

T. Jackie Cuevas

Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique

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Reviewed by John Kaiser Ortiz, 2020

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The year 2019 marked the fifteenth anniversary of the passing of social philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa, and the echo of her influence still resonates among emergent and established scholars alike. Now, some thirty-two years after Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* was first published, the insights raised in that work about identity, community, conflict, and writing as engaged criticism have been revived and recast as cross-cultural, pluriversal principles of inclusion toward present and future bridge-building movements and other efforts at solidarity. But the untold boundaries that separate life in Mexico from that in the United States are still bleeding, and the efforts of selves in action to connect with their authentic selves, the world, and

others are still alienating and divisive. The task of suturing these historical and ongoing wounds is not concluded.

T. Jackie Cuevas's *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique* stakes a genuine claim to Anzaldúa's writings and legacy. Cuevas's life was irrevocably changed (for the better, to be sure) in light of reading and so living the native south Texan's poetry and philosophical writings. In Cuevas's words, scholars, activists, and others are today still in search of *un otro modo de ser*—another mode or form or way of existing, of being human (123). Those who come away from reading *Post-Borderlandia* will doubtless realize that the road we have collectively undertaken to travel in order to achieve this normative transformation is one whose crossings, boundaries, and possibilities have long been in question—and may always be. Racialized and gendered violence continues to haunt and plague myriad bodies along this journey.

Cuevas seeks to affirm “the significance of gender variant critique for examining the relationship between gender and sexuality in Chicana literature and culture” (25). Accordingly, this book renders “gender nonconformity an explicit question in order to understand its relation to queer sexuality and Chicana identities, experiences, and representations” (4). Detailing its methodological orientation, “*Post-Borderlandia* turns to literary cultural productions to ponder how Chicana authors have grappled with queerness as a locus of cultural tension, how gender and queer relate in the fictive worlds of gender transgressive and gender variant critique” (5). Cuevas elaborates further on the book's central argument later on, stating that this work “expands the analytic categories of gender and sexuality to account for racialized queer genders beyond feminine/masculine and homosexual/heterosexual binaries” (25). *Post-Borderlandia* thus aims to address a defining problem within Chicana studies, which is that prior investigations of

such “intersecting relationships . . . have not fully taken into account the myriad genders and ways that gender variance reconfigures notions of Chicanidad” (25). This passage marks the first use of *Chicanidad*, but this term is left undefined. A similar issue arises with the use of *Latinidad* (18). By Chicanidad, Cuevas implies self-affirming constructions of Chicana/o/x identity. By extension, Latinidad concerns matters pertaining to Latina/o/x identity. One of the most nuanced and valuable contributions this work makes to scholarship is to show that the process of personal as well as social (or collective) identity-formation is always contested, intimately, within communities as much as between and beyond them.

Post-Borderlandia features four main chapters: “Chicana Masculinities,” “Ambiguous Chicana Bodies,” “Transing Chicanidad,” and “Brokeback Rancho,” plus an introduction and conclusion. These four chapters feature spirited treatments of various Chicana cultural, literary, and performative productions. Chapter 1 examines the Butchlalis de Panochtitlan, a female performance trio whose stagings call into question the meaning of butch politics, or the “psychological and cultural geographies of Chicana lesbian borderlands experience” (28). Attention is also given to Rocky Gámez’s fictional and Adelina Anthony’s theatrical work. Chapter 2 takes up Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*, a novel set in Los Angeles during *el movimiento* (or the Chicana/o civil rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s), placing “a gender variant genderqueer Chicana person in the context of a surreal urban nightmare within a dystopic Chicana past” (56). The fictional writings of Chicana novelist Felicia Luna Lemus provide the focus of chapter 3. Cuevas argues that “Lemus’s contemporary portrayals of queerness and her transing of Chicanidad move us toward a greater understanding of the intersectionalities of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, and gender identities through the productive unreadability of transgressive, racialized Chicana genders” (99).

