa de las Américas, Mexico City, Paris, and Madrid.

As I wrote it, I understood myself to be in an embattled relation to certain mainline Area Studies in the U.S. academia (especially our home-made American Studies and some varieties of Latinamericanisms in U.S. universities), even as I understood the critical text to be part of a more nuanced comparative American-Latin American-U.S. Latino/a studies that was developing in the literary and cultural critical work of Roberto Fernández Retamar, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Doris Sommer, and Vera Kutzinski, among others. With its allusions to the history of the study of Hegelian-Marxist dialectic (and immanent critique) and the Cuban José Martí’s anti-colonial criticism, the title and the text pointed to a tradition of critique that sought to explicate the vocabulary of the trans-American (trans)modernities of thought to which it belonged—moving historically from Martí’s Latinamericanist discourses framed around the long 1898 in “Nuestra América” to a newer, more scandalous and yet unknown Cuban–Marxist

discourse in the U.S. academia theorized by Che and Retamar, and away from mainline American Studies literary and cultural criticism. In the book's ending, I even baptized this dialectical Cuban-Caribbean political and cultural critique with the new name of "the School of Caliban" in honor of Roberto Fernández Retamar's "Calibán," Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, and Houston Baker, Jr.'s "Caliban's Triple Play"—which I felt as a minoritized Chicano subject to be an emerging part of. Of course, I still believe there remains today a warrant for more rigorous and continued Trans-American critique as I was then proposing it in 1991.

So, yes, the late nineteenth-century ideas of Martí's "Nuestra América"—the "America which is [not only] ours" and "European America" that are, today, in hindsight, like two sides of the same worn out coin, had to be severely deconstructed and reconstructed, with the unit of our analysis no longer being the nation-state. I was then arguing that we needed to use the unit of analysis of perhaps NATO, or even the U.S.'s foreign policy over the past two and a half centuries, from George Washington to Reagan-Bush in the 1990s, and into our new imperial century with Bush II-Cheney. Today, Mónica, as you know from having grown up in the face of the totalitarian shadow of Pinochet and Neoliberal Chile, *America belongs, to the whole world*. To answer the last part of your question first, let me just say that I was using Martí's 1891 anti-colonialist notion of "Nuestra América" as a shorthand for what I felt as U.S. Latino critic to be Martí's magisterial contribution to the debates on the formation of Latinamericanist ideology. Given that Martí had conceptualized his critique of the cultures of U.S. imperialism in exile from Cuba, and simultaneously as the political founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party from within the diasporic "spaces of in-betweenness" of the modernized Puerto Rican barrioscapes of New York City—as Julio Ramos taught us in his great *Desencuentros de la modernidad--*, I had always felt that Martí's comparative critiques of imperial America in his essays and chronicles, *Escenas Norteamericanas*, were "right on," and indispensable

for any beginning attempt to theorize a new, critical reading of America. But, as I have also noted in my newer work, "Las fronteras de Nuestra América: para volver a trazar el mapa de los Estudios Culturales Norteamericanos," an essay superbly translated into Spanish and published in the Cuban *Revista Casa de las Américas* (julio-septiembre 1997), I often wonder why Martí's critical readings of "Our America" and the "America which is not Ours" stopped so prematurely and abruptly at the national borders between the Americas? Why did Martí have to separate the two Americas at the Rio Grande? Why did he have to accept the political and cultural borders of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, which had ended a U.S. Imperial War, this time with Mexico? What if Martí had thought of the borderlands of "Greater Mexico"—that is, both sides of the Rio Grande culturally going back to 1749, when parts of the U.S.-Mexico border were first colonized? Now, in having said this, I do not wish to be misunderstood: in the U.S. academia today, we desperately need to read Martí's *Escenas Norteamericanas* to understand how his fifteen-year stay in the Global North turned into an occasion for him to record his critique of Puritan/European America and its totalitarian dialectic of the American enlightenment. That is, I'd much rather keep on teaching and reading Martí's traveling theory (collected by Cuban editors in some thirty volumes) than, say, the conservative French writer Alexis de Tocqueville's travel writing, *Democracy in America*. Why do U.S. readers continue to privilege the French traveler's view on American democracy and not the Cuban's critique of American democracy is something we should continue to ponder. Why do American intellectuals privilege French *Latinidad* (Latinity) in our political culture over, say, Cubanity?

When I was in Cuba at the invitation of the Cuban government and its cultural institution, Casa de las Américas, in 1997, Roberto Fernández Retamar and I had the great occasion to begin discussing some of these questions as we walked around Havana, and we both attempted to imagine a newer and, yes, more utopian, possible unmappings of the hemisphere that

Martí's "Nuestra América" inaugurated in 1891 that we could use today. And, of course, in my informal and yet rigorous cultural conversations with Retamar, I mainly listened to him speak passionately and eloquently about Cuba's 1898 as a *desastre*, about the Cuban Revolution, about Martí and Che and his own apprenticeship with the latter revolutionary thinker in Havana and later in Paris, and the terrible USA's blockade we felt so painfully all around us, like an imperial wound, and I was yet privileged to be in a position where *The Dialectics of Our America*, was being read and discussed by Cuban intellectuals in general and by this intense and brilliant scholar in particular, who I consider to be the most learned and nuanced Martí intellectual in the world. But, as you note in your question, it's been awfully hard for anyone (the Casa de las Américas' enormous efforts notwithstanding) to get around my government's unethical, mindless, and gross blockade of Cuba, since 1959. To complete answering your question then: I was using the scale of the modern world-system theory to understand what the Americas held politically and culturally in common. This was in the early 1990s the best way to go. Last, I was trying to answer a basic research question in that first text: do the Americas have a common literature? It's a question I'm still grappling with today in some of my work.

