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Trans-Americanities: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and  
the Cultures of Greater Mexico, by José David Saldívar

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## Reviews



SALDÍVAR, JOSÉ DAVID. *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 265 pp.

The continued search to map out the contemporary emergence of U.S. Latino subaltern voices becomes one of the goals of *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (2012). In this book, José David Saldívar sets out to reframe the development of literary works by subalterns and their impact on literary criticism in transnational and hemispheric modes. Through an examination of the boundaries that govern how we categorize, think about, and contextualize such works of art, the book challenges the reader to take on an alternative global perspective of analysis. Saldívar extends the notion of Americanness to that which he calls “trans-Americanity” to substantiate how Chicano/a and Latino/a literature and criticism reflect the making of the New World itself, creating what he terms the Global North.

Calling attention to how issues of race and ethnicity, oppression, discrimination, and cultural resistance manifest in minoritized populations across the world, Saldívar draws a trans-Atlantic parallel to “Americanness as a Concept” on a world-system level under the development of postmodern and postcolonial studies in India and other parts of the world, which he refers to as the Global South (4). In doing so, he validates the common shared experiences of racialized peoples and minorities and works on the axis between the Global South and the Global North to reveal how the cultures of Greater Mexico reflect notions of subaltern modernities and global coloniality that are pervasive in the Global South. *Trans-Americanity* undertakes a radical vision that rests precisely in the intersections of “coloniality of power” and “Americanness” to show how such engagements take place within literary cultural production in the United States and how decolonial expressions restructure minoritized identities by reframing their position as stakeholders in hemispheric and spherical understanding of the world as a system.

The first chapters of this book advance the author’s previous works on culture and literature along Greater Mexico’s border, concepts developed by Américo Paredes and Héctor Calderón. The author continues to expand his scholarly interest in Chicano/a and Latino/a literature and cultural production as inter-American expressions

of transculturation and hybridity in the borderlands as seen in *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (1991) and in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997). In the preface, Saldívar presents a theoretical approach to time and space of the present that conceptualizes new ways to think beyond Eurocentric modernist or American nationalist views by examining intercultural zones as outernational contact zones. Saldívar examines the colonial matrix of power, seeing Americanness as a key determinant in modernity to the development of categories such as coloniality, ethnicity, racism, and the notion of newness in thinking about the New World. He channels new critiques of U.S. imperialism to show, for example, how modernity developed unevenly. In this way, he contests the postexceptional history of the United States and that of colonial modernity by demonstrating how subaltern works of art challenge singular and fixed visions of the world.

For Saldívar, works by Toni Morrison, Ronaldo Hinojosa, José Martí and Paredes reflect the uneven development of modernity. In addition, their narratives are samplings of a range of critiques about U.S. imperialism lodged from what he calls the spaces and places of subaltern modernities. These authors offer an alternative reading of the idealized and hegemonic visions of U.S. power and coloniality. Serving as historical breaks, they underscore the importance of race for historically racialized groups but also garner a different conceptualization of race. By providing a contrapuntal vision of the hegemonic, post-race, colorblind vision of contemporary U.S. society against the narration of race in literary and cultural production, Saldívar shows how transmodern conditions make “the transmodern marvelous realist writer” into a canary that critically watches how race plays out in different ways for different people (101). The author extends Lani Guinier’s and Gerald Torres’ metaphor of “critical canary watching” in *The Miner’s Canary* (2002) to show how Chicana/o inscriptions of multiculturalism reveal the unequal play of race (92). At the same time, a writer’s ability to identify how race functions as a category allows for the use of race as political praxis.

With this in mind, Saldívar also demonstrates how language and knowledge are elements classified in the colonial project. “The immanent potential of Greater Mexico’s figural language” is important spaces and places that reflect a diaspora of power reworked by subalterns (xxv). The author illustrates how, in using old words in

new ways, border epistemologies reveal the braids of a global coloniality inscribed in language. His use of postpositivist realism and transnationalism grapple with the ways border epistemologies present in literary and cultural expressions work to offer a realist view of identity as multicultural. This linguistically imbedded diversity, often a result of colonized, fragmented, exiled, or translated tongues, challenges stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and nationalism. Saldívar reveals how language practices are key to understanding the enmeshed power relations witnessed in Gloria Anzaldúa's *pensamiento fronterizo* (29). In particular, his use of Anzaldúa's border thinking as a "site of crisscrossed experience, language, and identity," paired with Walter D. Mignolo's decolonial extension of Anzaldúa's work as "a different map," provides the context to illuminate the global intersections between the already known Latin American and South Asian Subaltern Studies Groups and Chicano subalternity in the United States within a domestic/global context (14).

Connecting the work of Subaltern Studies scholars from the Global South such as Gayatri Spivak, John Beverley, and Dipesh Chakrabarty with those of the Global North such as Toni Morrison, Rosaura Sánchez, as well as Mignolo, Martí and Anzaldúa, among others, Saldívar traces how distinct cultural expressions and new subjectivities emerge from "broken tongues." His analysis of Sandra Cisneros, Victor Martínez, and Arundhati Roy in chapters 1 and 7 are a case in point. To validate further his position, the author shows how works by Ronaldo Hinojosa, George Mariscal, and Paredes reflect wild tongues articulating an outernational critique of society. For Saldívar, works by Miguel Barnet, Esteban Montejo and Martí as well as the performance work of El Vez, "The Mexican Elvis" (Robert López), feature the forms in which subaltern identities mediate a transmodern realism already inter-American, hemispheric, and global as a result of the unequal development of modernity and coloniality of power.

This book is important to the area of Hemispheric Studies because it is one of the first ones to present a Chicano hemispheric perspective of diasporic relations and links to the world often dismissed or ignored because they remain the invisible Fanonian "wretched of the earth." As Saldívar intersects the literary production of the Global South with that of the Global North, the historicity mirrored in the writings of "thematizations of minoritized identities" opens a new

comparative line of analysis in which to contemplate the progression of identities (24). This book will prove valuable to scholarly analysis that charts new terrains that push the limits of contemporary epistemologies and unveils frames that envisage new illuminations on hemispheric angles of knowledge.

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