

BOOK REVIEW

Racializing Queerness, Queering Nationalism

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Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire. By Sandra K. Soto. Austin: University of Texas Press, Chicana Matters Series, 2010. Pp. 183. \$55.00 (cloth) \$19.95 (paper).

In a personal conversation with Chicano queer playwright, poet, and activist Luis Alfaro (University of California at Riverside, 1994), he stated that among Chicanas/os he acts “very queer” and among white queers he acts “very Chicano” in order to create discomfort and have each group acknowledge and begin to confront their own bigotry. For queer people of color, it is imperative to keep our queerness, our race/ethnicity, our class, our gender, and our sexuality together and at the forefront of our complex identities, especially when we navigate cultural spaces that do not encompass us completely and furthermore prevent us from contributing to the liberation of our communities. It is well known that queers of color have not found a welcoming space in the white queer movement or in our respective nationalist movements given their inherent and respective phobias. In the UC Riverside of the mid-nineties, there was no room for a Chicana queer to be the chair of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) until the queers “took over” the organization and created events with artists and writers such as Carla Trujillo, Cherríe Moraga, Monica Palacios, Felix Pire, and Luis Alfaro. These cultural producers provided the Chicana/o nationalists and white queers who attended the events with art that racialized queerness and queered nationalism.

Sandra K. Soto's *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*

begins with the premise that “monological and monocausal approaches to subjectivity and power” (1) have been and must continue to be contested in order to acknowledge a “racialized sexuality” that is better served if analyzed within a “de-masterful uncertainty.” Soto examines four of the most canonical writers within the field of Chicana/o Literature: Cherríe Moraga, Richard Rodriguez (who repudiates anything Chicana/o), Ana Castillo and, unexpectedly, Américo Paredes. In doing so, she begins with a theoretically sophisticated introduction where she contextualizes white queer studies alongside Chicana/o Studies highlighting the need to bring all such subjectivities together to better serve the analysis of the literature produced by queers of color in general and by Chicanas/os in particular. The first three chapters (Moraga, Rodriguez, and Castillo) contain a sound approach to the writers’ oeuvre within the framework of racialized sexuality and queerness. This is efficiently accomplished given that all three writers’ works fit within the category of queer literature, even in the case of Rodriguez and Castillo who have not been as forthcoming in their queerness within their writings as Moraga. However, the chapter on Paredes, while provocative, is not as successful as the others in persuading this reader that his work can be “queered.” The book closes with an epilogue explaining some of the theoretical terminology (like *racialized sexuality*) and the apparent shortcomings such as why the book seems to be devoid of a sociopolitical context. But this text would have benefitted precisely from having Soto incorporate her own criticism from the epilogue into the narrative itself. Nevertheless, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* contributes significantly to several fields of study, among them: Chicana/o, feminist, literary and queer studies.

In her introduction, Soto explains that intersectionality as a theoretical framework is no longer useful given that it is too strict when used in examining racialized sexualities and complex subject formations such as that of Chicana/o queers. Instead, she proposes “that we be *wordy* and contingent, that we not look

for a shorthand for naming or understanding or footnoting the confounding manifold ways that our bodies, our work, our desires are relentlessly interpellated by unequivalent social processes” (6). She also reminds us that in the midst of homophobic and sexist backlashes (from groups like the Nation of Aztlán) and xenophobic attacks in general, creating critical and challenging writings that encompass multiple subjectivities and modes of analyses is essential for the survival of a movement. *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, undoubtedly, must be added to such a literary and analytical canon.

In chapter 1, cleverly titled “Making *Familia* from Racialized Sexuality: Cherríe Moraga’s Memoirs, Manifestos, and Motherhood,” the author claims that as famous as Moraga’s writings are, they have not been analyzed carefully and therefore proceeds to correct this by examining some poetry, essays, and testimonies from several texts produced in the last twenty-five years. Outstandingly, Soto criticizes Moraga’s “unusual objectification of racialization” where race is taken as a “commodity, alienable and possessable” (27). This is especially clear, Soto argues, in *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (1997) where the author treats race as something that can be given to her future child by selecting a dark Mexican man as a sperm donor. Soto also indicates that Moraga has “reconfigured [her own race] through discursive resignification” (31) by consistently claiming and writing about her Mexican mother. In this chapter, Soto challenges Moraga on her commodification of race, a critique that can also be extended to the famous author’s latest work: *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010* (2011).

