

Book Review *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* by Karma R. Chávez

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Karma R. Chávez’s *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* is a critical contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition. Chávez’s book demonstrates queer coalitional work as it examines heteronormative cistems of oppression that have disempowered and marginalized migrant bodies and folks of color since the early AIDS epidemic.¹ However, before engaging with Chávez’s work, it is important to note that Ryan Mitchell, Assistant Professor of English at Lafayette College, has also written a review about this book. In his review, Mitchell provides a strong account about the parallels to current events, as well as articulating Chávez’s ability to add to archival histories by “shifting focus from the work accomplished by mostly white, mostly middle class, cosmopolitan AIDS activist groups . . . [and] draw[ing] from queer of color, migrant, and feminist traditions to recover an alternative history of AIDS, one that is attuned to how the epidemic affected (and continues to affect) those on the borders of civic and national belonging.” As Mitchell illuminates, Chávez’s work adds to archival work by amplifying a historical perspective that captures racialized migrant bodies and moves away from centering White bodies, organizations, and perspectives. Building from Mitchell, I also see this book queering heteronormative institutionalized cistems of oppression to signify white supremacy’s dominance and its violence against marginalized, disempowered, and ignored bodies.² As my review suggests, this text argumentatively informs readers about perspectives, identities, and literacies that are not often discussed in dominant heteronormative educational and archival scholarship.

In “Introduction: The Alienizing Nation,” Chávez as a rhetorical critic tells a story about how institutionalized powers (such as public health officials, politicians, media, and others) have disproportionately impacted Black men and Haitian migrants (and of course queer and trans bodies) through alienizing logic. She amplifies this point by articulating the HIV-positive migrant ban that lasted for 22 years and ended in 2010. Moreover, Chávez theorizes how alienizing logic represents a pivotal framework that “refers to a structure of thinking that insists that some are necessarily members of a community and some are recognized as not belonging, even if they physically reside there” (5). Then, she connects and builds from scholars to connect the alien with the citizen, amplifying the logic as institutionalized power that manifests differently, including “genocide, lynching, the plantation, the reservation, the ghetto, the internment camp, the prison, the hospital, quarantine, ban, or deportation” (9). This is magnified through the alien logic and disease section, which articulates intersectional identities that have been severely affected. As Chávez writes, racialized transnational communities were impacted, which represents this monograph’s exigency to understand how “AIDS created an opportunity for politicians, public health officials, and mainstream media to use immigration status, race, and citizenship to enact alienizing logic” (12).

In its entirety, Chavez’s book contains five chapters, each divided into two parts to exemplify

institutional disempowerment by dominant heteronormative culture against minoritized bodies. In part one, “Alienizing Logic and Structure,” Chávez emphasizes “how people with power to frame issues and make decisions utilize disease as an opportunity to enact alienizing logic” (14). In part two, “Resisting Alienizing Logic,” she “shift[s] attention to how mostly queer AIDS activists responded to and resisted alienizing logic as it applied to migrant communities who may or may not have also been queer” (14). Although this examination of institutional disempowerment examines historical accounts, Chávez notes there is a deep connection between the present, especially in consideration of COVID-19. As she clearly proclaims, AIDS has a lot to teach us all about the past and present.

In chapter 1, “A Brief Rhetorical History of Quarantine,” Chávez provides “a rhetorical history of quarantine in the United States, beginning in the late eighteenth century” (20). The purpose of this chapter is to trace how assertions and beliefs of quarantine rhetorically traveled from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Chávez “unpack[s] how quarantine, as an alienizing logic, emerges primarily from concerns about mobility and migration, showing that the applications of quarantine frequently rely on rhetorical appeals premised in anxieties about foreign invasion, international migration, and migrant communities that may bring infectious disease into the larger community” (20). Through this brief rhetorical history, Chávez establishes that conversations in relation to migrant and immigration discourses are deeply connected with quarantine, amplifying why “quarantine is a manifestation of US alienizing logic” (38). This sentiment signifies how quarantine is traced and emerged in direct connection with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

In chapter 2, “AIDS and the Rhetoric of Quarantine,” Chávez illustrates how alienizing logics manifested in rhetoric of quarantine by closely “exploring how calls for and fears of quarantining people with AIDS proliferated in US public discourse during the early years of the pandemic” (42). She situates the rhetoric of quarantine and examines its presence during the early years in media, political, legal, religious, and gay rights discourses. The chapter also details that although quarantine was not enacted during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, “a few high-profile and sensationalized cases of Black sex workers animated the creation or renewal of quarantine laws and set the stage for laws that criminalize HIV. . . . [and] quarantine ultimately became national common sense in US immigration policy on HIV/AIDS” (43). As Chávez concludes in this chapter, discourses on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS garnered mainstream appeal. As she writes, “As alien citizens, all US American homosexuals, including those with race and class privilege, ended up suffering because of problematic ideas from the right wing becoming dominant” (65). But as Chávez asserts clearly, Black folks endured the worst of it and migrants also encountered dire consequences, illuminating how institutional powers devalue the most disempowered bodies in the US. This chapter signifies the harmful rhetorical discourses that amplified violence against marginalized identities and the real consequences of those actions.

