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What's So Critical about Critical Regionalism?

The Case of Fray Angélico Chávez's *New Mexico Triptych*

MELINA VIZCAÍNO-ALEMÁN

The title of this essay makes a statement and asks a question. To say that there is something critical about critical regionalism is almost self-evident, but the title also asks what makes critical regionalism critical in the first place. Critical regionalism recently entered the cultural and idiomatic lexicon of western American studies, evident by Krista Comer's 2011 review essay from *American Literary History* in which she evaluates western American scholarship over the past two decades. Comer takes special note of Susan Kollin's *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* (2007) and Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (2008). At the same time she dismisses Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson's *Mary Austin and the American West* (2008) and Philip L. Fradkin's *Wallace Stegner and the American West* (2008) for their biographical approaches to western American literature and culture. Comer encourages instead a critical regionalism invested in asking "the who, what, and where of the West" (160). This same approach should also be asked of critical regionalism: Who is critical regionalism? What is it? And where is it? Because it is a recent innovation in western literary studies, an examination of earlier authors, such as, in the case of this study, Fray Angélico Chávez, complicates the way we understand critical regionalism.

What is so critical about critical regionalism is its mode of critique, as Comer and other western American scholars demonstrate, but it is equally important to understand how critical regionalism works as an aesthetic practice. Kenneth Frampton's 1983 essay "To-

wards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" popularized the concept in broader academic usage and defined it as a "double mediation" that, "[i]n the first place, has to 'deconstruct' the overall spectrum of world culture which it inevitably inherits; in the second place, it has to achieve, through synthetic contradiction, a manifest critique of universal civilization" (21). Deconstructing world culture means, from Frampton's perspective, mediating between the universal and the "place-form" so as to create a "place-conscious poetic" (27) with "the potential to withstand the relentless onslaught of global modernization" (29). Frampton's notion of "universal civilization" refers to western European development, First World cultures, and global expansion, and his sense of critical regionalism is a form of resistance to modernization, the local as a reprieve from the global. Scholars have since critiqued Frampton for his romancing of the local, most notably Neil Campbell and Stephen Tatum, who root their discussions of critical regionalism in western North America (and not necessarily western Europe) in order to consider how the "glocal" disrupts the modern binaries of Frampton's critical regionalism.

Campbell expands Frampton's thinking to consider how the West forms in transversals, diagonals, and crossings. This sense of the West diverges from its horizontal axis and creates what Campbell calls the "rhizomatic West," a way of looking simultaneously at "the universal and the local," as he explains, "and appreciating the special angle of critique that emerges from such a 'third space'" (53). On the one hand, Campbell invokes the myths of frontier expansion and manifest destiny implied by the designation "West," but he also tilts the perspective of place to consider the multiple myths and ideological worldviews that simultaneously comprise the region. Drawing on area studies and theories of space, especially Edward Soja's "trialectics" of "space" (59), Campbell cites Cheryl Temple Herr's definition of critical regionalism as created from the "space-between, interbeing, dialogism, nomadic space, intertextuality, hybridity, the assemblage" (Herr 8). From Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari Campbell adopts the notion of the rhizome to rethink the West from a borderlands perspective, and he emphasizes the *mestizaje* or mixing of culture and geography. In this way Campbell's rhizomatic West is caught in the crosshairs of nation

and geography, and it mirrors more the Chicano/a borderlands than the frontier space of manifest destiny. Campbell thus shares with Frampton a critique of “universal civilization,” but he shifts the discussion of critical regionalism from the material world of architecture to the imaginary West in a global media age.

Critical regionalism reframes the West in terms of routes—not roots—to underscore the shifting and unfixed place of regions in late capitalism. Stephen Tatum’s essay in Kollin’s *Postwestern Cultures* more directly challenges Frampton’s “architecture of resistance” for its reification of the region in opposition to modernity, emphasizing more the flows and nodal points of people, images, and capitalism in a postindustrial age. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “spectrality,” Tatum focuses on the connection between humans and machines through an “electronic geography” of the postregional West (17–18). Most compelling about Tatum’s argument are his notions of an interface and of the West as a conglomeration of “city-regions” where the human and machine worlds interact. As Tatum explains of the West, “the electronic and transportation networks, the virtual technologies, and the flow of images from the entertainment industry sector compose a postregional grid” where “the flows of capital, technology, people, and imagery all come together at a nodal point called ‘Las Vegas’” (13). Despite its image as rootless and ultramodern, Las Vegas takes on a spatial dimension in Tatum’s discussion, a “city-region” whose “electronic geography” signals a postregional West and a site for contemplating the practice of critical regionalism. Indeed, Las Vegas is a postmodern “city-region” of the West, but what interests me is what critical regionalism looks like before the postmodern era. As I hope to show by an examination of Fray Angélico Chávez, critical regionalism emerges much sooner and forms alongside of and within the discourses of modernist regionalism long before the postmodern moment.

