



SPAN322: “North of the Río Grande” US Latino/Chicano Literature

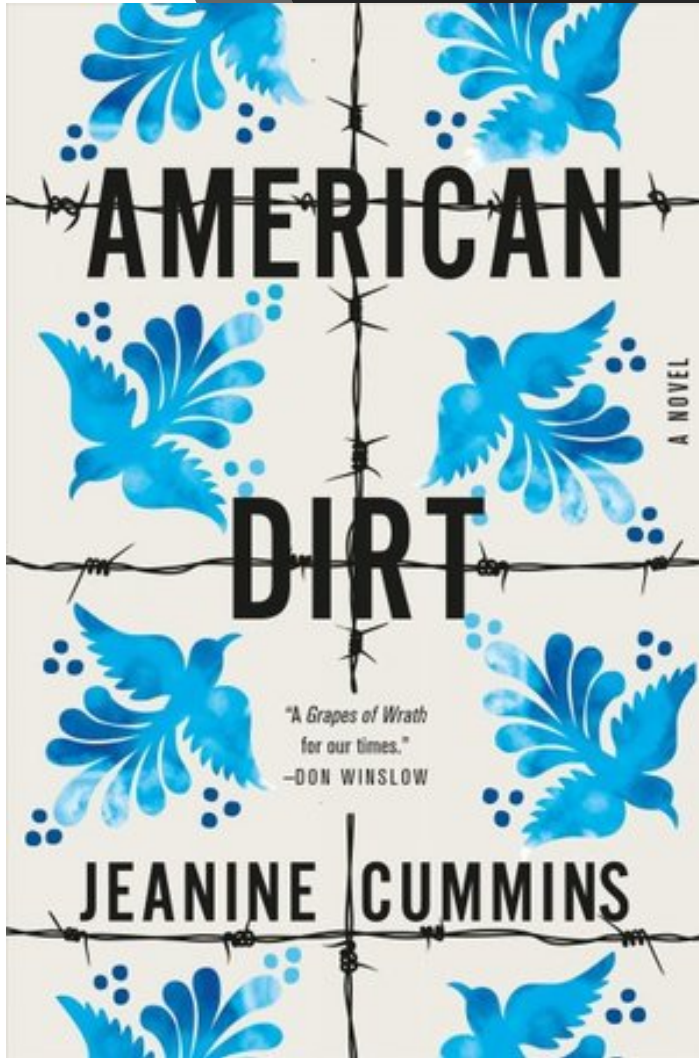
“With His Pistol in His Hand” I
January 28, 2020

Objectives

- Read and discuss key texts of US Latino and Chicano fiction
- Study the US Latino / Chicano literary canon
- Consider its relationship to the mainstream canon
- Contextualize literature in C20th and C21st political history
- Address core issues of identity politics and culture
- Theorize the notion of representation in its multiple meanings
- Rethink the role of the author in literature and politics

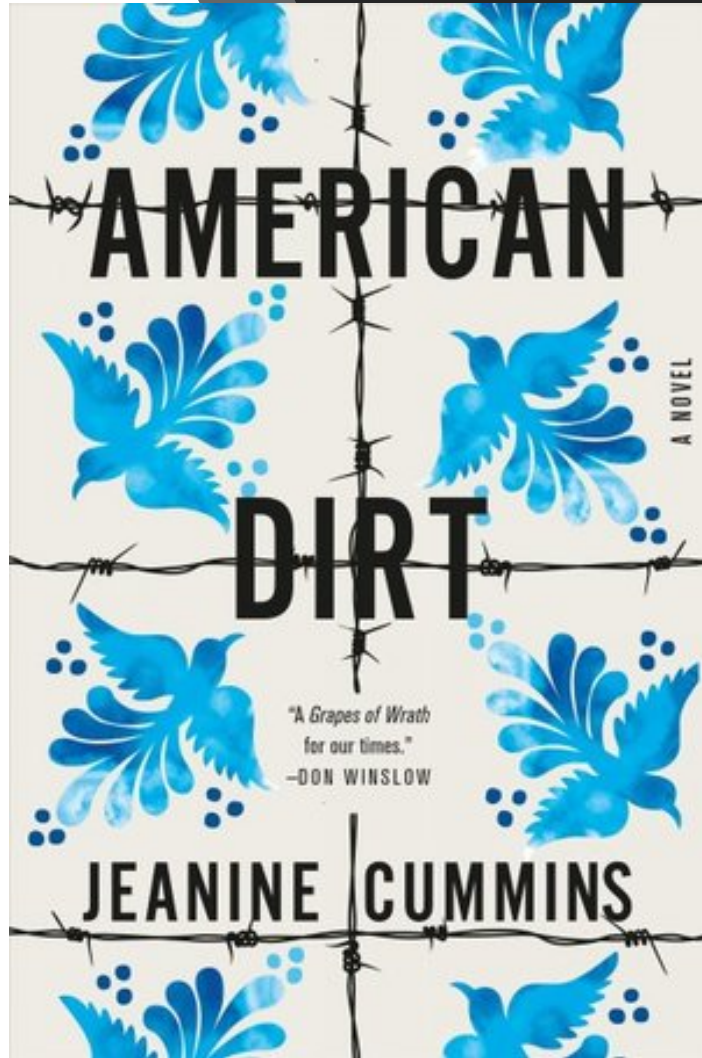
“AMERICAN DIRT”

American Dirt



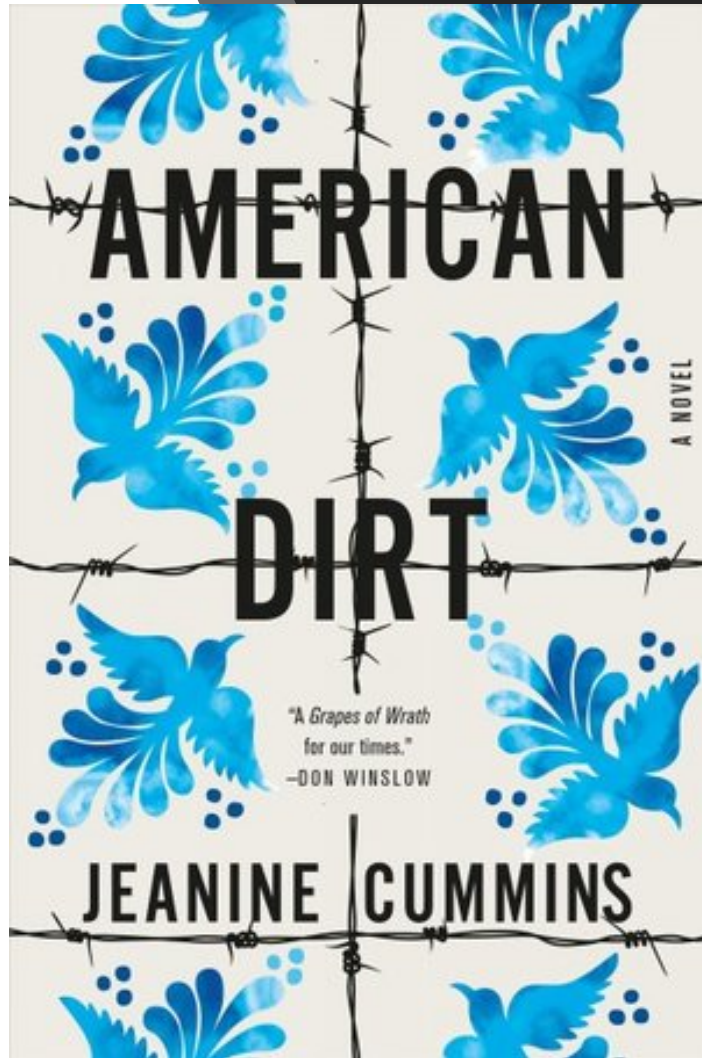
- By Jeanine Cummins, an established New York-based novelist
- Published (2019) by Flatiron books, an imprint of Macmillan, who gave Cummins a seven-figure advance
- Picked by Oprah Winfrey for her Book Club. A movie deal is already in the works.
- A thriller that follows a middle-class Mexican woman and her son who are forced to migrate north (on La Bestia) in the context of narco violence