If Moraga is extremely public about her relationship to race, in chapter 2, “Fixing Up the House of Race with Richard Rodriguez,” Soto indicates that it is Rodriguez’s silence and privacy about race and its relationship to his sexual identity that must be examined carefully. Chicana/o literary critics have

taken Rodriguez to task for denouncing race/ethnicity and affirmative action but, as Soto states, seldom has the author's queer identity, as portrayed in his autobiographical and other writings, been analyzed. This chapter succeeds in carefully examining the author's relationship to his sexual and racial/ethnic identity. According to Soto, Rodriguez's notion that "sexuality [is] a profoundly private and individuated affair" leads him "to try to disassociate sexuality from ethnicity altogether" (41) and therefore creates a double negation of his identity regarding his subjectivity as a gay man of Mexican descent.

In chapter 3, "Queering the Conquest with Ana Castillo," the author offers an effective critique of three of Castillo's novels: *The Mixquiabuala Letters* (1986), *Sapagonia* (1990), and *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999); at the same time she highlights transnationality (Mexico/United States) and the transcultural (gypsy/mestiza) nature of these works. According to Soto, in her novels, Castillo decenters hegemonic Chicana/o locations and subjectivities by replacing the U.S. Southwest with Mexico City, New York, and Chicago, and the white/brown dichotomy with mestizas and gypsy males. However, Soto contends, that in the end, "Castillo's romanticization of Aztec queens and 'Gypsy' kings finally prevents her from articulating a pan-ethnic Latino and cross-cultural vision of social change and cultural aesthetics" (86).

The biggest (and refreshing) surprise to readers of Chicana/o queer literary criticism is offered in the final chapter of this text, "Américo Paredes and the De-Mastery of Desire," especially because as the author contends, Paredes and his writings have been considered the epitome of Chicano heteronormativity and patriarchy as he stands as the "Father of Chicano Letters" (87). The literature examined here is the short story "Over the Waves Is Out" and *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (published in 1990, sixty years after it was written). Soto applies her theory of "de-mastery of desire" to these

writings as she examines the way in which both protagonists step outside of their traditional Chicano patriarchal roles; however, it is not clear how exactly she queers Paredes. Rather, her analysis seems to be more a powerful feminist critique of Paredes' work that would be better served if she avoided statements that border on exaggeration such as: "His [Paredes]' particular way of depicting [the protagonist] as near antihero by the end of the novel is an indelibly feminist move" (120) and "'Over the Waves Is Out' is not only Paredes's most poignant account of life in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands—and that is already saying a lot—but one of the richest and queerest Chicano feminist stories ever published" (emphasis in the original, 111). Overall though, this chapter is intrepid in its attempt at queering someone as canonical as Don Américo and Soto must be commended for her meticulous work.

Unquestionably, Sandra K. Soto's text must be added to the latest collection of strong, intelligent, and audacious studies of queer Chicana/o and Latina/o scholarship produced nationally and transnationally in the last twelve years.¹ The author enters into a theoretical and literary conversation and inscribes her text into a necessary discussion regarding the dismantling of borders around gender, genres, nations, and racial/queer subject identity/formation. *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* offers a refreshing examination of writings by four of the most important contemporary authors and contributes significantly to Chicana/o, feminist, and queer scholarship in literature.

Authors such as Alicia Arrizón, Rosana Blanco-Cano, Marivel Danielson, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, Laura Gutiérrez, José Esteban Muñoz, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, to name a few, have produced texts that converse well with Soto's given their themes and the use of Chicana/o and Latina/o, feminist, and queer theoretical frameworks.

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