**Lucero:** *The intellectual production of Cuba has an important place in your critique. Regarding this tradition, you analyze the critical work of José Martí and Roberto Fernández Retamar because, as you explain, both of them seek to establish a conversation between "Our America" and the "European" (Anglo) America. In a sense, Martí and Retamar represent two emblematic moments of a transamerican interaction characterized by war, intervention, revolution, bloqueo, polarization, etc. Do you believe it is possible to found a new literary, cultural, and critical "Americanism" which can deconstruct this traditional dynamics based on two mutually exclusive paradigms? In other words, is there any alternative in America to the "Caliban v/s Prospero" model of interrelations?*

**J.D.S.:** Yes, you are absolutely right about those very powerful emblematic transamerican interactions of cultural critique inaugurated by the Cuban poet and anti-colonialist José Martí and continued by the Cuban poet and revolutionary Roberto Fernández Retamar! In *The Dialectics of Our America*, I was most concerned at the time to criticize the pervasive Anglophonic assumptions in postcontemporary American literary and cultural criticism. I sought to criticize those North American nationalist views of the Americas that made all kinds of presumptions about the limits of America, and that restricted the meaning of America to its well-known slogan of itself as *e pluribus unum*—out of the many one. I felt as a young Chicano (colonial and imperial) subject that there was way too much emphasis in the U.S. academia and culture at large on the hegemonic *unum* of this slogan about the horizons of America, and not enough critical attention paid to the colonial difference of the *pluribus* in the meaning of America. In the 1990s, at the height of what some right-wing commentators called the "culture wars" in the U.S. academia, I was arguing against any theory of American literature and culture that restricted the meaning of America from within the nationalistic presumptions of its own practices and that, therefore, set up exclusionary norms within its theorizing about itself, often with racist and imperialistic consequences. By turning, for example, to some of José Martí's cultural criticism—especially his essay "Nuestra América" and his stunning essay about the pop cultural "Wild West Show" he saw performed in New York City, we can now see clearly that he was "projecting" in political and psychoanalytic terms, from his colonial melancholic wound in New York City, a direct response to what was to become Theodore Roosevelt's War of 1898 (the so-called Splendid Little War). For the Wild West show's painting of U.S. manifest destiny (which included the killings of Native American Indians) was displaced for Martí from the USA to Cuba in his imagination and therefore relocated in a new external position. These essays, indeed, tell us a lot about the U.S.'s cultures of the spectacle. Therefore, as Martí saw the Wild West

Show's tableau of violence right in front of eyes--the U.S.'s killings of Native American Indians—he also “projected” the future U.S. Rough Rider's killings of Cuban *mambises* and Creoles, thus passing from the center to the periphery. And by then turning from Martí's projections of 1898 to Retamar's Cold War critique of U.S. empire as a way of life in his celebrated reading of José Martí in “Caliban,” which was written almost at the same time when he had been theorizing a new ideological way of “Reading Che,” I was attempting to ground my own emerging cultural criticism of the Americas from an “outer-national” perspective—that is, from the barrioscapes of the U.S. Latino/a communities and from Che and Retamar's revolutionary Cuba.

Thus, from my first text to my most recent essay “Americanity Otherwise,” [forthcoming] (an essay that builds on the critical work of Immanuel Wallerstein, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter Dignolo), I continue to push in my Trans-American work for an outer-nationalist study of American literatures, cultures, and ideologies. That is to say, Mónica, I am not today as a Berkeley English Professor very much interested in any new, crunchy, New Historicist-like readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, readings that merely rewrite the political allegories of Ariel, Caliban, Miranda, Sycorax, and Prospero, without addressing the cultures of the new imperialism of the United States. (As a parenthetical aside, this does not mean, however, that the New Historicist criticism of, say, my former Berkeley colleague, Stephen Greenblatt, isn't still enlightening us, for in his new biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* [2004], Greenblatt suggests that before W.E.B. DuBois and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Shakespeare's Protestant-Catholic family entanglements had allowed him to attain what they had called a “double consciousness.” This has lots of potential implications for readings of “The School of Caliban.”) So, when I teach Roberto Fernández Retamar's manifesto, “Calibán,” in my seminars at Berkeley these days, I find that the essay is not “really” about Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, but in fact about José Martí's anti-colonial criticism and struggle.

*Lucero:* Still regarding your first book (and also the logic of binary models of interaction), one of the theses you propose in *The Dialectics of Our America* has to do with the limitations of the paradigm “center/periphery” because “[it] cannot entirely account for the hybrid appropriations and resistances that characterize the travel of theories and theorists who migrate between places in our “First” World and “Third” World” (xvii). You suggest going beyond that paradigm and exploring hybridity and in-betweenness. In this context, the Chicano writer Rolando Hinojosa, as you argue, would represent that in-betweenness as an author who portrays the culture of contact and conflict developed in the U.S.-Mexico border. You affirm that Hinojosa's *Casa de las Américas* prize in 1976 for *Klail City y sus alrededores* may be considered a model for a broader literary and cultural American history. It seems that you propose an alliance between “heterodox” American sectors. What is the current status of these conversations between *Casa* and Chicano/a literature? Has the (Latin American) canon been modified since 1976 due to this conversation? Is there any possibility of broadening these conversations so as to include some of the “orthodox” American sectors as well? Or, in other words, do these “orthodox” sectors have any interest in widening, opening or rethinking their canon?

