



Americo Paredes: In His Own Words, an Authorized Biography (Al Filo: Mexican American Studies Series)

Manuel Medrano

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Américo Paredes (1915-1999) was a folklorist, scholar, and professor at the University of Texas at Austin who is widely acknowledged as one of the founding scholars of Chicano Studies. Born in Brownsville, Texas, along the southern U.S.-Mexico Border, Paredes' early experiences impacted his writing during his later years as an academic. He grew up between two worlds—one written about in books, the other sung about in ballads and narrated in folktales. He attended a school system that emphasized conformity and Anglo values in a town whose population was 70 percent Mexican in origin.

During World War II, he worked for the International American Red Cross and wrote for the *Stars and Stripes* army newspaper in the Far East. He returned to Texas with a new bride and a passion for continuing his formal education and his writing. Paredes did both at the University of Texas at Austin, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1956. With the publication of his dissertation, "*With His Pistol in His Hand*": A Border Ballad and Its Hero in 1958, Paredes soon emerged as a challenger to the status quo. His book questioned the mythic nature of the Texas Rangers and provided an alternative counter-cultural narrative to the existing traditional narratives of Walter Prescott Webb and J. Frank Dobie, among others.

For the next forty years he was a brilliant teacher and prolific writer who championed the preservation of border culture and history. He was a soft-spoken, at times temperamental, yet fearless professor. He was a co-founder in 1970 of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and is credited with introducing the concept of Greater Mexico, decades before its wider acceptance today among transnationalist scholars. He received numerous awards, including La Orden del Aguila Azteca, Mexico's most prestigious service award to a foreigner. Paredes became a scholar of scholars, guiding many students to become academic leaders.

Manuel F. Medrano interviewed Paredes over a five-year period before Paredes' death in 1999, and also interviewed his family and colleagues. For many Mexican Americans, Paredes' historical legacy is that he raised, carried, and defended their cultural flag with a dignity that both friends and foes respected.

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