American Dirt



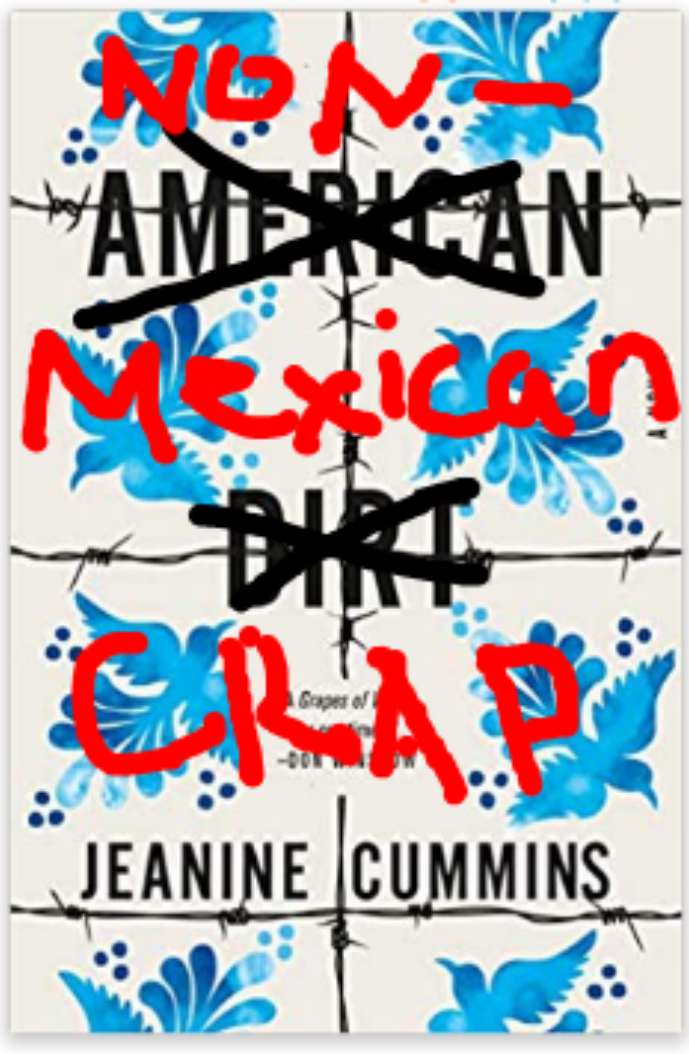
- “This book is not simply the great American novel; it’s the great novel of *las Americas*. It’s the great world novel!” (Sandra Cisneros)
- “Riveting, timely, a dazzling accomplishment. Jeanine Cummins makes us all *live and breathe* the refugee story” (Julia Alvarez)
- “An extraordinary piece of work” (Stephen King)

American Dirt



“Her obra de caca belongs to the great American tradition of doing the following:

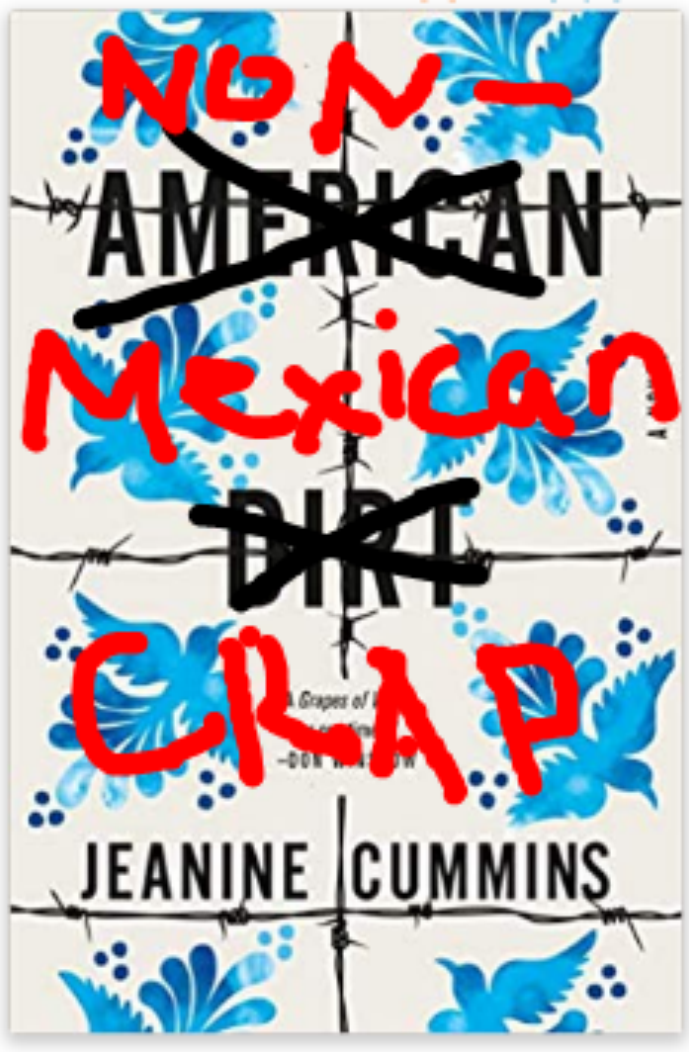
- Appropriating genius works by people of color
- Slapping a coat of mayonesa on them to make palatable to taste buds estados-unidenses and
- Repackaging them for mass racially ‘colorblind’ consumption.” (Myriam Gurba)