*J.D.S.:* Yes, I believe that Chicano and Chicana writers like Rolando Hinojosa, Américo Paredes, Tomás Rivera, Gloria Anzaldúa, John Rechy, and Sandra Cisneros, among others, belong to what many of us in Chicano/a literary and cultural studies are calling the borderlands of American culture—and to the borderlands of “Greater México.” This is our political way of saying that Chicanos/as—as colonial subjects of the U.S. Empire--belong equally to the dialectics of the Americas, both within the Global North and the Global South. Let me also try to put this another way because some of my newer work attempts to grapple both with what you term “heterodox” and “orthodox” American affiliations and sectors. That is, just as I see William Faulkner, the great Mississippi modernist of the 1930s, writing against President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal North in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1939), and/

or Gabriel García Márquez in the radical 1960s writing both against the insularity of Colombian literary practices in *Cien años de soledad* (1967) against the imperialist La United Fruit Company's underdevelopment of the Caribbean part of Colombia, so, too, I see the Chicano novelist Rolando Hinojosa writing a series of trans-modern Spanish, English, American, Mexican, and bilingual and multicultural chronicles/novels about a particular space he calls Belken County, Texas, a chronicle, I might add, that doesn't take the hegemonic Texas Rangers perspective on the winning of the so-called frontier.

So, when Sherwood Anderson advised William Faulkner to write about "that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from," he underlined his justification by adding: "But that's all right too. It's America too." By "America," I suppose that Anderson meant the United States, but in the some 80 years since he assured Faulkner of the full significance of creating "that little patch" called Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, the resulting Faulkner chronicle has today acquired hemispheric and global mappings and ramifications neither Anderson nor Faulkner dreamed of. Maybe the great Trans-American imaginative writers Gabriel García Márquez, Rolando Hinojosa, Edouard Glissant, and even Toni Morrison—writing her English MA thesis on Faulkner at Cornell University—had already begun to see Faulkner's great imaginary South and that larger Global South as kind of mirror in which they saw their own imperialized and racialized and partitioned American Global South reflected, distorted, and bent awry. It was this Global South that Rolando Hinojosa turned to in his "gran cronicón," about South Texas, and it was this Global South that the Cuban Casa de las Américas—led by Roberto Fernández Retamar—grasped, acknowledged, and published in their Cuban Casa de las Américas edition of *Klail City y sus alrededores*.

In 1973, Hinojosa published with Berkeley's alternative Quinto Sol Press his first novel entitled *Estampas del valle y otras obras*, and twenty years later in 1993, he published with Houston's Arte Público Press, the tenth novel that makes up his multi-volume

chronicle, a hard-boiled detective novel entitled *The Useless Servants*. And Hinojosa is still in the process adding narratives and poetry to this monumental chronicle.

If Hinojosa's first experimental novel used the Spanish literary tradition of the "estampas," or biographical sketches, his tenth novel, *The Useless Servants*, a hardboiled detective novel about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, anticipated, we might say, the dynamic duo of Subcomandante Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo II in writing a hard-boiled political fiction, *Muertos incómodos (falta lo que falta)* [2005] about the Global South. If Hinojosa's first books about Belken County were written in a vernacular, norteño Mexican and Tejano Spanish, his last six books were written in a borderlands vernacular English.

So how in the world are we to place Hinojosa's work of linguistic hybridity and cultural in-betweenness? As North American minoritized "heterodox" literatures? As "Greater Mexican" literature? To complicate matters even more, as you suggest, Hinojosa's great, second novel, *Klail City y sus alrededores*, won the highly coveted, competitive, and prestigious 1976 Cuban Casa de las Américas Prize as the best Latin American novel. Were Chicanos to be welcomed forever as Latin American "orthodox" subjects in Havana? Why did Hinojosa's *Klail City y sus alrededores* win the Cuban prize—because his novel used the Gulf of Mexico's oceanic *choteo* as an aesthetic? These were some of the questions I grappled with in my analysis of Hinojosa's work in *The Dialectics of Our America*. Now, whether or not we see Faulkner, García Márquez, or Hinojosa as American "heterodox" or "orthodox" writers I think is still a very much an open question in the U.S. academia, though I do share your skepticism that the Post-Cold-War American University has any pedagogical interest in "rethinking the canon." But today, I hope, anyone who reads Hinojosa's great ten-volume chronicle would agree with UCLA's Héctor Calderón's recent assessment of Hinojosa's remarkable chronicle about his imaginary Belken County: "Hinojosa, is, to be sure, the finest expression in Mexican American literature of how the language and cultures of Spain, Mexico, [Latin

America,] and the United States have fused to form a Texas-Mexican culture of Greater Mexico" (2004, 194).