Unpredictably, however, the fourth chapter, on Jovita Gonzalez's posthumously published *Caballero*, is based on a recovered text. *Caballero* was written in the 1930s but not published until the 1990s. Including this text heightens this reviewer's confusion about the temporal sequencing and conceptual organization of incorporated texts. *Caballero* clearly transcends the historical exclusion implied by a title that points to critical thought produced not just after but beyond the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). In this way, Cuevas introduces a certain confusion between the ontological and the normative, including the need to distinguish and locate these terms in space, place, and time.

The secondary scholarship this work draws from lends the work a concrete theoretical foundation. José Esteban Muñoz (5, 10), Jack Halberstam (22, 59, 84, 96), Judith Butler (33), Arlene Stein (51), Sara Ahmed (52), Cherrie Moraga (73, 78, 122), and, of course, Anzaldúa receive mention. Drawing from these theorists, Cuevas applies concepts such as disidentification, orientation (52–53), queer time (59), and displacement (61), among others, as central categories of investigation and analysis. Cuevas also introduces original interpretations of key concepts such as *jotería* (18), which connotes a “Chicanx term for queer people,” enabling the author to characterize this manuscript as a contribution toward “critical *jotería* studies” (18).

My worry about *Post-Borderlandia*, however, is that it gets caught up in a confusion about philosophical categories that ultimately risks diminishing the lived and felt experiences of human beings who, after all, are not taken seriously as human beings. More to the point, Cuevas's book suggests what we might agree to call the problem of normative dissonance—or a metaphysical and moral/ethical confusion over what claims of normativity represent. Cuevas's work seems to have avoided taking two conditions or requirements of normativity seriously: 1) the nature, scope, and purpose of philosophical accounts of normativity themselves, that is, as

claims, and sometimes arguments, of preferred or idealized moral conduct; 2) the need for articulating consistent, readily discernible, and actionable principles for future inquiry and practice or behavior tied to the preceding (that is, original) claims. At issue here may be an equivocation between norms in a sociological sense, as the unwritten rules of (un)acceptable conduct, including prevailing ideas about how people do, in fact, behave, and normativity in a philosophical sense, which concerns how one ought or should behave, how one should act, given specific or concrete circumstances. One example appears early on when Cuevas introduces Felicia Luna Lemus. Cuevas says that Lemus's "work shares some concerns with Anzaldúa and Moraga's generation, such as challenging normative constructions of Chicano identity that render queerness outside of Chicanidad" (9–10). However, the author's claim of so-called normative constructions of identity lacks grounding or explanation, here and elsewhere. Cuevas also refers to "normatively situated Chicax communities" (16), "normative texts" (17), and then the "disavowal of the normative" (33). But if Cuevas' aim is to show how "gender nonconformity can disrupt the social order by bringing one's ontological status as a categorizable human being into question" (3), a more carefully explained account of how ontology and normativity develop and relate appears to be missing.

Perhaps this is the point of the book: to call into question how split subjectivities (57) come to be. But if it is true that who we are is a function (at least in small measure) of where we come from, then this claim of identity-formation would seem to emerge and exist indecisively, somewhere between past, present, and future. In this way, this text seems to have overlooked the articulation and elaboration demanded from any claim of having moved beyond or surpassed a given work, idea, or experience.

Post-Borderlandia leaves the reader in a theoretical pickle, stuck between but also curiously beyond philosophical categories (and distinctions) that would appear to require more robust engagement. The dilemma here might be better characterized by stating that problematizing, including “troubling” or “interrogating,” performativity is not the equivalent of, or synonymous with, problematizing philosophical problems. Stated differently, criticisms of heteronormativity, which a gender variant critique promises, are not the same as philosophical discussions of normativity. We might continue along this path: literary protest and criticism are not the equivalent of philosophical protest and criticism, and so on.