American Dirt

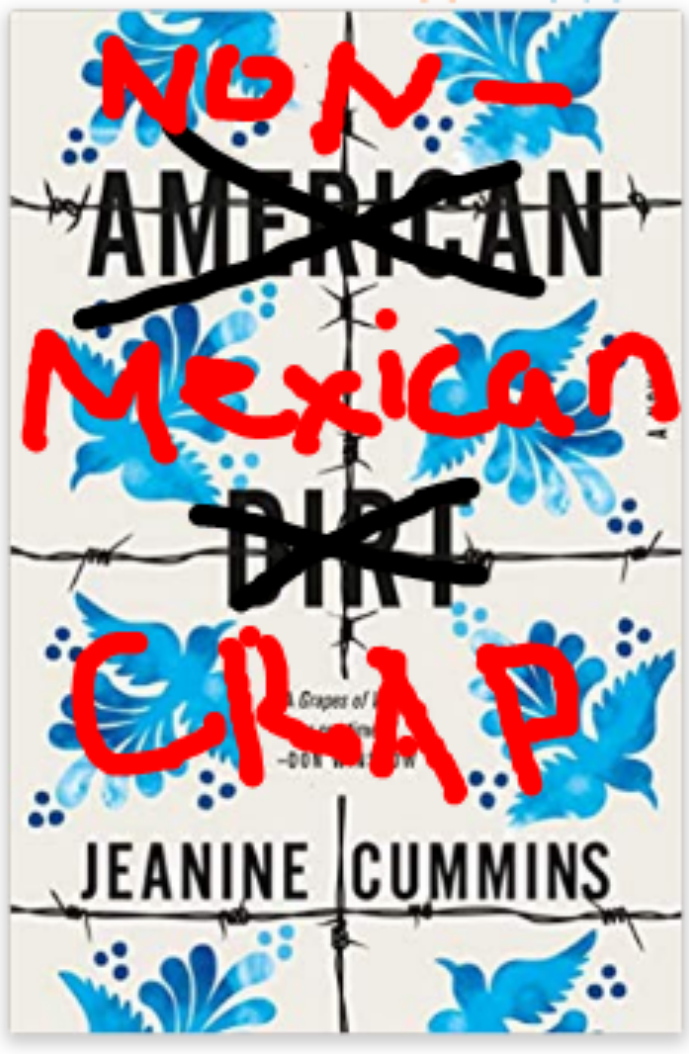
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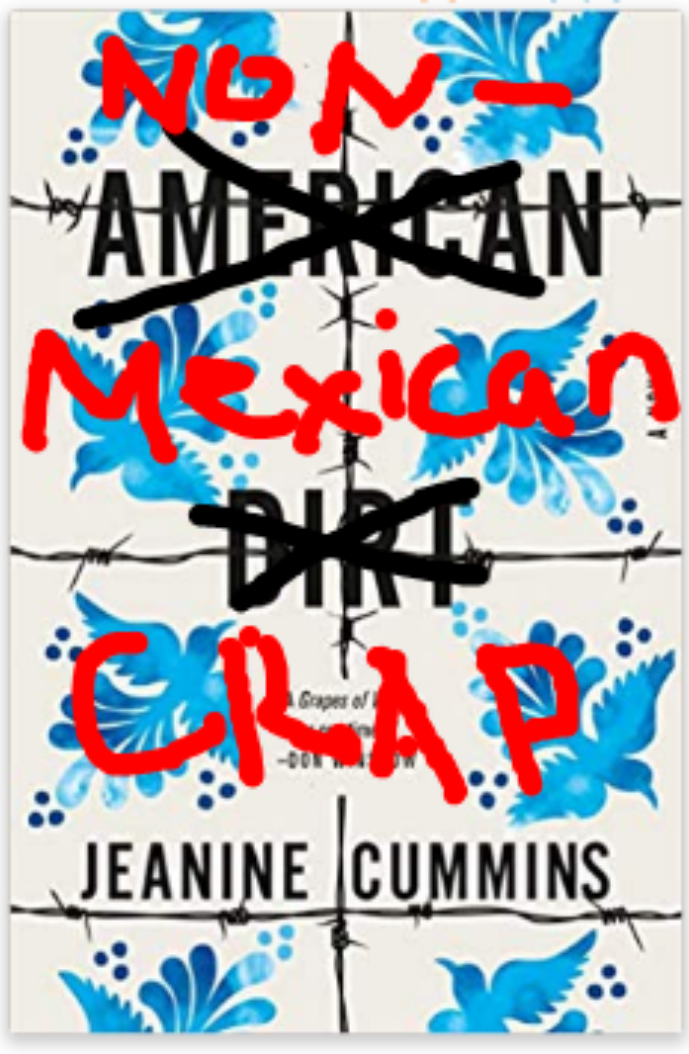
American Dirt

“Cummins exudes neither grace nor flair. Instead, she bumbles with Trumpian tackiness, and a careful look at chronology reveals how she operates: opportunistically, selfishly, and parasitically. Cummins identified the gringo appetite for Mexican pain and found a way to exploit it. With her ambition in place, she shoved the ‘faceless’ out of her way, ran for the microphone and ripped it out of our hands, deciding that her incompetent voice merited amplification.” (Myriam Gurba)



American Dirt

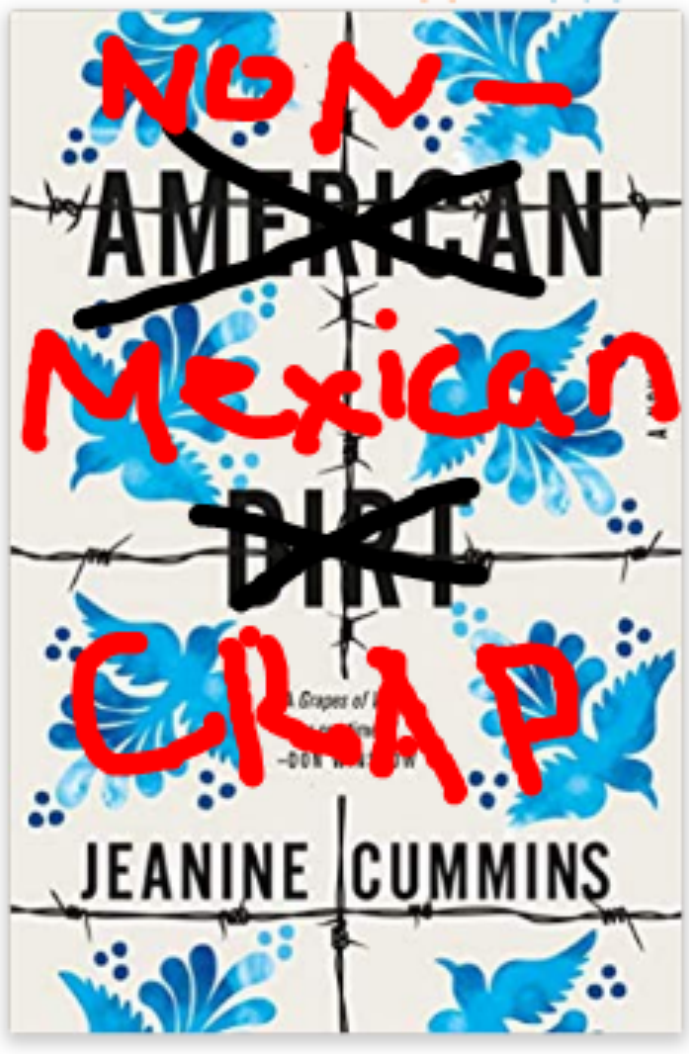
- “[By] an author whose knowledge of Mexico is superficial and derivative at best [. . .] ‘American Dirt’ is a reminder of the deep ignorance regarding Mexico and Mexicans in U.S. culture.” (Ignacio Sánchez Prado)
- “There is nothing wrong with a non-Mexican writing about the plight of Mexicans. What’s wrong is erasing authentic voices to sell an inaccurate cultural appropriation for millions. And believe me, Jeanine Cummins gets SO MUCH wrong.” (David Bowles)