As far as the current conversations between Roberto Fernández Retamar's Casa de las Américas and Chicano/a literatures, I can only say that many of us are trying our best to get around Bush's continuing blockade of Cuba. My colleague, Ben Olguín, a Professor of Chicano literature at the University of Texas, San Antonio, for example, recently traveled to Cuba "illegally" as a regular member of the famous Venceremos Brigade. Before leaving for Cuba in July, he asked some of us within the field of Chicano/a literary studies to contribute a modest amount of funds so that he could purchase and personally hand deliver to Casa de las Américas the most recent novels, essays, teatro, and poetry written by Chicano and Chicana writers.

### **"Looking Awry" at the Borders of History and Nation**

*Lucero: Thanks for those interesting observations about the latest remappings of Chicano literature, the notion of América, and the role of Casa in this process. In some of your recent articles published in American Literary History, Revista Casa de las Américas, Cultural Studies, and Modern Fiction Studies you refer to some remarkable readings of hegemonic narratives made during the last years. For instance, you cite Gayatri Spivak's interpretation of U.S. Latino, African-American, and Native American demands in the United States as post-colonial struggles within the nation. You also comment on Amy Kaplan's analysis of Theodore Roosevelt's account on his participation in the Cuban war for independence. She reads this account in terms of the national "internal" conflict in relation to African-American soldiers, showing the "domestic" tensions of Roosevelt's discourse manifested within the context of the war. Yet, it concerns me that these readings focus on the "national" effects or characteristics of the imperial history of the United States. In this sense, if the nation is still used*

*as a main frame of analysis, this may contribute to the ghostly status of the history the U.S. is writing "abroad," as an empire...*

*On the other hand, I wonder if the South Asian and Latin American Subaltern Studies Groups you invoke in some of these essays have tended to utilize certain categories in a rigid way. That is to say, there seems to be a clear convention related to who the subaltern is. In this sense, it seems to me that if we think only in terms of race, class, and gender, we risk leaving outside many sectors that currently do not benefit from the hegemonic project of modernity -because they would remain invisible to traditional categories of "subalternity." This is a concern related to neoliberalism and its latest effects in terms of both the growth and reshaping of those sectors that we could call "subaltern." Are there any new readings in this respect? Would you consider it useful to 'look awry' at traditional categories of subalternity?*

**J.D.S.:** Thanks so much Mónica for asking me some great but surely impossible to answer questions, and also for asking me to "look awry" at the book of critical essays that I am in the middle of writing, provisionally entitled *Subaltern Modernities*. As far as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Amy Kaplan's works are concerned, all I can say is that I have found their deconstructive feminist readings on the "archives" of the cultures of British and U.S. imperialism extremely important for my own work on the general question of the subaltern and U.S. Latino/a Studies. I often teach their celebrated work in my graduate seminars at Berkeley, on the cross-genealogical roots and routes of Subaltern Studies, from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* to a survey of the emergent schools of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group, founded by the brilliant historian Ranajit Guha (Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee) and the equally monumental (but short-lived) Latin American Subaltern Studies Group founded by the superb Latinamericanist literary and cultural critics John Beverley, Ileana Rodríguez and José Rabasa (Walter Mignolo, Alberto Moreiras, Gabriela Nouzeilles).

All of their work on the Global South, nepantla, and subalternity has helped me think through a variety of issues in my new book of essays. Allow me now to say one more thing about Spivak's most recent work in particular, before moving on to your specific hesitations about some of the protocols of these unique subalternist projects. Spivak's book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* is an amazing book. Each of the enormous sections, on "Philosophy," "Literature," "History," and "Culture," are tour de forces in themselves, and, of course, cover almost everything anyone needs to know about her unique "tropologics" of deconstruction and what (after, I suppose, Derrida, Paul de Man, and Marx) she calls her "new politics of reading"—a critical reading that involves us in her attempt to climb the royal road of theory/praxis and enter "the protocols of Marx's text in order to re-inscribe for use" (1999, 91). What I often take away from reading Spivak is a whole project of "reading" and what she terms "a pre-comprehended procedural priority"—that is, the use of reason, dealing with royalty, grappling with the (hu)man and rationality, and so on. Spivak's take on "the native informant" has also allowed me to see how this serialized "subject position"—from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* all the way to recent Nike commercials—travels laterally within a range of discourses and uncanny protocols. For Spivak, the subject positions that constitute the so-called native informant are from the very start in Kant's philosophy "geopolitically differentiated" (1999, 26-27). In Spivak's view, Kant's education of the aesthetic unleashes a geopolitical project, which in turn unleashes the imperial project of the civilizing mission.

For me, Spivak's work on the archive fever of our times and the subaltern has helped me begin to see how the native informant is produced in the Trans-American Global South: William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1939), with Shreve, a Canadian northerner insisting that Quentin from the Global South plays the role of the native informant ("Tell me about the South"), or of Arturo Isla's *The Rain God*, where Miguel Chico, too, resists the tropologics and

protocols of the heteronormative U.S.-Mexico border ("I don't hate Mexicans! I don't hate the Borderlands! I don't hate gays!"). I'm also beginning to see Toni Morrison's Paul D in *Beloved* grappling with this when he confronts Sethe early in the novel and badgers her with the statement ("Sethe, you've got two feet not four."). So, I obviously find Spivak's critical reading very useful for all sorts of reasons.

