

## Book Review: T. Jackie Cuevas Shatters the Hegemony

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*Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique.* By T. Jackie Cuevas. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018. ix + 188pp. \$30.95 (paperback)

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, it is becoming much clearer how our Western hegemonic society has this outdated logic of binary opposition: race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. T. Jackie Cuevas in her book *Post-Borderlandia*, stands as a participant in shattering the hegemonic principles of viewing life in such a black and white perspective. Cuevas **seeks to expose** the faulty logic of Western hegemony while rescuing and excavating Chicana/Latina from the onslaught of this faulty logic. Cuevas follows the tradition set forth by Gloria Anzaldúa and Vírmones. Cuevas' exploratory research and critical study on gender variances relating to queer Chicana delves into the world of the Chicana culture specifying the intersections and convergence of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality. She illuminates how queer Chicana individuals are demonized in the U.S, specifically how they are racialized, gendered, and otherized through the heteronormative hegemony. By delving deep into **these** issues, Cuevas helps us identify the issues Chicana queer individuals face and how to start fixing the challenges that confront them. Moreover, Cuevas expands upon Gloria Anzaldúa's statement that Chicana is a transformer of the "borderlands," where she posits that a new generation of Chicana writers, filmmakers, performers, and others in the arts are contributing to a "post-borderlands" movement.

The organization of the text is succinct, and consists of an introduction with definitional terms, categories, and background information. From there, Cuevas begins her first of four chapters starting from butch-femme analysis, to transgender, ambiguous bodied Chicana, to gay Chicana.

Cuevas' first chapter, "Chicana Masculinities," explores the butch feminine persona of Chicana Latinas and the associated misconception that butch Latinas do not think, feel, act or care. Cuevas uses Chicana butch literature to evaluate what being a butch means, what their politics are, as well as the challenges posed to butch-femme desire and lesbian gender. Cuevas examines the work of Rocky Gámez and Cherríe Moraga and how they use butchness or masculinity to describe their characters as lesbian. These authors set the stage for establishing the butch as a dominant Chicana queer figure. Significant in Moraga's literature is the desire of Chicana butch to be able to move other women emotionally, physically, sensuously, and sexually. This desire requires emotional empathy and expressiveness, and thereby disproves the previous misconception that butch lesbians do not feel, think, act, or care. Cuevas reveals the importance of Moraga's and Gámez's works in showing how they communicate that being butch does not deny one of being womanly or feminine specifically in a Chicana context. She pulls from many credited sources, such as Jack Halberstam's theories, to dispel the notions that butch is a misogynist form of gender identity and expression as well as the notion that butch fell out of style in the lesbian community and only reemerged recently. The Butchlalis performance group shows the struggles that butch women face in Chicana/Latina communities as they are a racialized gender identity. Overall, this chapter serves to steer away from the notions that middle-class white lesbians have conceived, that butch womanhood was fading and only reemerging now, that the butch womanhood is inherently masculine and stoic.

Cuevas' second chapter, "Ambiguous Chicana Bodies", turns to Helena María Viramontes' work in *Their*

*Dogs Came with Them*. In doing so, Cuevas argues that the assimilation progress script forced on ethnic groups should be discarded. To illustrate that, she uses Viramontes' work, which features inassimilable gender characters in Chicana history. Furthermore, Cuevas examines what the presence of genderqueer or queerly gendered bodies contributes to the history of Chicana. She analyzes how the death of Viramontes' main genderqueer protagonist, Turtle, represents the fate of queer Chicana body as a target for erasure by racial and gender driven violence. The significance of this novel to Cuevas, is that the author focuses on Turtle's loss and impending erasure rather than personal and political triumphs and thus defies reader's expectations of a coming out novel or a politically active novel for the Chicana community. Viramontes' novel shows what happens when the U.S. marginalizes the racialized genderqueer Chicana. Cuevas uses this example to show that such citizens are only recognized by the U.S. when they are struck down in violent death for not conforming to heteronormative ideologies.