Both Tatum and Campbell situate the West in ways that intersect with the Chicano/a borderlands, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa’s now-germinal book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), in which she describes the US-Mexico border region as a “third country” (25). Anzaldúa’s new mestiza sits at the border of two nations and the crossroads of difference, and she identifies as a

“border woman” from the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Yet she also makes certain that her borderlands philosophy is not static or fixed, but “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other” (19). Such a borderlands theory dovetails nicely with Tatum’s notion of an interface and Campbell’s rhizomatic West, but Anzaldúa’s theory does not represent a critical regionalism exclusively *in* and *of* the Southwest. The intersections of the Chicano/a borderlands and the postregional West mark a fruitful moment in which we can begin to ask the who, what, and where of critical regionalism. Whether construed horizontally (Frampton), imagined transversally (Campbell), or situated interfacially (Tatum), critical regionalism remains tied to a Eurocentric sense of the West. Though western American scholars have adopted a more critical stance toward the region, there is more to unpack about how critical regionalism forms *within*, and not *against*, modernist discourses of regionalism.

Tatum’s notion of an interface offers a useful way to investigate Fray Angélico Chávez’s 1940 collection of short stories, *New Mexico Triptych*, but the collection inversely offers a way to revise notions regarding the postregional West, the Southwest, and critical regionalism. Chavez was a Franciscan, so his visual and verbal repertoire drew from a long tradition of religious art, which Ellen McCracken has copiously documented in her biography of the friar, *The Life and Writing of Fray Angélico Chávez: A New Mexico Renaissance Man* (2009). Chávez used his writings and his art to express his religious personality, and *New Mexico Triptych* uses the flora, fauna, and folk of New Mexico to retell three biblical tales. The Trinitarian structure of Chávez’s religion compliments what Chris Wilson calls New Mexico’s “tri-culturalism,” the Indian-Anglo-Hispanic paradigm that became a means by which to Americanize New Mexico as a tri-cultural state during the territorial period.¹ The artists and writers who migrated west during the interwar period adopted the tricultural as a unique expression of a regional culture and literature that was distinct from the East, and Chávez worked and published within this network of artists and writers. *New Mexico Triptych* adapts both the author’s religion and the then-current modernist regional discourses of New Mexico in critical regional ways. The repetition of the number three in both the form and the content of the collec-

tion compliments the modernist regional Southwest, but the aesthetic also alters time, space, and geography in a way that reveals a critical regional aesthetic before critical regionalism.

The Case of *New Mexico Triptych*: A Critical Regional Text before Critical Regionalism

New Mexico Triptych cloaks its religious tales in regional imagery in a “double-voiced” way, following Genaro Padilla (*Short Stories* 35; “Reassessment” xii), but the triptych takes the collection to another level. According to Madeleine Polner Cosman, the triptych is rooted in a religious philosophy of trinal triplicity, a medieval notion, and Christian fascination with the number three (249). The triptych means “threefold,” from the Greek *triptukhos*, and as an art form it consists of three separate but interrelated panels with a central image in between two others, one image to the left and another to the right (Cosman 250).

Chávez’s cover illustration provides a visual sign of the collection’s triptych of stories, and the title is a mediation of his religion and his regional art. *New Mexico Triptych* puts into practice the author’s philosophy of art and spirituality, which he states in his 1933 bachelor’s thesis, “Painting, Personality, and Franciscan Ideals.” In the thesis Chávez draws a connection between art and spirituality, and he makes an argument for the pedagogical uses of religious art—mainly from the Renaissance period—in teaching novitiates the Franciscan personality. “A Franciscan clerical student,” the thesis begins, “would profit considerably by becoming acquainted, even if it must be by informal study, with the spirit of Religious Painting” (1). The thesis makes certain that it addresses the “spirit” and not the skill of painting, and it concludes that religious painting is “an easy form of Aesthetics, it completes, as it were, the formation of a priestly and Franciscan personality, by helping to add to the Solidity in God and to Charity that third ingredient of personality—a harmonious balance of the whole man” (22). This “third ingredient” is a provocative concept in rethinking *New Mexico Triptych* and its critical regional aesthetics.

Chávez’s religious philosophy of art and the New Mexico folk converge in the cover illustration, which the author himself drew as a visual document of the three collected stories. Chávez quite

Fig. 1. The cover image for *New Mexico Triptych* by Fray Angélico Chávez. Courtesy of Sunstone Press, Box 2321, Santa Fe NM 87504-2321, www.sunstonepress.com.

literally draws (on) a modernist folk aesthetic popular in the early twentieth-century Southwest, as he composes the images in what looks like a folk retablo, or a sacred image painted on a wooden board. Each story in the collection revises a religious tale, beginning with “The Angel’s New Wings,” which relates the birth of Christ, moving to the second story, “The Penitente Thief,” which recounts the Passion of Christ, and finally finishing with “Hunchback Madonna,” a retelling of the legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe. While McCracken sees the collection as a form of hybridity (“Iconicity”; “Cathedrals”), Genaro Padilla reads more the critique of cultural conflict through social allegory (“Reassessment”; *Short Stories*). The triptych offers another lens through which to view Chávez’s fiction, one that mediates Padilla’s allegories of social conflict and McCracken’s aesthetics of harmony. For scholars of western American literature the aesthetics of mediation in Chávez’s fiction provide a way to rethink the postregional West, critical regionalism, and Chicana/o studies.