I'll now attempt to get at your second question about subaltern studies by describing how I'm entering into this complex debate with my project *Subaltern Modernities*. I begin *Subaltern Modernities* by noting that the arguments in my book of essays about subaltern studies are arguments *within* postcolonial studies. I say this to emphasize that neither the South Asian Subaltern Group--founded in 1982--nor the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group—established in 1992—can be defined by a single critical "program." Rather, the South Asian and Latin American Subaltern groups are "experimental spaces" (as John Beverley once characterized them) in which various agendas and cross-genealogical projects talk to each other around common concerns that are political, ethical, and epistemological. Throughout my study, I follow historian Ranajit Guha's succinct definition of the subaltern as the "name for the general attribution of subordination... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way." Now, Mónica, I hope Guha's clear and open-ended definition of the subaltern allows us make room for your own hesitations about the comparative subaltern studies project. In the same spirit of Guha, I hope that the subaltern might serve as a signifier for a variety of concerns in my work: the "unspeakable" in subalternized African American, U.S. Latino, Cuban, and South Asian literature; the rhetoric of form in post-colonial narratives; and the constructions of subalternized identities in our culture and society. Postcolonial studies, as I see it, involves listening to "the small voice of history." Like many post-colonial theorists who have taken an interest in subaltern studies, I am also interested in mapping out the small voices of those positioned within a "subordinated

particularity” and in the difficulty of representing the subaltern in our discourses (academic, literary, and testimonial).

Specifically, my idea for this new project arose from a passage in Toni Morrison’s post-colonial novel *Beloved*, in which the protagonist Sethe, faced with the awesome circumstances surrounding her act of infanticide, admits to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, that the entire situation “was unspeakable.” These words led me to consider whether the story Morrison relates (based on a real story of social death, slavery, and infanticide) is finally caused less by Sethe’s “rememories” than by her own attempts to represent an aspect of the ineffable of the subordinate in narrative.

What kind of “unspeakable” idiom of the subordinate was this, and what kind of comprehensible form does Morrison (through Sethe and the women of color of 124 Bluestone Road) provide? Late in the novel, Morrison returns to this issue by writing: “the thoughts of the women of 124 [were] unspeakable thoughts, unspoken.” At base, the questions seemed to involve not just the formal features of the narrative, but also the entire enterprise of the many idioms of dominance and subordination in subaltern literature. Sethe could not understand the meaning of those “unspeakable” semiotics of U.S. dominance without first naming the “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” and keeping, what Morrison calls “the past at bay.” This could be done only by constructing a “syntax” to organize the storytelling and to establish the most basic links between words and things. Morrison’s task, I suggest, is to formulate the very possibility of a grammar of the subaltern by which the “unspeakable” individual and collective trauma of her vision might be meaningfully communicated.

It then struck me that it is this very possibility of expression and representation through narration that forms the fundamental assumption of much U.S. and global minority writing. All writers must be, in fact, first the authors of a system of expression before they can be the authors of a particular expression. In her own allegory of reading American literature, *Playing in the Dark*, published after the appearance of *Beloved*,

Morrison expressed this idea in the following way: “The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.” Likewise, the Chicana feminist writer, Gloria Anzaldúa, expressed this idea of systemic writing in similar terms in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: “In looking at this book that I’m almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Mexica-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with deep structure, the underlying structure... that is red earth, black earth.”

*Subaltern Modernities* to make a long story short, will analyze the assumptions and theories behind such statements by Morrison and Anzaldúa (among others) in order to examine the processes by which Trans-American and South Asian diasporic and border writers and thinkers from the Global South establish the grammar and syntax proper to the expression of their particular meanings. Following post-structuralists and post-colonialists such as Paul de Man, Judith Butler, and Ranajit Guha, I term these processes the creation of rhetorical form. The present study investigates the enabling conditions of narrative (novels, memoirs, testimonies) by subaltern writers such as José Martí, Miguel Barnet, Víctor Martínez, Sandra Cisneros, and Arundhati Roy and the various ways in which their stories seek to create an epistemological ground upon which coherent versions of the world may be produced.

*Lucero*: My question did not mean to criticize the work of Spivak and Kaplan as a whole, but to address a specific potential limitation related to their “national” frame of analysis.

In your new work, in fact, the notion of the “unspeakable,” which you introduce after Toni Morrison (or after her character Sethe), is very illuminating given the difficulties of narrating the stories performed by “the small voices of history.” If I understand it well, this notion refers to an entire dimension linked to the hidden effects of modernity, which is hidden precisely because it lacks a vocabulary to account for it as an existing phenomenon.

*In this sense, and in connection to my previous question, could it be also assumed that you would consider those new, still unnamed, still unspoken subalternities created by neoliberalism, difficult to articulate due to this (subaltern condition of) unspeakability? If this is the case, then, do you think it is possible to “borrow” the “syntax” or the “epistemological ground” created in literature so as to begin to tell the story of these new colonial and/or imperial subjects (because it is mandatory that the subaltern speaks!)?*