American Dirt

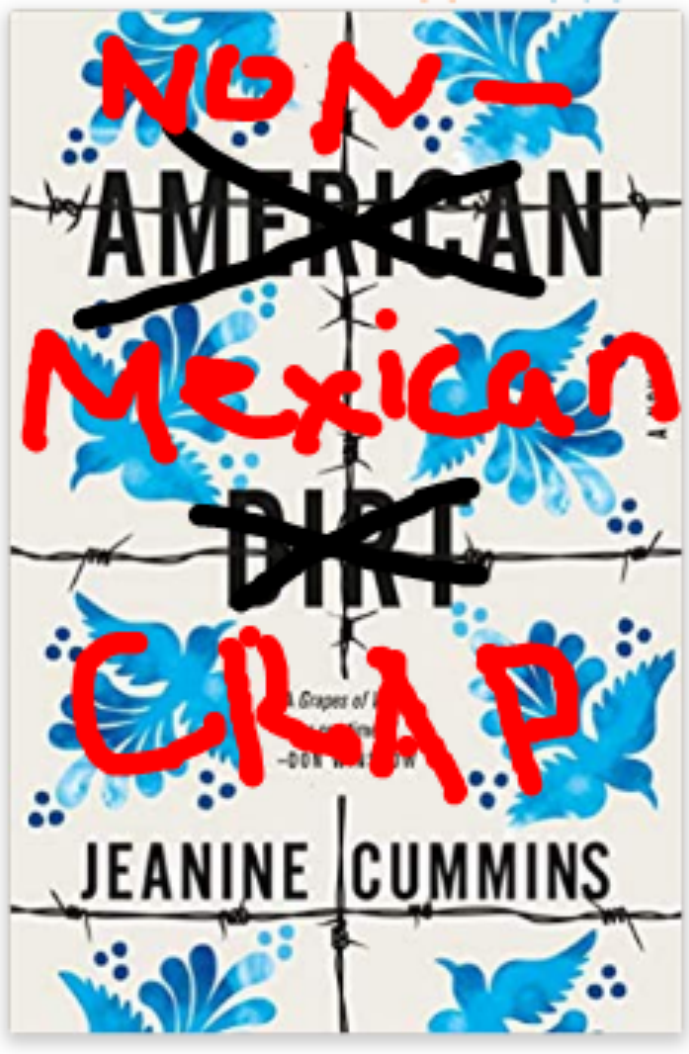
“Anyone who has been to Mexico will find the landscape of ‘American Dirt’ quite alien. And yet, certain scenes have a strange ring of authenticity [. . .]

“I don’t believe any of Cummins’ writing meets the legal definition of plagiarism. [. . .] However, several elements in her novel lean much more heavily on [. . .] preexisting works than on any original research. Indeed, Cummins appears to have never visited some of her locations at all.” (David Schmidt)



American Dirt

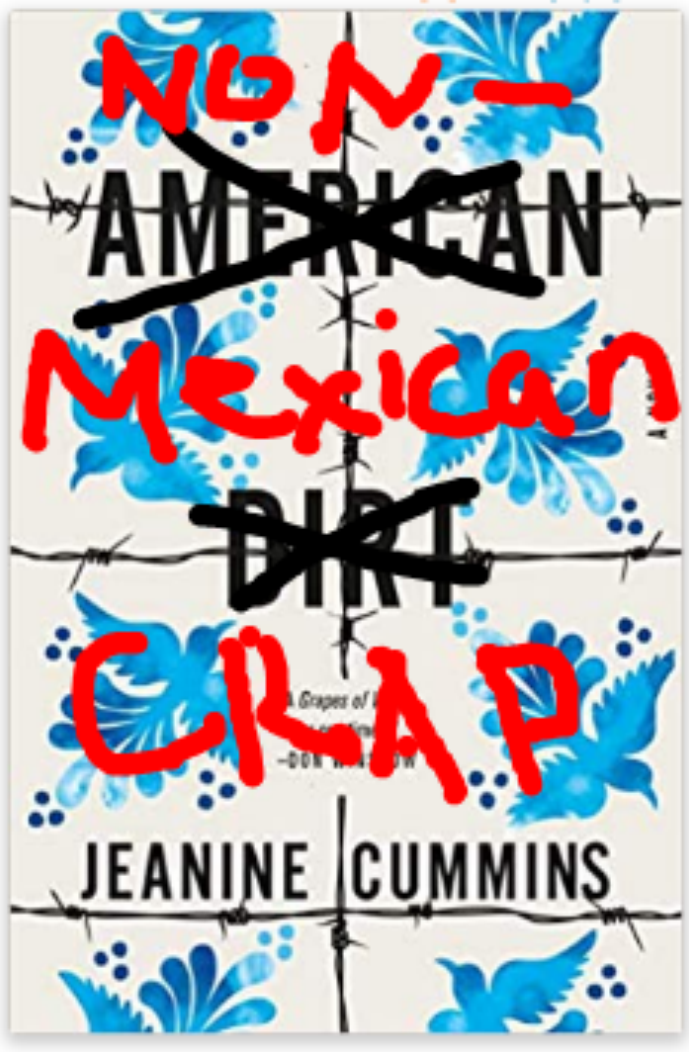
“Cummins seems to have foreseen at least one criticism: the fact that she is not from Mexico. While Cummins described herself as white up to 2016, she has recently emphasized that she has a Puerto Rican grandmother. Her Twitter account describes her as an ‘Irlandaisa Boricua Persona’ [...]. She stresses that her husband is a former undocumented immigrant (he came to the U.S. from Ireland).” (David Schmidt)



American Dirt

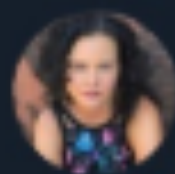
“Jeanine Cummins snagged a movie deal and a spot in the coveted Oprah's Book Club based on a story she has no right to tell. [. . .]

“While Cummins’ assault on Mexican culture is bad, it arrived right on time as the crisis at the border became a national talking point. She went from white to ‘Irlandaisa/ Boricua/ Persona’ at the most opportune moment, trading in the traumas of others for her own benefit.” (Alex Zaragoza)



American Dirt

“So seemingly out of touch with the really fucked up shit going on with niños ripped from familias and imprisoned in detention centers, Cummins thought it would be okay to use a barbed-wire fence motif (part of the book’s jacket-cover design) on her fingernails and at the book launch party.”
(Frederick Luis Aldama)



Jeanine Cummins @jeaninecummins · Nov 10, 2019

You guys, [@BookManicurist](#) is some next level awesome. My book jacket never looked prettier! [#americandirt](#)