First published in 1940 by the St. Anthony Guild Press and coinciding with the four hundredth anniversary of Coronado's 1540 expedition into New Mexico in search of Cíbola, El Dorado, or the Seven Cities of Gold, the book is dedicated to "Coronado's Children: My People." By this time Chávez was no stranger to the regional modernist arts and literature in his home state, which began to form shortly after statehood (1912) and between the two world wars (1917–41). The rise of regional literature and art in New Mexico culminated in the 1930s during what Marta Weigle and Kyle Fiore call the Writer's Era, when artists and writers primarily from the East relocated to New Mexico either sick with tuberculosis or damaged by the war, individuals Lynn Cline calls "literary pilgrims."² Chávez found a niche for himself in the romantic Southwest after returning home from a long hiatus in the Midwest, where he studied to become a Franciscan. Although he began publishing his religious verse in small Catholic magazines and school newspapers in the 1920s, he published his first collection of poetry, *Clothed with the Sun*, in 1939 upon the strong recommendation of his friend and fellow poet John Gould Fletcher, who at the time was coeditor of the Writers' Edition, a local press and an outgrowth of the Writer's Era.³ One short year later the St. Anthony Guild Press published Chávez's collection of stories, though in Walter Romig's *The Book of Catholic Authors* (1943) the author credits his affiliation with the writers and artists of New Mexico for the collection's success. Such a self-portrayal of his work exhibits a Franciscan humility and reinforces the friar's identity as a Catholic author, but it also reinforces the Writer's Era vision of the Southwest. The friar's sense of regionalism forms in between his religion and the region, producing in the process a mediated sense of time, space, and geography in *New Mexico Triptych*.

All three stories in *New Mexico Triptych* are set in New Mexico, but each one takes place during a different era. Taken together, the collection moves back in time from the industrializing American Southwest to the preindustrial Mexican period, but it does so subtly and through key signs and symbols that mark historical time in the backdrop of each story. Chávez orders the stories seasonally and liturgically, not chronologically, so the collection's narrative arc follows traditional holidays and feast days in a seasonal man-

ner. Such a spatial sense of time creates a “dreamy” and harmonious narrative, but Padilla has already pointed out how cultural signs and symbols undermine the surface text in counter-historical ways (“Reassessment”; *Short Stories*). What remains to be examined is how *New Mexico Triptych* alters time, space, and geography to create a critical regional sense of place in the Southwest.

The first story in the collection, “The Angel’s New Wings,” takes place in poststatehood New Mexico (1912), and the last story, “Hunchback Madonna,” occurs some time during the Mexican era before the US-Mexico War (1846–48) but after the opening of the Santa Fe Trail (1821). In between the two is “The Penitente Thief,” which takes place during the territorial era (1850–1912) and is set during Lent in the fictional village of San Ramon. “The Penitente Thief” was first published in New Jersey’s *St. Anthony Messenger* in 1938, at a time when public notoriety surrounded the penitentes of New Mexico (McCracken, *Life and Writing* 130). Two years prior to the story’s publication a young houseboy connected to the penitentes murdered journalist Carl N. Taylor in Cedar Crest, New Mexico.⁴ The media used the murder as an opportune moment to portray the penitentes in a sensationalist manner, and even the *St. Anthony Messenger* was guilty of grossly misrepresenting the brotherhood (McCracken, *Life and Writing* 130). The story gained the friar much traction, for he received notice by the Pittsburgh poet and recent emigrant to New Mexico Haniel Long, who was instrumental in cofounding the Writers’ Edition with fellow poet and émigré Alice Corbin Henderson.⁵ Just three years prior to the publication of *New Mexico Triptych* Henderson published her own book on the penitente brotherhood of Abiquiu, New Mexico: *Brothers of Light: The Penitentes of New Mexico* (1937). Henderson’s husband, the artist William Penhallow Henderson, illustrated the book with woodcut images in a manner reminiscent of Chávez’s own *New Mexico Triptych*. The friar’s collection of stories thus forms within a regional landscape, and it carries with it ramifications for understanding the emergence of critical regionalism in a modernist regional era.

“The Penitente Thief” is an apt starting point for reading the collection as a whole because of its central location, both textually and contextually. The story takes place in three sections and over the

course of three years, reiterating the Catholic fascination with the number three and the structural logic of the triptych. It opens in the village bar, where the penitentes are gathering in preparation for their Lenten ritual of reenacting Christ's Passion during Holy Week. The omniscient narrator is quick to point out how the lay religious group has only twenty-two members left, with the last two, Lucero and Maldonado, counting only in body and not in spirit. The story draws on all the distinguishing characteristics of the regional folk but does so to recast the biblical narrative of the Good Thief in the regional garb of northern New Mexico's penitente folk. Rather than focus on the ethnographic facts of the penitente ritual, as Henderson had done three years before, Chávez's story instead focuses on the two characters who have adopted American ways and are of the lowest character. Referred to only by their surnames, Lucero and Maldonado represent two types of thieves who serve to teach a lesson about sin, forgiveness, and retribution, but a critical regional reading of the story also suggests how it teaches a lesson about Americanization and the shifting terrain of land and culture in the southwestern United States.

Chávez's portrayal of Lucero and his good friend Maldonado as drunkards and thieves plays on the media portrayal of the penitentes at the time, but Chávez's crucifixion story shifts the media attention away from the sensationalist drama of self-flagellation and toward the intercultural conflict of the Mexican American community during a time of transition. As the story opens, the two old friends are in the midst of their annual drinking fest, and throughout the course of the story they find themselves crucifying a Christlike figure in a drunken and dreamlike state every year for three years. Their other penitente brethren believe Lucero and Maldonado are bewitched, but Lucero is more lucid when drunk than when sober, and he dreams up his best heists in his dreamlike and drunken states, so he is convinced that his and Maldonado's annual crucifixions of a penitente dressed in white are more real than imaginary. In this way "The Penitente Thief" alters time and space in "magical" ways, as dreams play an important role in the way the narrative unfolds, but on a deeper reading of the story the two Mexican thieves function as archetypal characters more symbolic than real. The story transmits both a religious message and a

historical lesson by mediating the time, space, and geography of the New Mexico landscape.

