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Review / Reseña

García Caro, Pedro. *After the Nation. Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014.

Transnational Genealogies and Post-national Literary Canons

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Scholars of American and Mexican literature and culture, border studies, comparative studies, nationalism, and postnationalism will find Pedro García-Caro's *After the Nation: Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon* engaging and useful. Historically, García-Caro contributes to scholarship on the Cold War, while politically he addresses the emergent New Left during the 1960s, both contributions complicit with the more general aim of focusing on international currents of thinking as a critique of nationalist narratives. In the Preface, García-Caro highlights the contradictory nature of the border that divides the U.S. and Mexico. Traversed by human traffic and circulating goods, the border is characterized by bans and barriers as much as by circulation and

commerce. Duly noted by García-Caro are the subterranean passageways through which contraband and bodies travel that threaten the authority of material borders above ground. This border landscape serves as a powerful introduction to *After the Nation* and captures the purpose and the methodology of the book. A critical study of the simultaneous separation and proximity of cultural and economic factors that characterizes the border demands a comparative approach that considers how national symbols reinforce the ideological demarcation of two countries that are also united by invisible tunnels.

Professor García-Caro invites readers to question the legacy of narratives of nationalism and the nation-state and their relation to the literary canon through a new comparative study of two canonical authors, Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon. García-Caro argues that the works of Fuentes and Pynchon challenge the nationalist discourses that define the nation and that are reiterated by iconography from opposite sides of the border. Their challenge comes in the form of a satirical representation of official histories and temporalities, both of which are bound to the Enlightenment notion of progress and that erase violent repression and heterogeneity from national histories. In this way, the title not only alludes to an interpretation of these works that highlights a postnational reading of U.S. and Mexican cultural and literary history, but also to the satirical pursuit of nationalizing discourses constructed by Fuentes and Pynchon. In other words, these authors literally went “after the nation” to undermine and oppose what García-Caro refers to as the foundational myths that make such a national abstraction possible. García-Caro refers to this satirical pursuit as postnational satire, “a novel form which deploys a postmodern defiance of the grand narrative of the modern nation-state” (79).

After the Nation is not limited to the comparative study of two writers; it invites its readers to question the limits of nation-centered ideologies associated with literary production, literary criticism, and cultural history on both sides of the border in a study that engages with theoretical problems of nationalism, historiography, narratology, border studies, temporality, neocolonialism and postnationalism, as well as literary, cultural, and intellectual history. Theorists from a wide range of

disciplines and approaches are given their due, including nationalism (Gellner, Hobsbawn, Anderson, Balibar, Bhabha), border studies (Limón), satire (Kristeva, Hutcheon) and theories on the novel (Bahktin) to name only a few. This broad theoretical field is an attractive part of this book as the author provides a well-written survey of multiple schools of thought and how they interact and question each other. Nevertheless, this same strong theoretical bent gives this book more a home in graduate seminars than the undergraduate classroom. Finally, García-Caro provides a critical framework with which to approach the entire corpus of work by Fuentes and Pynchon. He shows how these texts that have become pillars in each respective national literary archive reframe historical narratives and events that have been claimed by a national history.

In constructing his study transnationally and comparatively, García-Caro suggests a revision not only of the works he studies, but also of the way in which literary and cultural criticism are undertaken. In short, the border that has established untenable barriers between the U.S. and Mexico has, it would seem, also constructed a separation between its critics. In breaking down these barriers García-Caro does much more than present his reader with an exhaustive study of two indisputably powerful voices in twentieth-century literary and political production; he also illuminates a path to scholarship that moves beyond the walls of the U.S. and Mexican academies and toward a method of reading that echoes his title and the aim of his study: to emphasize the limits of understanding literary history and culture in terms of the nation. Although literary history has subsumed these authors as canonical, García-Caro reminds us that their canonicity lies not only in their discursive innovations, but also in their critique of the hegemonic discourses that, to some extent, enveloped their work, making it emblematic of the institutionalization of literature instead of the satirical representation of the institutionalizing powers that is the target of postnational satire. In this way, Fuentes and Pynchon are canonical national authors from each side of the border and their postnational satire the invisible tunnels that undermine the validity of nationalizing discourses.

The books' seven chapters are organized in three parts that progress chronologically through the authors' publishing careers. Each part focuses on a specific way that each author performs his postnational satire and begins with a useful comparative introduction that outlines the individual chapters' contribution to the overall thrust of the book. In Part One, titled "Narrative Undergrounds in the Postnational City," García-Caro analyzes the city as a crossroads of local and global modernities where control is hidden beneath narratives of progress. He argues that Fuentes and Pynchon satirize the way cities are mobilized in nationalist historiography as sites of modern organization and control. García-Caro considers the protagonists of *V.* and *La región más transparente* to be reminiscent of the picaresque tradition. He follows the protagonists as they navigate the fictionalized urban space in a satirical gesture that presents an alternative urban history. This alternative, in turn, undermines the myths that prop up the nationalizing and modernizing discourses, so closely associated with the urban space. In these novels the representation of urban space is satirized as a way to revisit the manners in which modernity rewrites history in order to eliminate opposition and heterogeneity. García-Caro's reading focuses on the postmodern failed utopian future that appears in these novels to perform an "unearthing of the history of the first half of the twentieth century, whose narrative is explicitly exposed not as progress or a gleaming futurity, but as a continuum of usurpations, genocides, and wars without the teleological impulse that nationalist ideologues confer on it" (75).

