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## T. Jackie Cuevas. *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Culture and Gender Variant Critique*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018.

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**Abstract**

Review of T. Jackie Cuevas. *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Culture and Gender Variant Critique*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018. xiii + 169 pp.

**Keywords**

queer, chicanx, literature

T. Jackie Cuevas. *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Culture and Gender Variant Critique*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018. xiii + 169 pp.

T. Jackie Cuevas's 2018 *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Culture and Gender Variant Critique* argues for the centrality of genderqueerness in Chicana literature. It opens from two premises. First, the author responds to the centralization of lesbian alterity in queer Chicana literature, arguing that it is not necessarily queer sexualities, but rather queer genders, that have historically been perceived to threaten a Chicana "cultural or familial sense of unity" (3). Second, Cuevas argues that gender variance has played a significant, but overlooked role in shaping queer Chicana literature. She aims for her book to begin constructing an archive of those contributions. The title "*Post-Borderlandia*" likewise has a dual significance. Cuevas aims to answer the question of "Who's next?" posed by Cherríe Moraga in a 2004 tribute to the life of Gloria Anzaldúa. Cuevas also writes that she hopes to push the limits "of how borderlands theory has become so infused in Chicana studies as to become a default way of seeing....It looks for the places where borderlands theory does not quite fit or hold, where it may be helpful yet not enough" (12).

The book has four body chapters. The first, "Chicana Masculinities," discusses butch lesbian gender in the context of Chicana literature. In particular, it analyzes the work of Los Angeles performance troupe Butchalis de Panochtitlán, writing that "Chicana butch mixes genders to construct a borderlands gender that resonates with the notion of mestizaje" (33). The second, "Ambiguous Chicana Bodies," analyzes the figure of Turtle, a genderqueer gang member in Helena María Viramontes's novel *Their Dogs Came with Them*, set in East Los Angeles during the Chicano movement. Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam, Cuevas argues that Turtle "brings into sharp relief the untimeliness of nonnormativity that intersects in the genderqueer brown body," culminating in police violence (59).

Chapter Three, "Trans-ing Chicanidad," uses the work of novelist Felicia Luna Lemus to argue for the relevance of "transing"—"a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly" (Stryker et al 2008)—to queer Chicana identity. Finally, Chapter 4, "Brokeback Rancho" reads Jovita González's 1935 novel *Caballero* as a precursor to twentieth-century Chicana lesbian feminist ideas, supporting Cuevas's argument that gender variance has always been present in Chicana literature. While the analysis is fascinating, it departs enough from the rest of the book—centering an effeminate male character written by a female author before the idea of "Chicana" had cohered as a racial self-identification—that it does not easily fit into, or support, the book's overall argument.

The book's central premises occasionally come into conflict. The argument that “not queer sexualities, but queer genders” have historically been perceived to threaten Chicana identity places a burden on Cuevas to distance her archive from the work of writers such as Anzaldúa and Moraga, while her response to Moraga's question of “Who's next?” (11) and argument that genderqueerness is present in Anzaldúa's unpublished work (123-128) invites affinities. The argument that genderqueerness “poses a bigger threat to a Chicana imaginary than same-sex desire” introduces an impossible burden to prove that the threat is “bigger” (78). Perhaps a more successful argument might have placed the two premises of the book into a dialectic rather than a tension, asking what new directions lesbian and genderqueer Chicana literature takes once borderlands theory has been internalized and metabolized, and showing the ways that *Post-Borderlandia*'s texts have done so.

The premise of the book can also feel unstable at points because the key terms of the work go undefined. Cuevas refers to “the coherence of the Chicana community and a shared Chicana imaginary” (78), but this coherence is dubious. In order to speak of expanding the interpretations of Chicana cultural production and the archive of Chicanaidad, it is important for Cuevas to tell readers what definition of Chicana/a/x she is using, not only in general in the text but also at specific moments. The term “Chicana” is labile and historically and geographically specific, meaning different things in different decades as well as in different states and regions. Even when Cuevas uses the term to refer to those writers, scholars, artists, and activists who self-identify as Chicana/Chicana/Xicana, what are the terms of that self-identification? How does each artist or author's geographic and historical situatedness affect that identification?

Similarly, Cuevas uses the undefined terms “gender variance” and “gender transgressive” to counter what she calls “a coherent Chicana lesbian feminist subject” (10), exemplified in the work of Moraga and Anzaldúa, without convincing readers of that subject's gender-coherence. It seems likely that Anzaldúa and Moraga would have agreed with Cuevas about the significance of gender-variant presentation, as the two are not mutually exclusive: queer desire and queer gender presentation go hand in hand. Indeed, Cuevas points to overlooked moments of gender variance in the work of both Moraga and Anzaldúa (81-82, 123-128). This supports her argument that gender variance has always been present in Chicana literature, but not her argument that it is a novel challenge to a gender-coherent Chicana past.

These instabilities go away in Cuevas's conclusion, which articulates the book's guiding questions and commitments perhaps better than anywhere else in the book. She asks: “How might queer texts open up new ways of imagining queer lives and gender variant possibilities?” and responds: “the archive I have

assembled here argues for an understanding of the centrality of gender variant critique in Chicana literature” (123). *Post-Borderlandia* indeed creates an archive showing that gender variance is central to Chicana literature. Further, it shows that such intersectional non-normativity is, in the words of Rosario Castellanos quoted by Cuevas, “Otro modo de ser humano y libre” ‘Another way of being human and free’ (123).

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#### Works Cited

Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore. “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?.” *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 36, no. 3-4, 2008, pp. 11-22.