From the very start the story makes reference to its own recasting of the Good Thief, but it does so in a way that also marks its historical time. As the story introduces Lucero—the title character and archetypal Good Thief—it reveals something of his personality and skill as a thief:

An outstanding event was the Governor's visit to San Ramon. Governor Wallace, who had just written a novel about the Christ, was shaking hands with the ranchers and townsfolk. While holding Lucero's hand, he turned to an aide and remarked that this fellow made a fine model for the Good Thief. It was only later that His Excellency found his gold watch and chain missing. (28)

The “outstanding event” in San Ramon is a historical reference to Territorial Governor Lew Wallace, who became famous for arresting and jailing Billy the Kid in 1878. Equally important is the governor's novel, *Ben Hur: A Tale about the Christ* (1880), which he authored while serving his term as territorial governor (1878–81). Set during a time of political upheaval and social turmoil, when New Mexico was an undefined territory in its transition from northern Mexico to the US Southwest, the story's not-so-hidden historical referent becomes a self-reflexive commentary on the story and the literary history it is rewriting.

Interest in Hispanic folk art peaked shortly after statehood (1912) with the confluence of the New Deal Era with the Writer's Era in the 1930s and the subsequent implementation of a preservationist folk ideology. Artists and writers adopted the tricultural model during the interwar period, and the year 1940 marked a commemorative moment in which artists, writers, and the state collaborated to celebrate the quadricentennial of Coronado's expedition into New Mexico. Chávez's dedication to “Coronado's Children” invokes the quadricentennial and the ethnographic interest in Hispanic cultures of the Southwest, but it also reclaims that history, which by that time had become a sign of poststatehood American modernity. The “My People” in Chávez's dedication reclaims the folk and puts a contextual spin on the story plotlines, which revolve around theft and cultural displacement. Lucero and Maldonado are both thieves,

but Maldonado is a lawyer who steals more than watches, church chalices, Navajo rugs, and horses. During the course of the story Maldonado murders his client Doña Encarnación Lopez in a greedy endeavor to acquire all of her land. He dies the Bad Thief because he is a nonbeliever, following the biblical tale, but he also dies the Bad Thief because he is perhaps *too* American. By reversing time and moving in a counterhistorical way, the collection pinpoints the shifting geography of New Mexico, which becomes a *preindustrial* nodal point where the flows of history, time, and space collapse to reinvent the literary and cultural history of the US Southwest.

The collection's first story subtextually introduces the themes of religion, theft, and cultural identity, but on the surface it retells the biblical tale of Christ's birth. "The Angel's New Wings" is told from an omniscient perspective that invokes an "unremembered past" to tell also the story of an ancient santero (saint-maker) who has fallen behind modern times (4). Set in the fictional village of Río Dormido (Sleepy River), the story opens in the village church with the santero, Nabor, repairing the broken wings of the herald angel. The name Río Dormido creates a sleepy tone, and Nabor nostalgically recalls how he alone used to set up the *nacimiento* (manger scene) on Christmas Eve, suggesting a disjuncture of time. The fact that Nabor no longer manages the manger scene is a sign of how the village folk no longer value the old traditions that he embodies; after all he is fixing the angel's wings because the smaller hands of a new generation broke it while setting up the manger scene. In the midst of his thoughts the young parish priest enters the church and informs Nabor that all the church *santos* (saints) have been stolen. Confused by what has happened, the young padre explains to Nabor, "There are people in Santa Fé or Taos who buy them for good money, Nabor. Some good-for-nothing in Río Dormido has run away with them for that purpose" (7). At that moment Nabor attaches the angel's new wings, and (in Nabor's imagination at least) it flies away. For the remainder of the story Nabor chases the angel throughout the village, into a mesa, and back into the church in a circular and almost mythical manner.

Nabor's magical journey through the village maps out how the folk have adopted modern American ways, and so it juxtaposes the mythical and the real in a way that generates a magically real sense

of time. In one scene Nabor stumbles into the village store, where a “little Santa Claus, with a cotton beard whiter and longer than his own, seemed to greet him merrily.” Meanwhile a “fat storekeeper, who was weighing out some sugar with the added pressure of his thumb, called out to ask whether Nabor wanted something in a hurry” (11). When Nabor asks for his little angel, the storekeeper remarks with a silver dollar in his hand, “this is the only thing with wings that flies in here, and it flies out much faster” (11). The storekeeper embodies American capitalism, from his body weight to the sugar weight on the scale, and the Santa Claus image serves as a reminder of how the village folk have adopted the secular meanings of Christmas, even though at the same time they cling to tradition. Nabor’s journey maps out the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the story reenacts the biblical drama of Christ’s birth in a manner that, through his delusional state of mind, recalls the folk play “Los Pastores.”⁶ The audience pays witness to the folk drama inside Nabor’s head, but we are left to wonder about the effectiveness of it, given the folk artist’s delusional state of mind. In the end the story modernizes tradition in a way that critiques the village folk for adopting modern ways, but it also critiques the folk artist for falling behind modern times.