In chapter 3, “National Common Sense and the Ban on HIV-Positive Migrants,” Chávez examines congressional debates about the senators’ reliance that connect with what she calls a rhetoric of “national common sense.” As she writes, “this chapter details how the law that defined HIV infection as a ‘dangerous contagious disease’ and therefore grounds for immigration exclusion came to be” (67). This ban, as Chávez explains, holds rhetorical significance, as this ban had persistent

institutionalized ramifications from the “alienating logic that manifests in interlocking rhetorics of public health, contagion, and immigration” (67). More, Chávez adds to public memory on HIV/AIDS, addressing a prolific site of rhetoric that has gone unmentioned in the scholarly record. For this chapter, it provides a critical example of how “alienizing logic became embedded in national common sense in ways that led to scapegoating and exclusion of migrants” (100). This amplifies how interpersonal relations, such as senators, can perpetuate institutional violence through law and policy.

In chapter 4, “Boycotts and Protests of the International AIDS Conferences,” Chávez considers the rhetorical significance of the boycotts and protests that were enacted at the International AIDS Conference 1989-1992, which were scheduled in the US from 1990 to 1992. As Chávez argues, the “boycotts and protests of these conferences are important sites of rhetorical investigation because they represent a key instance of transnational coalition building that resisted the codification of alienating logic in US immigration law” (104). She builds an argument about how these acts of protests and boycotts also represented rhetorical movement strategies. Through this examination, this exemplifies how “boycotts work so forcefully to create rhetorical space that would not otherwise exist” (129) and represents an act of transnational coalitional building.

In chapter 5, “AIDS Activist Media and the ‘Haitian Connection,’” Chávez illustrates that AIDS activist media extended beyond organizations such as ACT UP. As she writes, “*New York Native* . . . provided some of the most comprehensive reporting on AIDS issues available during the early years of the pandemic, arguably defining the genre of AIDS activist print media” (133). Although she acknowledges that reporters were White dominant, which reflects a larger structural problem, the organization did conduct extensive coverage “by rely[ing] heavily on Haitian voices and provid[ing] long-form reporting on the issues” (134). This exemplifies, as Chávez states, “relying on the materials these activists produced allows us to tell a story about how alienizing logic impacted Haitians and how people resisted when few other primary source materials exist that can do so” (134). Although the chapter examines *New York Native’s* ability to challenge dominant views—and James Wentzly’s AIDS community TV, which recorded, documented, and presented material that highlight migrant voices that were detained which contributed to the release of detainees—it includes an important component about coalition building. Meaning, conceptualizing AIDS media criticality by challenging and responding “how ban and quarantine severely impacted Haitians is an important part of the public memory of HIV/AIDS. The revitalization of this memory is crucial for learning to build coalitions that address such complexities in the present and future” (156). Chávez signals the need to understand the vitality of learning about public memory about disempowered and ignored bodies that continue to be unnoticed and uncovered.

In all, Chávez’s book manifests an exigency that cohesively conducts archival queer coalitional work to challenge heteronormative systems that neglect to amplify intersectional migrant bodies. As Chávez articulates in the opening of her book, these enactments of alienizing logics can be seen historically and presently, which signifies the need to stay attuned to these types of logics on bodies that are disempowered by institutional structures. This also includes citizenship. Although these alienizing logics severely impact marginalized bodies, Chávez presents queer coalitional building

and demonstrates it as a tactical approach for advocating the survival from the cistem that fails queer and trans BIPOC lives. Meaning, queering the fuck out of heteronormativity and its oppressive logics remains vital to support the most marginalized individuals.

NOTES

¹ I incorporate cistems instead of systems as a rhetorical move. In “Violent Cistems: Trans Experiences of Bathroom Space,” Nigel Patel writes: “By cistem I refer to the systematized power which oppresses, subjugates, and marginalises transgender people” (51). In their defining notion of cistem, I utilize this term to articulate cistems of oppression against queer, trans, non-binary, and BIPOC lives and their direct connection to Eurocentrism.

² I use *queering* in an intentional and critical way. Queering, as K. J. Rawson articulates, can be used as an “analytic critique of normativity, particularly heteronormativity” (248). I see queering as challenging, disrupting, and countering normative cistems of oppression.

WORKS CITED

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