Barbed-wire centerpieces at a dinner to celebrate *American Dirt*

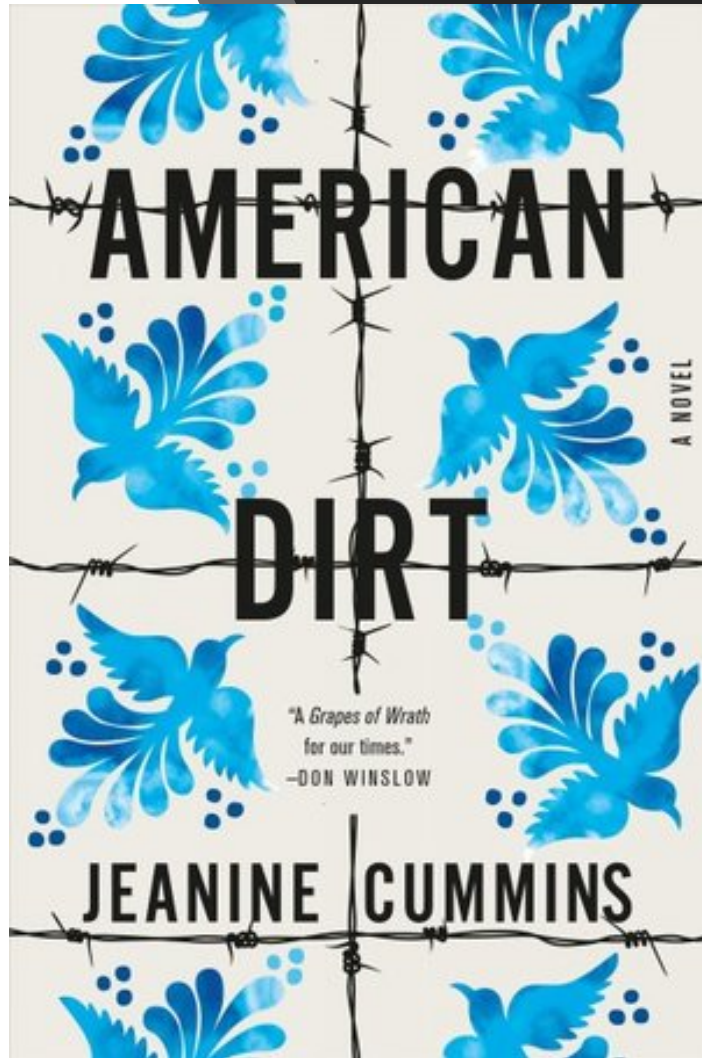


American Dirt

“I’m pissed as all hell about Cummins popcorn fiction and her careless reconstruction of life and lives in Mexico. I’m pissed as all hell that her 7-figure advance means that the attention will need to be thrown her way, and not the way of other more deserving authors, in order for Macmillan to recoup and further monetize American Dirt. As David Bowles (an author I admire) sums up: ‘If you don’t know this, Mexican writers are horribly underpaid. Women writers in Mexico, more so. And Chicanx authors suffer marginalization in the US market.’ [...]

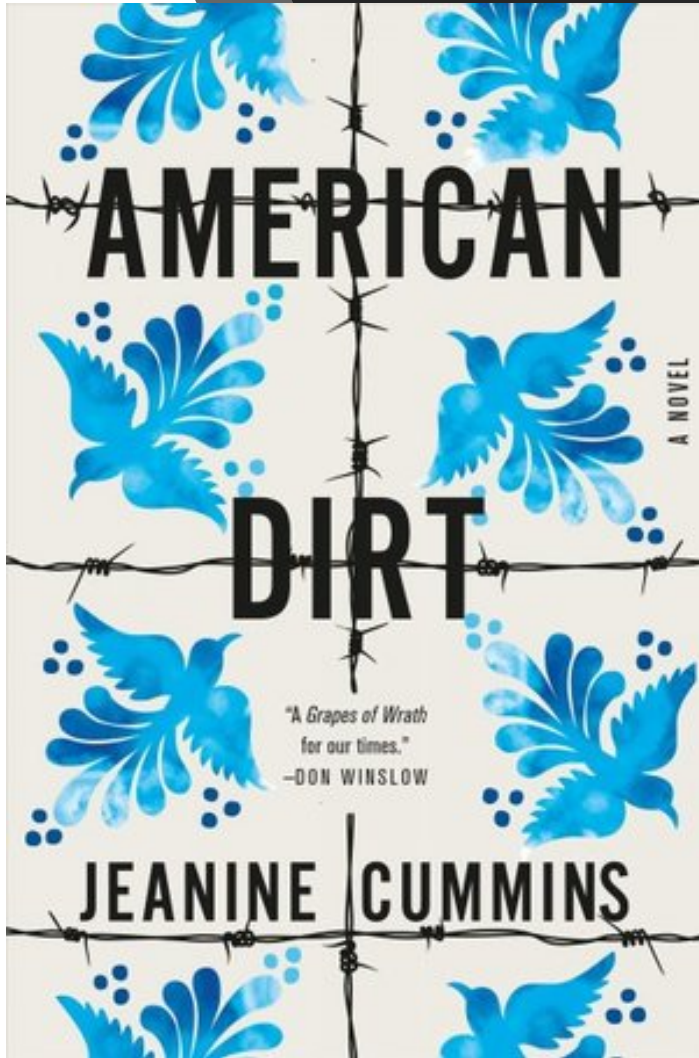
“But, I ask, when all’s said and done, does it harm literature as art—in its transformative capacity as a willfully constructed object in the world?” (Frederick Luis Aldama)

American Dirt



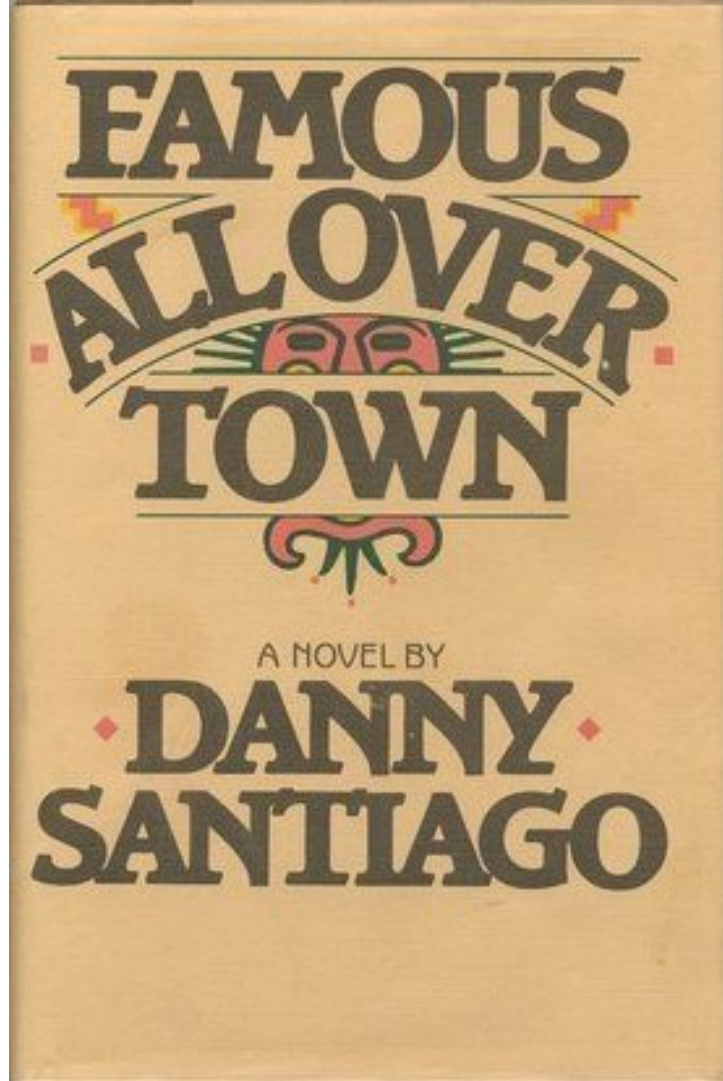
"When I decided to write this book, I worried that my privilege would make me blind to certain truths, that I'd get things wrong, as I may well have. I worried that, as a nonmigrant and non-Mexican, I had no business writing a book set almost entirely in Mexico, set entirely among migrants. I wished someone slightly browner than me would write it. But then, I thought, *If you're a person who has the capacity to be a bridge, why not be a bridge?* So I began."
(Jeanine Cummins)

American Dirt



- Who should write about Mexico? Do certain people have “rights” to certain stories?
- Does it matter if what they write is billed as fiction (a novel) or as non-fiction (journalism or memoir)?
- How much does “truth,” “authenticity,” or “knowledge” (native or otherwise) matter?
- Is all this more the case for Mexico than for other places and cultures (e.g. South American, African, Asian...)
- Does it matter if what is written is “good”? And what does that mean?