The final section in the story makes evident how the folk become part of modern tradition, and it begins in the penultimate scene in which the angel comes alive in an open pasture to announce Christ’s birth, much like the archangel Gabriel descended from the sky in the biblical story. In this rendition the space of the story is just as important as the magic that takes place, for it literally removes Nabor from the adobe structures of the village. By 1940 the adobe aesthetic had become a sign of what Chris Wilson calls a modern regional tradition, due in large part to architect John Gaw Meem and his New Deal–commissioned Pueblo–Spanish Revival style buildings (277). Nabor returns to the village during midnight mass as the villagers gather in the church; they are oblivious to Nabor, and he is oblivious to them as he witnesses his santos magically come to life and take their place in the *nacimiento* in a manner reminiscent of the final act in “Los Pastores.” The village priest again enters the scene to remind Nabor (and the audience) of the stolen santos, though Nabor has no clue as to what he is saying giv-

en the miracle he has just witnessed. As Father Arsenio blows out the last candles in the church, the story closes in a theatrical manner to reinforce its dramatic flair but also to suggest how the young priest serves as a self-reflexive character. Penned by a young priest himself, the story uses the padre as both a conscientious foil and a realist character who frames the story and points to another kind of modern folk artist who orchestrates the collection from behind the scenes.

Rather than glorify or romanticize the folk artist who has fallen behind the times, “The Angel’s New Wings” instead modernizes folkways and comments on modernist regional art through Father Arsenio. The priest in the first story embodies a sense of realism that edges up against Nabor’s “magical” sense of reality, but he also marks a shift in time, space, and perspective. Though his story is set decades before “The Angel’s New Wings,” Lucero in “The Penitente Thief” could just as well serve as the “good-for-nothing thief” in the first story, which puts a regional spin on the theme of theft and connects it to twentieth-century folk art. “The Penitente Thief” foreshadows its tragic end early in the narrative when Maldonado awakens from a terrifying dream of snakes and tarantulas. Meanwhile Lucero dreams of robbing the bank of Don Jacobo Rosenberg, but Maldonado warns, “Steal from people, cheat at cards or rob widows, even play dirty politics—but never rob the bank or steal a horse. The government or the vigilantes will get you!” (29). Maldonado’s words are prophetic, for in the third and final year of the story Lucero steals a horse to help “the Penitente in White” make the long and treacherous climb up Mount Calvario (48). By this point in the story Lucero has feverishly entered another dimension in which he speaks to God and becomes the Good Thief. God explains to him that he will go to heaven with Christ because he confessed to stealing from his neighbor, Doña Luisa, but Maldonado will suffer for murdering Doña Encarnación. Lucero explains in a half-delusional state that Maldonado did not mean to kill her, to which her nephew steps out from the mob, points his rifle, and shoots Maldonado dead. The blast scares Lucero’s horse and leaves him hanging, quite literally, in a scene that carries all the rugged trappings of a Hollywood Western.

The border violence between Mexico and the United States becomes the backdrop to the religious drama in "The Penitente Thief," creating a kind of interface between historical time and magical time but also creating an interface between the first and second stories. McCracken's point that the name Nabor is a homonym for "neighbor" in English (*Life and Writing* 133) makes for an interesting connection between the two stories, for Lucero becomes the Good Thief for confessing to his neighbor, a symbolic form of retribution that gives agency to the folk artist who has fallen behind modern times in the first story. Set during an era of transition, when New Mexico was literally in between Mexican nationhood and American statehood, the story's sense of time telescopes both backward and forward in history to reterritorialize the regional folk artist. The cover image offers a visual illustration, as the cross in the central image quite literally hangs between the two adjacent images and organizes the horizontal and vertical lines that create something of a spatial interface. In the first image a crippled old man walks with a cane against the backdrop of an adobe structure; in the second image another man pulls the reins of a horse underneath an oversized crucifix, a small adobe structure in the distance. Laterally and across from the first image walks another hunchback figure, this time a woman in a black shawl, but noticeably absent from the third image is the adobe structure sitting in the backdrop of the first image and in the distant hills of the second. The little black figure (though hunchback) seems to glide across space without any assistance, be it crutch, adobe structure, or horse, and unlike the previous two images the visual landscape of this last one exudes femininity and suggests a gendered revision of the crippled folk body.

Moving from winter in the first story to spring in the third story reinforces the themes of death and rebirth at the religious heart of "The Penitente Thief," but seasonal time also enables a counterhistorical flow of narrative that follows a "natural" pattern of change. Less biblical than the other two stories in the collection, "Hunchback Madonna" retells the legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico, patroness of the Americas, and in more recent times a symbol of Chicano social struggle and Chicana cultural *mes-tizaje*. The story is set sometime after the opening of the Santa Fe Trail (1821), and the title character is waiting for an image of Our

Lady of Guadalupe to arrive from Chihuahua. Like the previous two stories this one begins with a portrait of place set in the village of El Tordo, an interesting choice in name since it is a Spanish term that refers to a dapple-gray bird of the Americas. In the first story, “The Angel’s New Wings,” a bird plays a significant role in how the story unfolds, and in the cover image a small hummingbird flocks the right-hand edge where the first and second stories come together. The town’s name, El Tordo, subtly refers back to the modernist landscape in the first story. El Tordo comes to life every spring with tourists and locals alike who make pilgrimages there, “to hear from the lips of some old inhabitant the history of the town and the church, the painting and the grave, and particularly of Mana Seda” (60). Though told from an omniscient narrative perspective, like the other two stories “Hunchback Madonna” is told in a manner reminiscent of what Padilla calls a New Mexican *cuento* (oral storytelling) tradition (*Short Stories* xi). Set in spring and during a time of rebirth, the story alters the literary and historical landscapes of the US Southwest to retell a folk legend and to revise the folk artist.