**J.D.S.** Yes, absolutely, Mónica. I think all of us in the human and social sciences have to work very hard to get beyond using the nation as our unit of analysis. Turning to a critique of the cultures and politics of U.S. imperialism—as Spivak and Kaplan have been doing in their work has been a real breakthrough for U.S.-based “American Studies” scholars. That’s all I’m saying. Now, as far as what Toni Morrison has taught me over the many years I have been discussing her novels in my seminars, let me put it this way: in reading her Pulitzer-prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, for example, I see her allegorizing how language (maybe even diasporic literary language) seems persistently tempted in her fiction to fulfill itself in one single moment, in the uniquely figural expression which would explain its ineffable subaltern mysteries. Hence, we are as readers of her “unspeakable” subalternist texts constantly faced with the frustration of attempting to define something that continually resists definition. But, Mónica, I think your own elegant reading of what you have gleaned in the subaltern’s condition of unspeakability is precisely what I’m getting at. To read then is to question and to understand Morrison’s texture and the rhetorical resources of her figural language, as well as with grapple with referential and formal issues before us. I am interested in seeing the aesthetic structure of subaltern knowledge in the texts written by writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Arundathi Roy. I think that a critical awareness of this rhetorical screen can provide us with insight into the validity of any statement which seeks to describe or prescribe what in a novel like Morrison’s

*Beloved* is real, imaginary, and/or not yet real or imaginary.

**Lucero:** *In your book Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies (1997), you proposed to examine the zones of geographical contact between the United States and Mexico in order to undermine U.S. nationalism and its traditional historiography. First, I would like to ask you if you can talk a little about what this project feels like ten years later. What were you trying to do in this more focused book on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands? Why were you using Black British Cultural Studies (Hall, Gilroy, Mercer) to focus on conjunto music, corridos, rock en español, novels, performance art, folklore? Secondly, I wonder if another step in terms of undermining traditional historiography can involve the re-examination of the notion of “Empire” as a category of analysis because, as we know, the history of the imperial United States not only surpasses its national borders but also seems to be mainly inscribed abroad. In this sense, what categories do you use to explore overseas events such as the U.S. intervention in the Cuban war for independence in 1898? What did you expect to achieve by looking awry at 1898? What other places in history and geography do you believe could be revisited in order to eventually rewrite traditional and hegemonic history?*

**J.D.S.:** In our recent and unprecedented context of undocumented—mostly Mexican--migrants taking to the streets of Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Dallas, Philadelphia, Houston, Chicago, and New York in the millions last March and April 2006 in order to show their dismay and disgust with the immigration bills in the House and the Senate that would make them as undocumented border crossers into felons, let me try here to be a bit audacious in my answer. *Border Matters*, I think, was a little ahead of its time. Today, almost ten years after its publication by the University of California Press, I see my text as a scathing report on the way cultural and political violence had been used in the United States to make and maintain its borders in stark and abusive violation of the human rights of the people who cross the militarized borders

between the United States (the Global North) and Mexico, Central America, and América Latina (the Global South). In *Border Matters*, however, I was both raising what I saw as the “transfrontier issue of our time” and recounting the stories (what you call the historiography) that have challenged them. Drawing upon a wealth of frontier-crossing scholarship—from Américo Paredes and Renato Rosaldo to George Lipsitz, Lisa Lowe, and Barbara Harlow--, I drafted a critical agenda that not only worked across what I neologized as a “transfrontera contact zone” (in honor of Mary Louise Pratt) but also successfully worked out the parameters of a U.S.-Mexico border writing and border thinking (in honor of Gloria Anzaldúa and Walter D. Mignolo) —a border thinking that must, at the same time, struggle toward documentation of the undocumented in the USA and contest the pervasive articulations (to use Gramsci and Hall’s language) between the moral panic about border-crossing migrations and what I saw in California as the drift into a militarized law-and-order society so virulently purveyed by the mass media and the politicians (both in the House and the Senate) who legislate other lives. Today these legislators want to make undocumented border-crossers felons!

I divided *Border Matters* into two sections. The first part I called “Comparative Intercultural Studies,” elaborated on the written work of a selection of contributors to recent academic work and area studies development in precisely these matters; in part two, “El Otro Lado/The Other Side,” it is postcontemporary and transmodern Tijuana and Los Angeles, Baja, and what used to be called Alta California that “going beyond literature” I located my border matters commentary across several disciplinary distinctions and media.

While I do not have space to get into a full-blown précis of the book’s two parts; let me just say that my favorite chapters are those from Part 2 of the text, where the interlocutors I’m commenting on all demand “Rights for All.” This account begins on what I termed “the bad edge of la frontera,” with a critical reading of Helena María Viramontes short story, “The

Cariboo Cafe,” of a Salvadoran mother in search of her disappeared child on the back and mean streets of Los Angeles pursued by what the author calls “la polie,” proceeds with John Rechy’s fabled account of the not so “miraculous day of Amalia Gómez” in the same world city of Los Angeles, and is accompanied by the rock en español, punk, and hip hop musics of Los Illegals and (Kid) Frost, orchestrating what I recorded as “the complex sounds of mass media texts critiquing and complicating the dominant culture’s linear views of immigration, the American Bildung, ethno-race and the nation.” After Los Angeles, it was “Tijuana Calling,” in the touristic words of mainline travel writer from *The New York Times* Beverly Lowry, re-scored in the auto-ethnography of Luis Alberto Urrea, the displaced travels of the great journalist and poet Rubén Martínez, and what I characterized as the changed and changing career choices and perspectives by Richard Rodríguez, and the multi-media “happenings” and performances by the Chilango Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In the book’s conclusion, I turned back to the Gilded Age, when the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands—as Gloria Anzaldúa and Américo Paredes taught us—were being divided and partitioned, when the treaties were drafted and signed, the railroads built, the historical romances were written, and when monopoly capitalism was consolidated. It was time for me to re-read María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s recently re-edited novel *The Squatter and the Don* (1885). It was now time for me to see the precedents that John Gregory Bourne, a soldier-ethnologist for the Third United Cavalry had set by his 1894 Scribner’s article about South Texas border culture and society he symptomatically entitled “The American Congo,” where he compared the Rio Grande and the Congo River as predetermining the flows of nineteenth-century imperialist aspirations and late twentieth-century globalizing imperatives. And it was time for me to think again about José Martí’s 1891 “Nuestra America” in this context of not only hemispheric un-mappings but also in its global dimensions.

