

Book Review

**“Shakin’ Up” Race and Gender:
Intercultural Connections in Puerto
Rican, African American, and Chicano
Narratives and Culture (1965–1995)**

Marta Sánchez

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In this new book, Marta Sánchez carves a new and important space for Chicano/a literary studies, one that pushes the boundaries of the field as it was defined earlier within national and gendered lines. By exploring the intercultural connections between peoples of distinct ethnic groups in the minority narratives of the 1970s, and by proposing both an interethnic hermeneutics and reader responses that crisscross various national myths and discourses, she is contributing new paradigms to literary studies and to ethnic studies that are at the vanguard of Latino/a Studies and of American Studies as well. In *“Shakin’ Up” Race and Gender: Intercultural Connections in Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano Narratives and Culture (1965–1995)*, Dr. Sánchez fully engages in comparative ethnicities, an area that is now beginning to emerge within American Studies. This is no easy task, for it necessitates a profound knowledge of the various minority groups, their histories, myths, and discourses, not to mention the growing scholarship in each. While younger scholars are developing these comparative approaches, it is less common for Chicano/a senior scholars of Dr. Sánchez’s generation to open up and explore these other fields. This comparative approach is much

needed as a response to the demographic and racial diversification of the United States and to the internal diversification of the Latino population since the 1980s. Likewise, the exploration of the intercultural relations between and among Latinos and African-Americans also challenges the segmented knowledge of minorities, a segmentation clearly informed by the cultural nationalism paradigms of our early scholarship.

This book also proposes a very provocative argument and methodology that will foster discussion and debate. Sánchez unifies her work by deploying the Malinche trope to interpret the intersections between race and gender in Piri Thomas’s *Down these Mean Streets* (1974), Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), and Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972). According to Sánchez herself, La Malinche is deployed “as a metaphor in the service of interculturalism” for “it offers a way to organize the intercultural scenes and themes enacted in the literary texts of this book” (5). Secondly, La Malinche “allows [the author] to make visible what would not be visible if [she] did not use it in [her] analysis; and, third, “the conceit allows [her] to reveal [her] own identity as a Chicano woman in relation to the other two cultures that have no specifically named La Malinche figure” (6). Through this poetic and cultural icon, the author then foregrounds the importance of gender in the constitution of a racialized masculinity among men of color and of its ensuing, collective national imaginaries. What I find most relevant and significant is Dr. Sánchez’s methodological challenge to us all: can one use a cultural



trope or icon as a hermeneutic filter through which to read and give meaning to an outside text? As she explains in the book, this risky approach works because it unveils gender constructions that may not be overt through a monocultural lens, and it also works as a metaphor for uncovering structural analogies of experience of colonized and subordinated groups and, in particular, for understanding how gender functions in relationship to race and racism. The chosen literary narratives – Thomas, Brown, and Zeta Acosta – for this study are particularly illuminating in this respect. While these texts were not well received as narratives of cultural nationalism and of cultural pride at the time of their publication, their protagonists are embodiments of painful masculinity as a site of negotiation between the colonial forces and the colonized, male subject. The fact that these authors, Thomas, Brown, and Zeta Acosta, reach out to other minority tropes (without explicitly naming them) as part of their discursive resistance, and deploy them as part of the process of producing their own gendered subjectivities vis-a-vis dominant society and their own communities, is evidence that this intercultural approach is productive and not off the mark. Professor Sánchez's brilliant readings of key scenes in these narratives offer original insights and new ideas as to how men of color negotiate their own agency and power in a racist society. The Malinche trope is contextualized, historicized and deployed with great sensitivity to the cultural specificity of each of the groups studied. Thus, the methodological contributions of this book manuscript are highly significant for rethinking national boundaries and the segmented approaches to various US Latino/a communities. This book

is also a brilliant example of how gender cannot be separated from race. Finally, I want to foreground Dr. Sánchez's important incursion into theorizing reader responses and intercultural reading, an area that has increased both in literary and cultural studies. By exploring how one minority reader reads another minority text, she is illuminating power differentials as well as structured similarities across these ethnic borders.

It is also important to mention that Sánchez not only deploys *La Malinche* but the foundational works of Daniel Moynihan, Octavio Paz, and Oscar Lewis. She analyzes how these masculine authorities in their respective fields contributed to the ways in which women of color in particular are portrayed in such pathological and negative ways. Sánchez lucidly interweaves these discourses with the specific narratives that she analyzes, contextualizing their historical and sociological impact as well as connecting their language and images of women of color to the literary texts written by men of color.

Relatively brief, and written in a very accessible language, Marta Sánchez's book promises to become a foundational text in interculturalism because of the nuanced, sensitive, and well-informed approach through which she offers us original and unique readings of the race and gender dynamics that these men of color protagonists confront in their lives. Her intercultural imaginary should become a model for other future scholarship that attempts to build bridges between the literary and cultural productions of minority groups as well as of European-American ethnic groups in the United States.

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