Chávez stylizes the oral tradition to tell the story of Mana Seda (Sister Silk), who is known for starting “an ancient custom prevalent in her place of origin: that of having little girls dressed as queens and their maids-in-waiting present bunches of flowers to the Virgin Mary every evening in May” (62). Every year Mana Seda collects flowers for the annual May festivities, and one year, due to drought, she must venture farther out into the meadow surrounding the village where flowers are in full bloom. In the climactic scene of the story, as Mana Seda collects her wild flowers, a rainstorm forces her to seek shelter in a little adobe hut where she meets a young santero named Esquipula, “dark and somewhat lean-bodied in his plain homespun” (67). Esquipula’s home becomes a refuge for Mana Seda, who helps herself to a pot of beans and coffee cooking over the fireplace. As she dries off in front of the hearth, Mana Seda opens up her shawl and lays out the flowers she had gathered from the meadow, to which Esquipula exclaims,

“But that makes me think of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe,” he said. “Remember how the Indian Juan Diego filled his blanket with roses, as Mary most holy told him to do? And

how, when he let down his *tilma* before the Bishop, out fell the roses, and on it was the miraculous picture of the Mother of God?" (68)

The image inspires Esquipula to paint a representation of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Mana Seda's shawl, and he promises her that the image can serve as the altarpiece from Chihuahua that she has been awaiting. The end result becomes the legendary cloak that hangs in the village church and lures pilgrims far and wide to the lifeless village of El Tordo every spring.

This third story diverges from the earlier "The Angel's New Wings" in more ways than one, most importantly in the folk artist, whose name is especially noteworthy. Esquipula is the name of the Christ figure enshrined at the Santuario de Chimayó in northern New Mexico, which Mary Austin, Frank Applegate, and John Gaw Meem of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society purchased in 1929 and began restoring; it remains a pilgrimage site for both tourists and locals (Wroth). In 1970 the Santuario de Chimayó was declared a national historic landmark, and in 1956 Stephen F. De Borhegyi published a small historical pamphlet in which he describes the continental link between Guatemala and New Mexico. Borhegyi opens the pamphlet with the observation that a "massive baroque church in the town of Esquipulas in southeastern Guatemala in Central America houses the miraculous image of the Black Christ" (2). The Franciscans were responsible for introducing and spreading the image of Esquipula throughout the Americas (Wroth), so Chávez's choice of name for his character gives his folk artist multiple meanings. Esquipula signifies multiple geographies in the Spanish American world and is a vestige of the colonial era that gave prominence to the author's own religious brotherhood, but the description of him as "homespun" provides an indigenous character trait that puts him at a crossroads of geography, time, and space. Unlike in "The Angel's New Wings," where the folk artist appears obsolete in the face of modern change, in "Hunchback Madonna" the folk artist is both worldly and native, young and wise, self-reliant and communal, modern and traditional, Old Mexican and New Mexican, and therefore symbolic of a critical regional New World subject.

As Esquipula works into the night, the young santero learns

many things about his guest, including the story of how she came to be a hunchback and how it prevented her from becoming a May queen in her native village on the banks of the Rio Grande. Entrenched in her life story, Esquipula realizes that “he had made the Virgin’s shoulders rather stooped, like Mana Seda’s, though not quite so much.” Although his first impulse is to “cover up the mistake,” he decides to let “things stand as they were” (72). The next morning Esquipula hitches up his donkey, Mariquita, and rides Mana Seda back into town, but not without stopping to collect more flowers along the way. When they arrive in the village, Mana Seda resumes her place as the church caretaker and prepares dinner for the village priest and his guest. During this time Esquipula devises a plan with the help of the village padre to grant Mana Seda her lifelong wish to be a flower-maid for the May devotions of Mary’s assumption into heaven. From this moment on her shawl takes its place behind the church altar, filling the empty space that was previously awaiting the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe from Old Mexico. It is this shawl that lures both locals and tourists to make pilgrimages every year—out of sacrifice and curiosity—to hear the story of Mana Seda. That the story is imparting the oral history these pilgrims seek out marks a self-reflexive statement on the collection and its representation of folk tradition. In the end the hunchback shawl of Mana Seda serves as a critical regional allegory for the collection itself, which reterritorializes the space of New Mexico and the Southwest.

The folk artist in “Hunchback Madonna” is caught between modern change and folk tradition, but unlike Nabor, whose artistic vision is a forgotten relic of the past, Esquipula inscribes on the back of Mana Seda a somewhat deformed but apt metaphor for the way folk tradition becomes a part of modern change in Chávez’s collection. Mana Seda’s shawl is neither imported from Mexico, appropriated by Anglo artists, nor stolen by native insiders, but a “homespun” representation of New Mexico in all of its disfigured grace. The fecundity of the natural world in the springtime and the female body renews the folk artist, who is physically crippled and socially dislocated in “The Angel’s New Wings,” but who in “Hunchback Madonna” is young, vibrant, and (at least in name) another figuration of (the Black) Christ, Esquipula. Mana Seda’s disfigurement

becomes the canvas on which Esquipula renews a sense of the folk and inscribes a feminine sense of the region. Unlike “The Angel’s New Wings,” where modern change cripples folk tradition, the crippled ways of the folk become a part of modern change in “Hunchback Madonna.” In this way the collection generates an interface of tradition and change that “disfigures” history and geography, so to speak, and revises a post-southwestern New Mexico vis-à-vis its pre-southwestern past.