Books provide an opening into critically reflecting on the meaning we give to ideas about home, identity, community, and, above all else, shared values. Texts inform our identities, in other words, as much as any other form(s) of lived and felt experience. However, at this point it makes sense to reflect on the book’s title and stated *raison d’être*. Have we really moved beyond the intriguing and original ways of accounting for seeing/sensing, knowing, being/feeling, and relating that are raised in Anzaldúa’s book? Cuevas ends by returning to the San Antonio Four—a group of Latina lesbians who were wrongly (the more apt term here might be *insanely*) accused of being perpetrators of sexual abuse against two young girls entrusted to their care. But instead of revisiting the analysis in preceding chapters about how gender variant critique takes shape and then applying that critique to a discussion of their eventual exoneration, the author introduces new dimensions, even though they are implicitly allied with Chicana literature and performance: the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Moraga’s call for a rejuvenated Chicano nationalism, a variety of forms of consciousness related to Anzaldúa’s shape-shifter tendencies (including her tripping on mushrooms), Black Lives Matter, and several other figures and concepts introduced for the first time (for example, Gilmore, Puar, Soto, May).

Books are maps and sometimes bridges too, and Cuevas seems, page after page, to have a keen awareness of their instructive and edifying syncretism, helping set forth a compelling model for how to reconcile (more or less) who we are with who we are becoming, or want to be. Critical accounts of such healing, restorative, and (hopefully) redeeming community alliances, including their consciousness-raising initiatives, spiritual activism, and empathetic remembrances, have for too long gone unacknowledged and unmapped, thereby rendering them marginalized and erased by heteronormative publics. In this regard, Cuevas makes good on the book's promise of exploring queerness in a variety of Chicana texts and performances as openings into engaging and illuminating gender variant critique, one that prioritizes treating others justly and fairly, humanly and equally. As stated in the conclusion, "a gender variant approach allows for broader consideration of the wide range of possible and seemingly impossible genders and ways of embodying, self-describing, and theorizing gender nonconforming, transgender, genderqueer, queerly gendered, queer, marimacha, and other existing and not yet known gender variant embodiments and experiences" (131). The value of this approach is found in the book's final sentence: "In post-borderlandia, gender variant critique offers a perpetually unfolding map of liberatory potentialities" (139).

In the final analysis, it seems that reader, writer, and reviewer alike might return to the question of mapping—of delineating and demarcating, overcoming and surpassing, the trails and clues left to the living that mark the paths of our being and becoming. It is a daunting task, indeed, for anyone to locate or identify precisely where Anzaldúa's halfway point for being met might be, especially if the theoretical coordinates for such a project were truly intersectional and not just attentive to convergences as well as divergences. But when Cuevas states, in the final pages of *Post-Borderlandia*, that "Championing gender variant critique in post-borderlands

Chicana literature is part of a larger commitment to the ongoing utility of intersectionality” (131), the point seems lost, almost unnecessary. One concern here is that the author’s conclusion to this admirable work thus gives the distinct impression of unraveling what was so carefully sewn together in the preceding chapters. The author states that “Intersectionality can be imagined and deployed in such a way as to allow for matrices of complex interpellations” (133). I completely agree with the author’s claim. But shifting the focus away from Chicana/x literary and performative productions to a rather hastily introduced argument about intersectional methodology or orientation comes too late with too little to anchor the engrossing foregoing analysis. As with the remarks on ontology and normativity given above, the theoretical and/or critical terms for investigating identity perhaps shift too distantly throughout the work, with too much weight introduced at the beginning and end.

In the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa claims that “books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar” (Anzaldúa 1987, 19). Reading Cuevas’s book made me reflect on Anzaldúa’s work in new and surprising ways. Maybe this is the point of such necessary terms as “troubling” (22), “destabilize[ing]” (22), and “unsettling” (26)—and the point of Cuevas’s book: to lead readers away from their familiarity and comfort, to reflect more critically and creatively about who we are and to start acting like human beings whose lives—seen, that is, through their co-constitutive personal, familial, and social relations—are still deeply in question, and, deeper still, open to interpretation.

Reference

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.