## Border Thinking and Rethinking the Border within Immigration Times and Struggle

*Lucero: In your recent articles you define "border thinking" as "a new geopolitically located thinking from both the internal and external borders of the modern (colonial) world "system." Additionally, you specify that this knowledge or epistemology emerges from undocumented immigrants, migrants, bracero workers, refugees, etc. How can we remap or reinterpret "border thinking" taking into account the recent actions carried out by Latino immigrants in the United States, which have been described as demands for civil rights? Also, if what those immigrants are looking for is the legalization of their immigration status, in a certain (epistemic) way that would imply leaving the border behind. Do you think this would change the notion of "border thinking"? What consequences do you foresee in terms of "local histories" and "global designs"? In this context, what is your reading of those who still understand "America" as the white and Anglophone United States?*

**J.D.S.:** *Mónica, I'd like to begin concluding by saying that some of the questions regarding "border thinking" were in a sense already anticipated and answered in my précis above of *Border Matters* as a scathing report about human rights abuses in the USA. What I'd like to do now is—with all due respect to my Latin Americanist interlocutors and friends on the Left from Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Argentina who don't agree with my local views on immigration struggles in the USA—grapple with the recent demonstrations in March and April 2006 by a mega social movement of undocumented border-crossers mostly from Mexico and the Global South. While I understand why many of my *paisanos* from Latin America or the Global South tended to misread this movement as a newer U.S. Latino/a tinged call for "civil rights"—like the African-Americans of the 1950s and 1960s, or just dismissed the protests, for the workers were mainly attempting to acculturate into the U.S. culture and society, my own views (given my*

previous work in Chicano/a Studies and location in California) are a bit different.

First of all, why did so many millions of undocumented workers (and their children and family) in March and April 2006—mostly Mexican—take to the mean streets of the major cities of the USA to intervene in the political debates in the U.S. over its immigration policy. For me, given the prior right-wing legislative history of unconstitutional Propositions in California, like Proposition 187, it has never only been a question of "civil rights," as some argue, for this new and unprecedented social movement wasn't re-scoring Martin Luther King's great march on Washington in 1963. Could we say that this mega movement was in fact an attempt to counter the almost exclusive political focus on electoral politics in California and the rest of the U.S. that continue to betray them?

On the other hand, it also seemed to me that these events weren't entirely about Samuel Huntington's racist and melancholic fantasy that "demography is destiny," as others suggested. Were these border-crossing protests then about the USA's economy—that the mostly undocumented Mexican workers (1/6 of Mexicans now work "illegally" in the USA) were making a performative plea that they shouldn't be entirely blamed for having through their labor "depressed wages" for all unskilled (and legal) labor, to the detriment of low-income, so-called native born hyphenated Americans—especially, African-Americans and white ethnics? How can we really say that our postcontemporary immigration debate in this country is really about the economy? Or is the postcontemporary immigration debate really about the politics of race, nation, and culture?

On still another level, what did it mean that these mass protests (larger than the combined populations of many Latin American countries) were coordinated and organized by DJ activists like Renán Almendárez Coello in the new, massified U.S. public sphere, that is, on the vibrant Spanish language mass AM and FM radio stations throughout the United States? What did Almendárez Coello's estimated 35 million daily morning listeners hear "sonically" in the DJ's call for

dissent in his radio show that is syndicated in thirty-six cities throughout the United States? The DJ not only got them out to protest—but according to the *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 1, 2006), Almendárez Coello is also well on his way to getting some 1 million new Latino/a voters (a rather different imagined community) registered to vote against the anti-immigrant members of the House and Senate in the November 2006 elections.

Or was the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington (a Democrat, who served in the Kennedy administration) right in his warning in *Who Are We?* that unchecked Latino/a and Mexican immigration were bringing with them to the USA what he condemned as “alien” non-WASPish cultural values—that is to say, that the sacrosanct White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant-ness (WASP-ness) of the imagined community was being threatened? Last, what might it mean that the so-called underrepresented ethnic minorities (African-Americans, Hispanics, Chicanos/as, Asian-Americans) are now the majority of the population of the United States? Will the so-called white Americans become a minority group? As you know, according to the 2000 Census, in California, Texas, and New York that’s already the case (with Arizona and Florida soon to follow).

Let me end our interview for *Lucero* by suggesting somewhat utopianly that this mega movement of protest might in the future be taking some of its cues from the recent events in Latin America and the Global South—where new indigenous leaders as in Bolivia were elected into office for the first time.

What did it mean that many of those who marched (as I witnessed in our protests in Berkeley) cared about the immigration debates in the U.S. but also attempted to see beyond them? Many were quoted as saying “I used to be undocumented. I came here to the march because many of friends and family can’t.”