Cuevas' third chapter, "Transing Chicanidad", explores Carla Trujillo's essay "Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicana Community" to show how Chicana have historically perceived lesbians as a threat to their community. Through these sources and previous ones mentioned, Cuevas shines a much-needed light on what it is like to be a Chicana lesbian disowned by Chicana as well as how it is to be a Chicana feminist who is completely invisible to the white feminists, much as we witness today how police brutality against African Americans goes unseen and unpunished. Cuevas turns to post-borderlandia novelists like Felicia Luna Lemus with a focus on her novel *Like Son* to demonstrate the following main idea: the revelation that it is not so much lesbian or

same sex desire that poses a perceived threat to Chicax community and identity, but rather genderqueerness. These new generation authors illustrate the new borderlands of Chicax identity to be entered, navigated, interrogated, and above all, accepted. Cuevas argues that Lemus' novel, which features a male-to-female transgender queer character, Frank, pushes the boundary of Chicax queer literature to move to post-borderlands to fully examine how gender variance and queerness of gender, not only sexuality, have to be taken into account with the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, and gender identities that occupy transgressive and racialized Chicax genders.

Cuevas' fourth chapter titled "Brokeback Ranchero" focuses on Jovita Gonzáles' novel *Caballero*, which explores the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and how ranchers try to find their place in a now American part of Mexico. The main character Luis Gonzaga is a gay man who falls in love with an Anglo U.S. military officer. He encounters challenges from both his family and society for being gay. Cuevas focuses on how this novel aligns with the Mexican American queer literature as well as the issues that queer individuals and literature face, such as loss, rediscovery, production, and the politics of publication. Gonzáles' novel is the embodiment of these issues as it was rejected and not published in her lifetime. Her work was lost, and was published in 1990s only when it was rediscovered in archives. Cuevas seeks to analyze *Caballero* in three major areas: first, to recover a queer Mexican American literature and its impact; second, to give credit to Gonzáles' contribution to queer Mexican American literature because of how the novel was a precursor to Chicana lesbian feminist concerns that were expressed later in the

twentieth century; third, to show how queerness plays a pivotal role in the makeup of Mexican American cultural imagination.

The strength of Cuevas' work is that she explores texts that are mostly obscured in the mainstream. In that sense, it would not be unreasonable to describe her work as archaeological, for it exposes and illuminates hidden and silenced ethos. Cuevas adds to this strength by exploring new writers in this genre who have expanded and added to the emotional and psychological makeup of their butch characters. Cuevas examines and writes persuasive analysis to repudiate the binary nature of sex and gender. Her ability to connect history with critical theory expands Chicax queer literature and studies. Cuevas' *Post-Borderlandia* contributes greatly to the field of Chicax subjectivity. It is important to note how she challenges and breaks ground in proposing a movement beyond white lesbianism or heteronormative Chicanidad and move on to the post-boderlandia, where gender variance can open up new possibilities for Chicax subjectivity. Cuevas highlights her points in a way that has not been very explicit before, **in evaluating** exactly how important queer gender variance has been in the Chicax movement. Cuevas leads the reader on a seamless academic journey that builds from one chapter to the next. She calls for people not to group identities under one umbrella, but rather be open to the reality of a gender variance that broadens into all possible, impossible, and yet-to-be-discovered gender identities. This provokes readers to discontinue any hegemonic and binary categorizations. Cuevas uses the case of the San Antonio Four -- four lesbian Chicax women, who were found guilty of sexual assault with circumstantial and false evidence -- to establish how heteronormative hegemony views queer Chicax, as a threat, and then

subject them to violence, unjust accusations, and convictions.

Cuevas shatters the hegemony and its demand for binary categories, be it based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. As we look on what has happened with George

Floyd now and the protests which followed and are **continuing to erupt** within our nation to fix our broken system, we hear Cuevas' call for our attention to the hidden and silent voices of the oppressed in the Chicax movement. If we listen, we shall hear innumerable stories of those oppressed by Western hegemony.