American Dirt



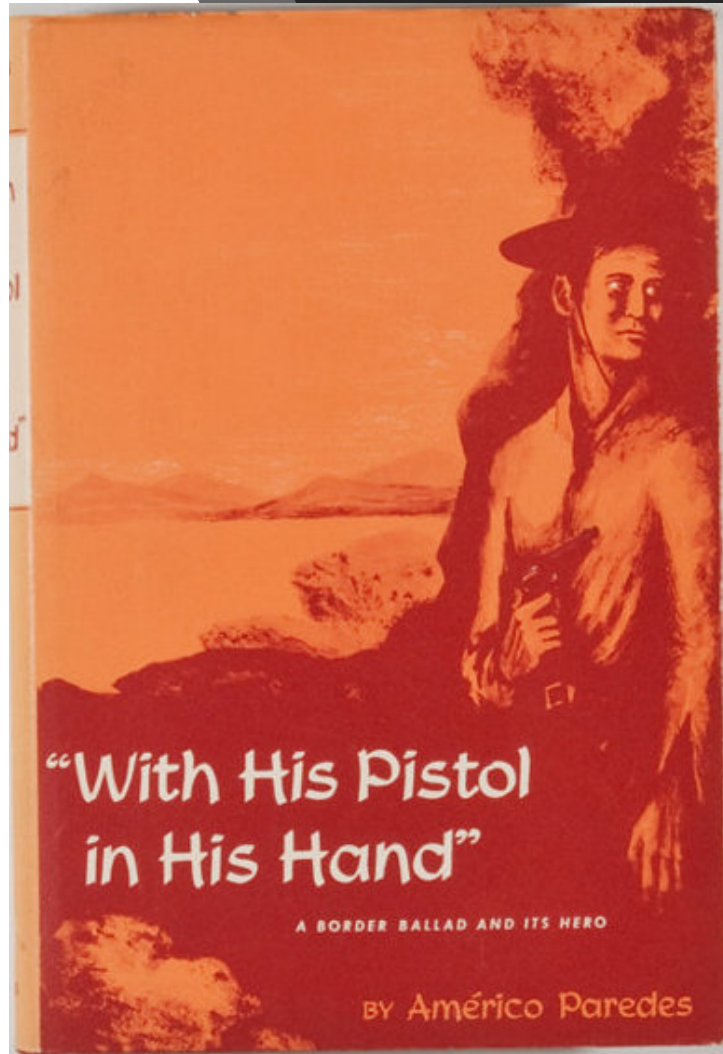
- Who should be published on Mexico? Who should profit from that publication?
- How much honesty should we expect of authors? Is honesty a virtue in fiction?
- How different is this case from that of *Famous All Over Town*?
- What are non-Mexican readers looking for from books about Mexico (or elsewhere)?
- What are the responsibilities of authors, publishers, and readers?
- Should we buy *American Dirt*? Should we read it?

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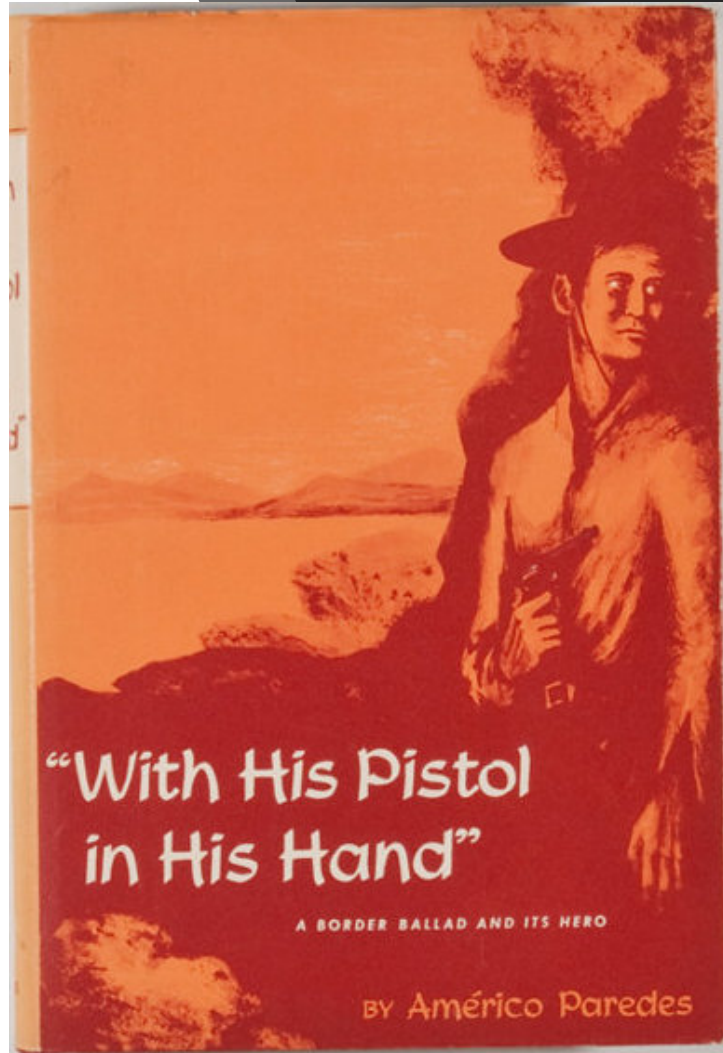
**“WITH HIS PISTOL IN HIS
HAND”**

“With His Pistol in His Hand”