Chapter 1 considers Fuentes' *La región más transparente* as a parody of the attempts by Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz, Samuel Ramos, and Alfonso Reyes to define Mexican identity in the decades following the Mexican Revolution. Fuentes concentrates on the "ghostly reminder" of the indigenous past that threatens the national discourse of *mestizaje* promoted by intellectuals such as Vasconcelos. García-Caro argues that Pynchon constructs a parody of the nationalizing discourses of liberation and progress by rewriting U.S. history as territorial expansion and global colonization. García-Caro illuminates the way in which Fuentes opposes the attempts by contemporary intellectuals to

create and inculcate Mexicanness—*lo mexicano*—through the satirical rendering of space and time in *La región*. Meanwhile, Chapter 2 presents an analysis of Pynchon's *V.* as a satirical rewriting of the role of the United States in Vietnam and the Cold War. Hence, both authors use their respective nations' pasts to point out the disparity between postnationalist discourses and projections for the future.

Part Two, "Dissenting from the Nation: The New Left," concentrates on the way Fuentes and Pynchon satirize the nation as an inherited legacy in three novels, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Cambio de piel*. García-Caro reads these novels as satirical representations of "dysfunctional and privatized uses of national narratives" in order to emphasize the ways in which such narratives fail "to account for social change and cultural diversity" (79). In the novels analyzed in this section the satire that interests García-Caro is aimed at events contemporary to the writers, not a reworking of the past, the topic of Part 3, or a construction of the future, the topic of Part 1. What unites these three novels is that they lay bare the neocolonial networks that the ruling elites benefit from in order to manipulate the masses. García-Caro includes in his study of the satire of elitist abuse of power the representation of objects associated with modernity (the automobile, the television, and the radio) and institutions grounded in the authoritative assessment of the nation's citizenry such as the asylum and madness.

García-Caro's reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* in Chapter 4 is developed on an allegorical interpretation of the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, as the parody of the tragic protagonist of *Oedipus Rex*. The parody of nationalizing narratives emerges from Oedipa's incapacity to recognize her own colonized identity and thus her inability to act or to acknowledge the truth. This structure works in direct opposition to that of the tragedy where the protagonist is always confronted with the consequences of an intolerable truth. In Chapter 5, García-Caro underlines the genealogy of postnational satire in the works of Fuentes from *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* to *Cambio de piel* as moving from the national context to a universal representation of abuse or, "the universal history of infamy" (133). The claim here is that once Fuentes moves beyond a critique of the discourse of

Mexicanness, a critique of the violent underpinnings of global modernity emerges. In the case of Fuentes, the satirical representation of nationalizing and modernizing discourses that begins with *La región* culminates with *Terra nostra* in 1975, “completing a perceptible shift from (post)national to pan-Hispanic satire” (133). At stake in the novels that are the focus of this section, according to García-Caro, is the discovery of a narrative that satirizes the national while avoiding the same “universalizing claims of enlightened reason and its liberal cosmopolitan avatars” (146).

In Part 3, titled “(Post)Colonial Enlightened Origins: Americanism Born,” the focus of analysis is the historical novels *La campaña* and *Mason & Dixon*. In these novels the authors emphasize the neocolonial practices that informed the creation of nation-states in the Americas. Intimately linked to enlightened practices of homogenization and standardization, the independence era is, in García-Caro’s reading, characterized by a Eurocentric worldview that violently eliminated difference and dissent. In the case of Pynchon, mapping, deterritorialization, and American exceptionalism “reinscribe into the birth of the nation the cultural erasures and the epistemic violence involved in the narration of American exceptionalism” (181). Fuentes, meanwhile, offers a reworking of the campaign for Independence in Latin America that emphasizes the elimination of the local in competition between Europeans and Creoles for cultural dominance.

The publication of this rigorous study of satire, discourse, and power in the United States and Mexico is timely. The tragic disappearance of 43 teachers in Mexico’s southern state of Guerrero and the events in Ferguson, Missouri have sparked a renewed mediation on the politics of exclusion and the viability of nationalist discourses on both sides of the border. In light of these event that threaten nationalist myths of a homogenous community in the U.S and Mexico, Professor García-Caro’s study of postnational satire as a tool to unearth the bankruptcy of national myths (national iconography and teleological notions of time and space) associated with the creation of modern nation-states is especially prescient. If postmodern works question the assumptions of modernity, they are at times criticized for offering more questions than answers to the problems

they reveal. Garíca-Caro distances himself from those who treat postmodern texts as examples of an “authorial loss of control” or “hermeneutical play” to suggest a reading strategy that provides answers to the problems outlined above.