Conclusion: Triptych Cultural Critique

New Mexico Triptych demonstrates how critical regionalism does not necessarily follow the developmental stages of Western civilization—from expansion to global capitalism—but emerges instead in response to the local environment and its own logic of modernity and cultural change. The triptych mediates and maintains spatial differences, and *New Mexico Triptych* offers a critical point of departure for current discussions of the West and the Southwest. One way to deploy the triptych as a critical apparatus is to align Chávez’s fiction alongside other writers of the Southwest who represent alternative and often conflicting intellectual traditions. Américo Paredes and J. Frank Dobie represent two intellectual histories of South Texas folklore, with Dobie representative of the Texas Folklore Society and Paredes the precursor to Chicano literature and cultural studies. Like Chávez, Paredes wrote and published regularly in the decades preceding and postdating the Civil Rights Era, and their works have been recovered and republished by the Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, launched in 1992 with the mission of making Hispanic literature written before 1960 more accessible to the interested reader.⁷ Much could be written on the similarities between Paredes and Chávez, but while Paredes holds a secure place in the canon of Chicano literature, Chávez’s place is much more ambiguous because he deploys a sense of place more in line with the tricultural vistas of the New Mexico landscape. Yet, as this essay shows, Chávez puts into practice a critical regional aesthetic. An intertextual reading of Chávez, Dobie, and Paredes alongside of and lateral to each other, as in a triptych, offers a fuller picture of critical regional aesthetics and a triptych cultural critique.

The romantic regionalism that came to dominate the image of New Mexico was much in line with Dobie's own regionalist philosophy, which Chávez invokes on the dedication page in *New Mexico Triptych*, "To 'Coronado's Children,' My People." Dobie had published a collection of Southwest folktales titled *Coronado's Children* in 1930. Chávez's dedication reclaims the folk in Dobie's lore, but rather than oppose Dobie altogether, Chávez offers an intertextual link that becomes a way to rethink Dobie and Paredes. Paredes resisted the ethnographic discourses Dobie came to emblemize in the twentieth century, and his classic study of the corrido hero Gregorio Cortez, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), is foundational to Chicano/a cultural and literary studies. In José Limón's study of South Texas ethnography, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (1994), Limón describes Dobie as a "romantic regionalist" (51) and Paredes as a "new intellectual figure" (76). Limón focuses on the ethnographic writings coming out of South Texas in the early twentieth century, and he uses the folklore of Jovita González to mediate Dobie and Paredes. While Limón's genealogy makes sense chronologically and geographically, the male-oriented landscape of his text overdetermines the structure and interpretation of Anglo and Mexican American folklore. Chávez's work instead balances this gendered landscape and offers a more lateral interpretation of Dobie and Paredes.

Dobie, Texas ethnographer and one-time president of the Texas Folklore Society, published *Coronado's Children* after returning to academia in the wake of his father's death. As Limón explains, "with his father now physically absent, Dobie had a kind of intellectual conversion experience that resolved much of his anxious contradiction and allowed him to return to academia as a literary intellectual and as a 'man'" (47). Dobie's writings are "fraught with anxiety," Limón continues, and driven by a desire "to resolve a cultural and psychological contradiction rooted in his upbringing" (46). Limón situates Dobie within the history of Anglo-Mexican conflict in South Texas, but Limón is himself anxious to resolve Dobie's legacy as a precursor to his own work. As an Anglo ethnographer Dobie reaped the rewards of what Richard Flores might call the Texas Modern, a period between 1880 and 1900 that "saw the

closing of the range, the introduction of the railroad, and the beginning of commercial farming" ("Alamo" 100). Dobie's dedication page pays tribute to both his mother and his father, but does so in a way that brings to bear Dobie's location of culture and power in modern Texas. First, he acknowledges his mother, "who has so often delighted me with / conversational sketches of such / characters as enter / this book," and second, he evokes the memory of his father, "a clean cowman of / the Texas soil" (n.p.). Dobie attributes his love for storytelling to his mother, but he roots his father in the very soil of Texas. Following Limón's logic, Dobie claims his intellectual manhood in the Texas ranching culture that his father's memory represents.

The title of Dobie's collection pays homage to Coronado's 1540 expedition in search of the lost treasure of El Dorado, a legend he recounts in his preface. As he explains, the stories are not his own creations but part of "the soil" and "the people of the soil" (v), yet the dedication page already designates his father as "of the soil." Therefore, before one even opens to the first page of the preface, the book enacts a symbolic violence against the Mexican people, a point that Limón has already made. The preface further lays out Dobie's ethnographic philosophy and method, which focuses more on the act of storytelling and less on the scientific study of language. While the Coronado expedition was a failure, Dobie explains, it unleashed the human imagination and a propensity for storytelling. Dobie describes the collection title as a depiction of those who "follow Spanish trails, buffalo trails, cow trails; they dig where there are no trails; but oftener than they dig or prospect they just sit and tell stories of lost mines, of buried bullion by the jack load, of ghostly *patrones* that guard treasures" (ix). Interestingly, as Dobie explains, the "English-speaking men [who] took over the *sitios* and *porciones* of Spanish lands in the Southwest . . . acquired not only the land that Spanish pioneers had surveyed but the traditions they had somehow made an ingredient of the soil itself" (ix). Here the dedication comes to fruition as Dobie romantically weaves ethnographic method and philosophy to form a masculinizing core, but there is a deeper gender contradiction in his work that connects, as well as divides, him and Paredes.

