

BOOK REVIEW

Gender and Chicanidad Beyond Borders

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Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique by T. Jackie Cuevas.
New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018. Pp. 188. \$29.95 (paper).

Honoring the foundational work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, T. Jackie Cuevas's *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique* extends dominant discourse on queer sexuality by foregrounding the equally significant sites of gender variance represented in Chicana/o/x literature. In *Post-Borderlandia*, Cuevas moves beyond Chicana feminist formulations that position cisgender mujeres as the central figures from which gender justice is realized by analyzing characters who dislocate the gender binary in their representation and navigation of gender. Through a close-up view of Chicana genderqueer expression, Cuevas marks post-borderlandia as the space where gender variance opens up "the radical potentiality of queerness, of gender, of Chicanidades" (14). Considering areas where Anzaldúan borderlands theory does not fully capture Chicana/o/x experiences, Cuevas effectively argues that a post-borderlandia framework rooted in gender variant critique reveals the myriad of ways gender, sexuality, and race intersect to construct Chicanidad beyond binaries.

Post-Borderlandia opens by examining the real-life implications of gender variance in the case of "the San Antonio Four," a group of Latina lesbians who were wrongfully convicted of sexual assault in the late 1990s and imprisoned for over ten years. Cuevas begins with their experiences, documented in the 2016 film *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four* by Deborah

Esquenazi, to capture the urgent impetus driving her analysis of Chicana gender variance. Extending dominant formulations of queer sexuality as disruptive to heteronormativity, Cuevas argues that non-normative gender expressions, such as those embodied by the San Antonio Four, “disrupt the social order by bringing one’s ontological status as a categorizable human being into question” (3). Foregrounding literary representations of gender nonconformity, *Post-Borderlandia* situates gender-variant critique as a necessary framework from which to examine genderqueerness and its role in shaping Chicana/o/x culture and history.

In the first chapter, “Chicana Masculinities,” Cuevas focuses on Rocky Gámez’s short fiction to highlight the butch Chicana as a central literary figure in late twentieth-century fiction. She builds on this archive by analyzing contemporary performances by Adelina Anthony and the Butchlalis de Panochtitlan, considering how they construct “a racialized gender orientation” beyond a fixed butch identity that also departs from white middle-class lesbian experiences (53). In the second chapter, “Ambiguous Chicana Bodies,” Cuevas argues that loss and lack of resolution in Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came With Them* disrupt the traditional American coming-out narrative and the dominant Chicana/o/x cultural narrative that rely on personal and political identification, ultimately connecting Turtle’s genderqueer body to the “not-yet-here” queerness José E. Muñoz articulates (29). In the third chapter, “Transing Chicanidad,” Cuevas examines characters in Felicia Luna Lemus’s fiction that evoke trans Chicanidad by forging paths beyond the dominant Chicana butch/femme categories, while the fourth chapter, “Brokeback Rancho,” travels back to Jovita González’s 1930s novel *Caballero* to consider how the recovered novel constructs an alternative vision of Chicana/o/x history in its portrayal of romance between two ranchos. In the conclusion, “From a Long Line of Marimachas,” Cuevas reasserts the real implications of gender

variance when perceived as a threat to hetero/gender-normative social order, situating post-borderlandia as a site that opens “liberatory potentialities” of gender beyond borders (139).

Building on Catrióna Rueda Esquibel’s 2006 study of Chicana lesbian literature in *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians*, Cuevas’ *Post-Borderlandia* propels the field of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies forward by offering the first full-length study to explore Chicanx gender variance. Joining literary studies and critical jotería studies, *Post-Borderlandia* offers a much-needed framework for reading representations of gender variance in Chicana/o/x literature and culture more broadly. Cuevas effectively navigates fiction as a medium that both reflects and shapes Chicanx gender(ed) experiences, illustrating gender nonconformity as always existing in Chicana/o/x history rather than only recently emerging. Though she situates *Post-Borderlandia* as a project post-*This Bridge Called My Back* and post-*Borderlands*, Cuevas successfully navigates the tension between limited gender analyses of the late twentieth century and more expansive contemporary frameworks by both honoring and extending the important contributions of central figures like Anzaldúa and Moraga to consider how gender nonconformity works alongside sexuality to shape Chicana/o/x culture.

While Cuevas’ attention to gender variance is critical here given the growing need to move beyond analyses of gender and sexuality rooted firmly in the gender binary, there is at times too deep a separation between gender and sexuality, including claims that genderqueerness is more threatening to social order than queer sexual desire or that the Chicana butch is read as gender variant before lesbian (78, 82). These moments open avenues for extended discussion as gender and sexuality often function in tandem rather than in

isolation or competition, particularly since butchness tends to be read as queering gender and sexuality simultaneously. Nonetheless, *Post-Borderlandia* should be a required read for anyone invested in the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Moving beyond borderlands, Cuevas highlights the potentialities of gender that exceed normative structures and invites us to recognize more clearly the ways gender nonconformity has shaped and will continue to shape Chicanidad as we know it.

References

- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.