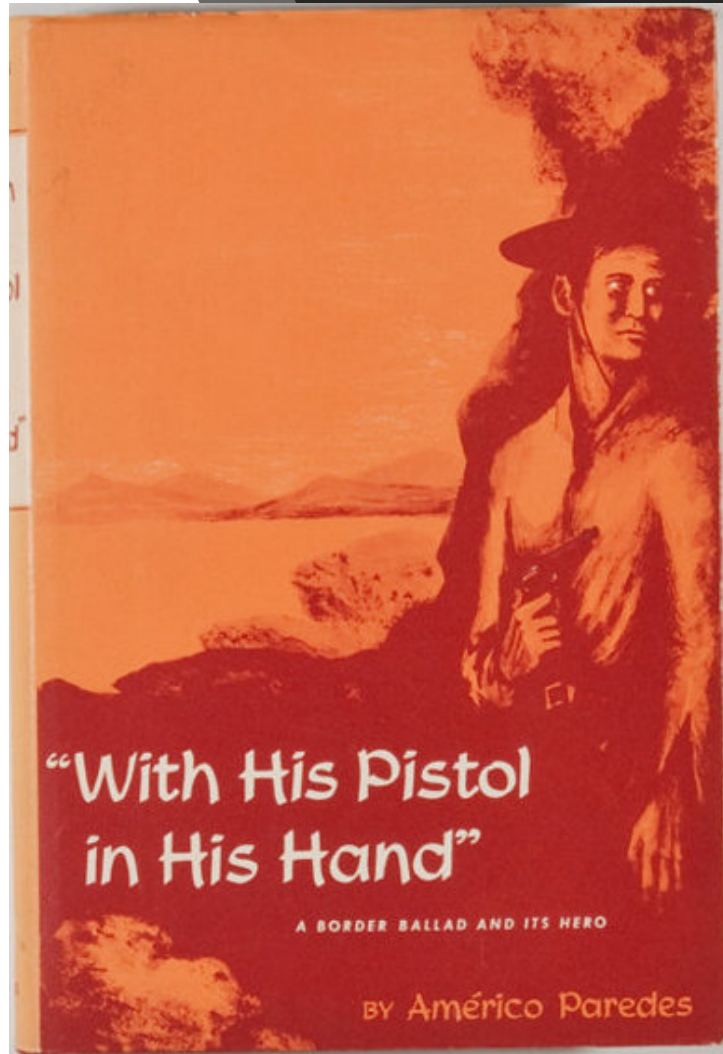
- By Américo Paredes (1915-1999), one of first scholars of Chicano culture
- Based on his PhD dissertation
- A study of a *corrido* or border ballad
- The ballad (and the book) is about Gregorio Cortez, who shoots a sheriff and flees the Texas Rangers.
- “Dissect[s] the roots, the impact, and the significance of border struggle”

“With His Pistol in His Hand”



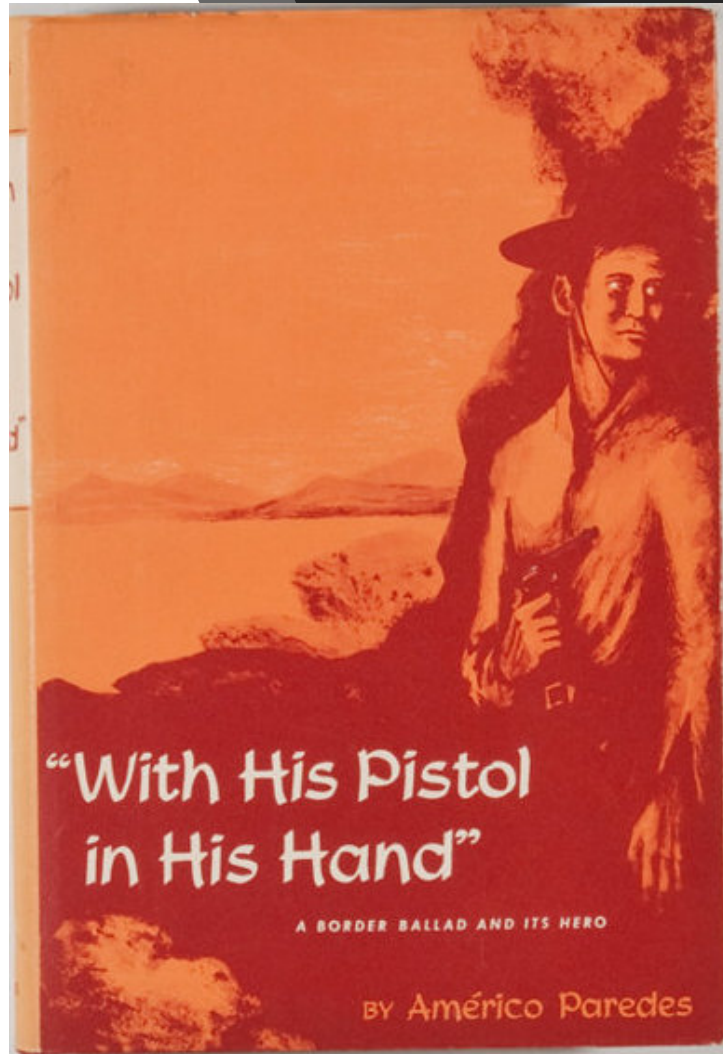
- What are the different kinds of conflict that this book depicts?
- How does the presence of a border influence culture, politics, or history in Southern Texas?
- What is the use, purpose, or social function of a) oral “legend” and b) popular balladry? Is this “literature”?
- What does the book say about History and the best way to study Chicano history?

“With His Pistol in His Hand”



- What kind of a book is this? What is its genre? What is its implied audience?
- The book is a hybrid: academic and non-academic; history, literature, folklore, anthropology, ethnomusicology, literary criticism. Even memoir in so far as Paredes locates himself in the culture described.
- It combines aspects of oral and literary culture, of “official” and “non-official” knowledge.
- The book is both a study of Chicano culture and a contribution to that culture.

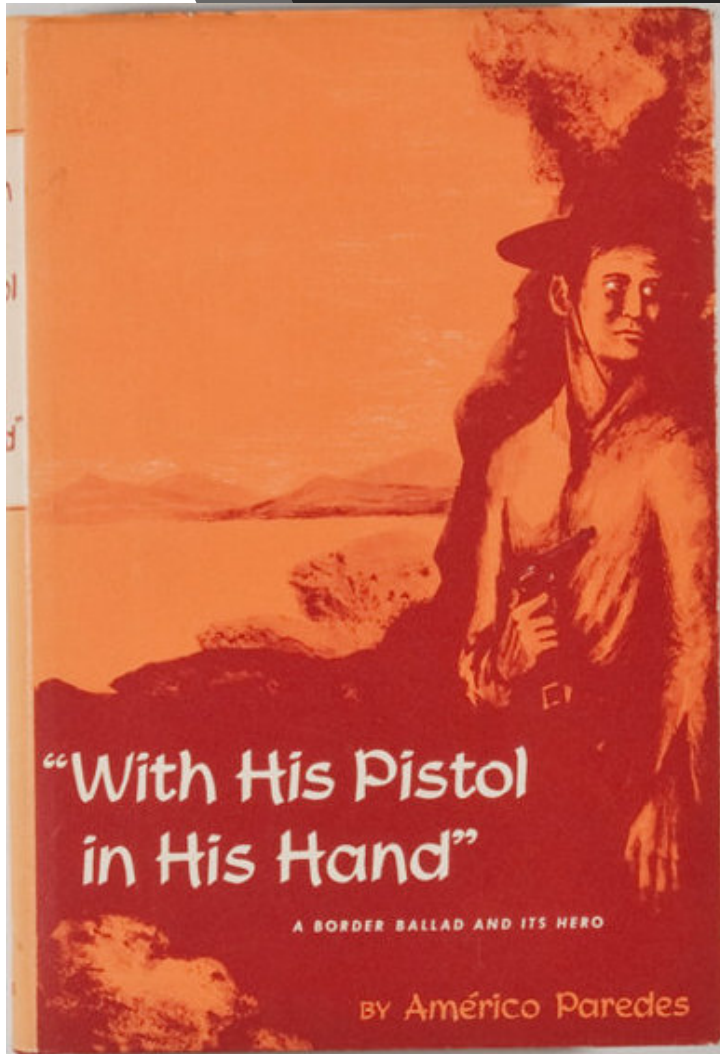
“With His Pistol in His Hand”



- What is the status of “truth” in this book? What is Paredes’s attitude to “legend” and its associated exaggerations and fabrications? How much does what “actually” happened matter to him?
- Paredes does give us the “true” history of Gregorio Cortez, but ultimately that doesn’t necessarily interest him so much as does what people do with that history.
- He is interested in the historical conditions or foundations and subsequent impact of a “tall tale” and an ever-mutating ballad.