What the millions of undocumented and documented marchers cared about was not only U.S. immigration reform—they were also concerned with human rights for all, with wages and better working conditions, they cared for health care, education in the public schools that their tax dollars pay for,

and the environment. They were protesting because they couldn’t go to the hospitals for care; they were protesting because they couldn’t drive to work because they couldn’t get a license; they were protesting because they couldn’t organize at work.

One last thing. When I was in Mexico City last July 2, 2006, I had the opportunity to rethink these massive protests in the USA by the literally millions of the undocumented workers. What would have the so-called three Mexican Presidents (or so they claimed that Sunday night after the election) Fox, Calderón, and López Obrador had done if the 1/6<sup>th</sup> of their nation’s population had returned to Mexico City and protested human rights for all on their home turf? My sense is that at least two of these Mexican Presidents would have called on the army to put down the uprising of workers and their families. That is to say, my views on border thinking, immigration reform, and immigration struggle are, like Subcomandante Marcos’s views, both utopian and dystopian.

*Lucero: Immigration has been a complex phenomenon, and, if you allow me, I still would like to propose another question regarding this matter in order to conclude our dialogue. As you and other remarkable scholars have noted, geographical borders, especially in the U.S.-Mexico frontier, are places where these tense processes of restructuring identities, experiences, and knowledges occur. Is it possible to advance a reading of the current debate about immigration also taking into account the history of the United States as an Empire? In other words, what is the place of immigration within the imperial configuration of the U.S.? On the other hand, as we discussed before, it seems to exist other “types” of borders that have not been sufficiently explored. That is, the epistemic borders, where Quijano’s “coloniality of power” could also be illuminating in order to record the local stories and epistemic sites that the Empire is fueling-through neoliberalism, intervention, war- in the bodies and daily experiences of people who remain within the limits of their “nations.” Would you still consider it useful to allow for the notion of “border thinking” so as to address the stories of people who, without having migrated, are yet caught in a space of in-betweenness?*

J.D.S.: Mónica, I think it was Stuart Hall who once explained that the recent history of black migration to Britain and the UK best with the slogan—"We are here because you were there." I think that this logic is at work with regards to U.S. immigration and U.S. Empire but with a difference. Neither China nor Greece and Rome were never really "global" empires. The British Empire was "global" to a great extent. However, according to the geographer, Neil Smith, the U.S. Empire is the first to be striving to be "planetary." And as Amy Kaplan has taught us, this U.S. planetary logic of empire expresses a contradictory U.S. structure of feeling—it expresses an assumed geography of privilege and exceptionalism (it never credits itself with any originary belligerence) on the one hand, and it expresses what Smith characterizes as a peculiarly "anti-geographical ideology of post-nineteenth-century Americanism" on the other. What I think Smith is getting at, is that today the U.S. Empire is not only interested in, say, the geopolitics of oil and resources, but also more precisely that the power of U.S. empire is in the first place exercised through what we call "the world market" and only secondarily (when necessary) in geopolitical terms. Using Smith's way of thinking about the American Empire allows us to see that the United States has never followed the British and European models of empire, for from its beginnings the U.S. forged its own "manifest destiny" and its own geographical and economic expansion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That's why I think the European financial historian of empire, Niall Ferguson, is off base—when he argues that the U.S. Empire should model itself after the British Empire, but without the British's errors with the underside of modernity.

The U.S. Empire—in contradistinction to Europe—was built on what Neil Smith calls a "strategic recalibration of geography with economics, a new orchestration of world geography in the pursuit of economic accumulation."

What we have partly in Smith's book, *American Empire* (2003) and fully worked out in his mentor's David Harvey's book on the American Empire entitled *The New Imperialism* (2003) is a concern

with temporal-spatial dynamics and with a healthy grounding of historical geographical materialism. They are both interested in constructing a theory of place relations; with the geographical development under (late) capitalism that they believe can explain state functions, uneven development, urbanism, and imperialism. There are in Harvey's view two logics at work in the new U.S. imperialism—a global logic of capital operating in continuous time and space and a territorializing logic of states oriented to imagined collective interests. These two logics are "articulated" by the current U.S. hegemony of the U.S. Empire.

Where the Peruvian historical sociologist, Aníbal Quijano's great theory of the colonality of power would surely help us in conceptualizing is precisely in what you have noted as the way Americanness and capitalism built a new fixed space (landscape) in 1492, necessary for its own unique functioning based on the creation of racial, gendered, and caste hierarchies the Iberians and Britains brought with them from the other side of the world to enslave indigenous and black bodies. This is what Marx called primitive accumulation—the way resources are expropriated and humans enslaved once and for all from a commons that was built up over centuries.

The U.S. Empire's accumulation by dispossession today in Latin America, the Middle East, and other parts of the world might also allow us to see how it is attempting to impose a "structural coherence" on the rest of the world. So, yes, I think that this logic also foretells newer forms of "border thinking" around our planet in response to these new American Empire's dual logics of territory (*fronteras*) and capital.

*Thank you very much for this illuminating conversation with Lucero on the limits of geography, ideology and academic disciplines. Undoubtedly, this is a debate that should continue to develop, and I am glad that our questions and especially your observations can contribute to this discussion.*

Thanks so much Mónica.