The ghost of Dobie's father masculinizes the soil of his Mexican

folktales, but the soul of those tales is not masculine at all. In fact, Dobie's calling to folklore is inspired not by his father's world, as Limón points out, but by "his mother's way, the way of literature" (47). Paredes's dedication page in *With His Pistol in His Hand* also pays tribute to "the memory" of his father, "who rode a raid or two with / Catarino Garza," and he further masculinizes the text when he extends his tribute "to all those old men / who sat around on summer nights, / in the days when there was / a chaparral, smoking their / cornhusk cigarettes and talking / in low, gentle voices about / violent things; / while I listened" (n.p.). In the context of Dobie's symbolic violence against the Mexican folk, Paredes's dedication reclaims the voices and the violence that Dobie appropriates, and the two diverge at the point of masculinity. Yet the lingering question of the mother shores up a certain trace of the feminine in Paredes's dedication, despite and even because he does not dedicate his book to his mother. Both Dobie and Paredes exclude women from their folklore, but Dobie's dedication page points to how his mother's influence was not marginal but integral to his interest in folklore. Dobie's preface further suggests how the territorial and cultural conquests of South Texas complement each other, and he celebrates the folkways of South Texas while laying claim to them in a colonial manner. Paredes, on the other hand, laments the tragic loss of a time past and quietly assumes a silent posture that, contrary to the way Limón and others have interpreted his work, does not represent a masculine counterdiscourse as much as it enacts a feminine response to the literal and symbolic conquests of the South Texas folk.

The impetus for what Limón calls Paredes's "modern tragic sentiment" (85) and for what B. V. Olguín describes as his "tragic *anti-hero*" (94) symbolizes a territorial struggle over the "soil" of South Texas folklore, but the gendered "soul" at work in both Dobie and Paredes is the key to understanding better their commonalities and differences. Dobie makes certain in his preface that we see the acquisition of stories in the Southwest as parallel to the acquisition of land, a feminization of the Mexican folk that Paredes both corrects and ironically enacts. Paredes responds to the masculine "soil" of Dobie's folklore in similar kind, but where Dobie claims and dismisses the feminine "soul" of his folklore in a masculine and colonial way, Paredes quietly assumes and represses it in a feminine

way. The feminine tragedy of Paredes's work is still uncharted territory in Chicano/a studies, but Chávez offers a way to facilitate this gender reading through a lateral analysis that equally takes into account *both* Dobie and Paredes. Triptych cultural critique thus operates as a mediating paradigm of intellectual discourses to define better the aesthetic practice of critical regionalism in between modernist regionalism and the borderlands. It is this interface of regionalism, border studies, western American literature, and Chicano/a studies that needs more discussion.

NOTES

1. See Wilson's *The Myth of Santa Fe*, Weigle's "Southwest Lures," Babcock's "Mudwomen and Whitemen," and Dilworth's *Imagining Indians in the Southwest*. The Indian-Anglo-Hispanic tricultural paradigm emerged during New Mexico's territorial period and crystallized during the poststatehood era.

2. These include Alice Corbin Henderson, Witter Bynner, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, and Oliver La Farge in Santa Fe, and Mabel Dodge Luhan, D. H. Lawrence, Spud Johnson, and Frank Water in Taos. See Cline's *Literary Pilgrims*.

3. The Writers' Edition was an outpost of Rydal Press, and it began operation in 1933 under the cooperative editorship of Henderson, Bynner, Haniel Long, and Fletcher, all of whom published Writers' Edition collections of poetry in the 1930s. Chávez was already a published Catholic poet by the time he published *Clothed with the Sun*. Most of the poems in this first published collection originally appeared in Catholic journals and magazines in the Midwest and the East. See his personal essay in Romig's collection for his own narrative about his published writings.

4. Sixteen-year-old houseboy Modesto Trujillo was a member of the penitentes in Cedar Crest, New Mexico. See Pulido's *The Sacred World of the Penitentes* for a cultural history of the folk religious group.

5. Chávez reveals this little-known historical fact in a letter to Fletcher dated June 21, 1940. He sent the stories that comprise *New Mexico Triptych* to Fletcher for review, explaining that "the middle story, 'The Penitente Thief,' was originally published in a magazine, and it was through it that Haniel Long and I became acquainted—and then you through Haniel! So the genealogy of our friendship can be traced back to poor Lucero and his horse!"

6. See Flores's *Los Pastores* for a discussion of the Christmas play in San Antonio, Texas.

7. See Chávez's *Cántares* (2000) and Paredes's *Cantos de Adolescencia* (2007), as well as Padilla's edited collection *The Short Stories of Fray Angelico Chavez* (1987), Chávez's *Guitars and Adobes* (2009), and Paredes's *The Hammon and the Beans* (1994).

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