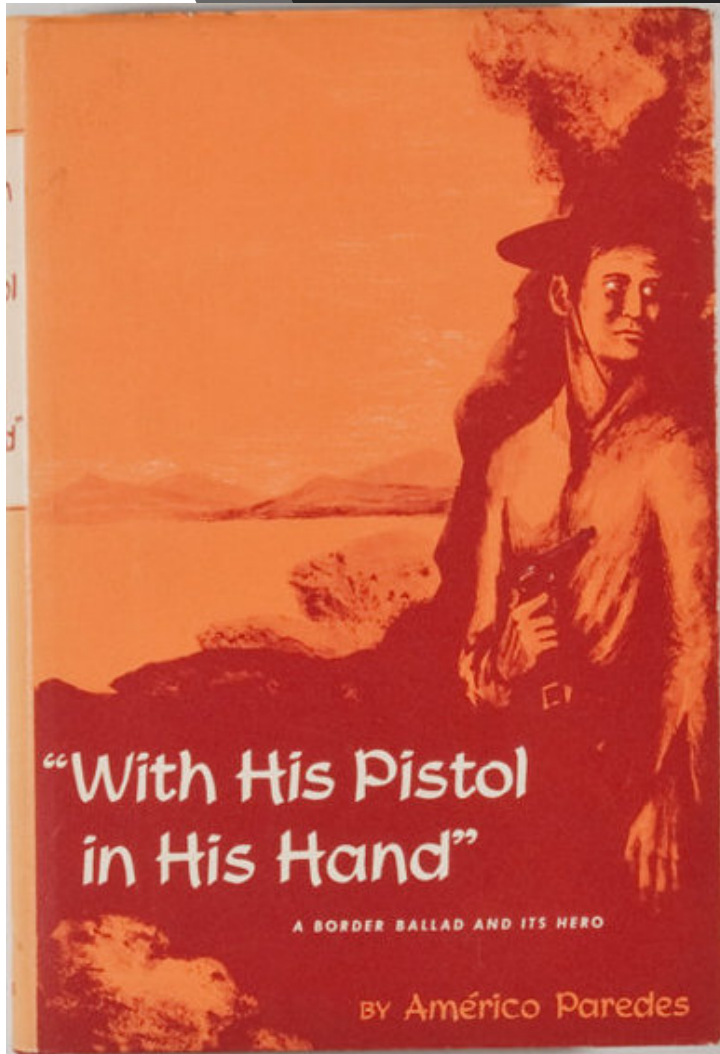
“With His Pistol in His Hand”

- What are the different kinds of conflict that this book depicts?



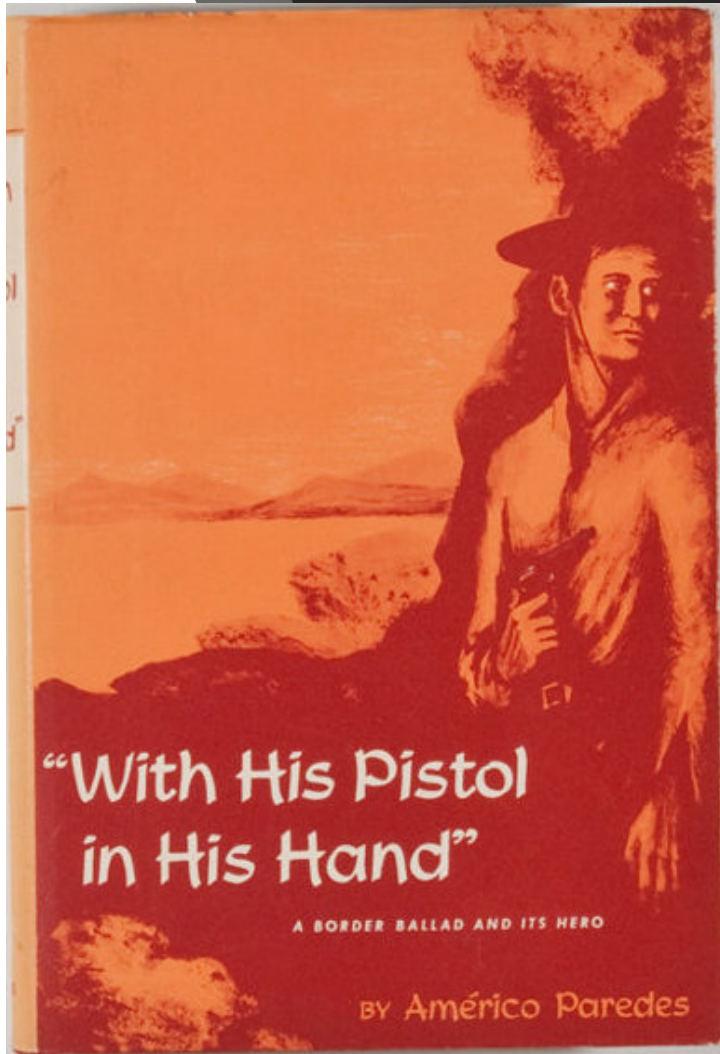
“With His Pistol in His Hand”

- Is it important that Paredes is himself a Chicano, and indeed a “Border Mexican”?



“With His Pistol in His Hand”

- What are the “kinks” in this book?



WIKIPEDIA

Editing Wikipedia

- Remember that you cannot break Wikipedia: anything you do can later be undone.
- Look at the documentation and resources linked from our project page.
- But also start editing: write something on your user page. Make an edit (even if just adding a comma) on an article or two.
- Read the article we will be working on, and think about how they might be improved.



Editing Wikipedia

- Minor edits alone won't get us much closer towards Featured Article status. We need a sense of what needs to be done, and an overall plan for the article.
- Look at models and guidelines on how to write featured articles. What sections are required? What will be the article structure? What information is needed?
- By January 30, each group should have their plan in place, and have written it up on their article's talk page.
- We will then need to divide up the tasks that we've identified. Who is going to do what and when?



NEXT STEPS

For Thursday

- NB no class this Thursday
- By January 30, each group should have made a plan for their Wikipedia article, and have written it up on their article's talk page.
- Make two edits on Wikipedia.
- Write brief comments on two of your classmates' blog posts. Especially on Blogger, make sure you sign them.

For Tuesday

- Read Part Two of “*With His Pistol in His Hand.*”
- Watch the movie version (*The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*) also if you wish.
- Write a blog post (c. 400 words) about your reading, and publish it Monday evening.