

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

García-Caro, Pedro. After the Nation: Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014. Print. 282 pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30m598pj>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 6(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Janzen, Rebecca

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T461030933

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

García-Caro, Pedro. *After the Nation: Postnational Satire in the Works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014. Print. 282 pp.

REBECCA JANZEN
BLUFFTON UNIVERSITY

Pedro García-Caro's *After the Nation* offers a historically based analysis of the works of Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon. It argues that satire, parody and metafiction in the works of these two authors challenge nationalist narratives promoted by Mexican and U.S. literary and official histories. This unique contribution explores ideas beyond the nation by studying established authors—it compares a canonical Mexican author, Carlos Fuentes, and the more reclusive, but equally important, Thomas Pynchon. This approach to understanding the postnational is completely unlike other approaches, because it avoids the well-travelled paths of thinking through the current era by focusing on the border region, transnational migrant networks, or identity-based approaches, such as those that focus on Latino people in the U.S.

After the Nation begins by developing a framework through which to examine the national literary histories of Mexico and the U.S. To do so, it converses with surveys of nationalism in each country, their literary canons, a panoramic outlook on the critical reception of these two authors, as well as the authors' public personae and their other writings. Such dialogue is important; however, this section does not make the connection between metafiction, parody and satire explicit, nor does it develop a clear connection between these literary techniques and concepts of the postnational.

Once the literary analysis begins, García-Caro brings this final point to the fore, describing how several of what we could call "postmodern literary techniques" are in fact gestures towards the postnational. *After the Nation* is organized around three parts containing a total of seven chapters, each part offering a short introduction that prefaces chapters that focus either on Pynchon or Fuentes. Unfortunately, no section has a dedicated conclusion and thus the reader must wait until the final conclusion to gather together loose ends. The first part of this work explores Fuentes and Pynchon's early careers and analyzes two novels that discuss the city, which, in García-Caro's view, establish their visions of the future that would cross national borders. The second part focuses on novels from the middle of Fuentes and Pynchon's careers, novels that comment on the 1960s and critique the New Left movement. The final part examines the authors' later careers and suggests that

in these novels, both authors develop unique visions of the past. This part situates Mexican and U.S. nationalisms within the Enlightenment tradition.

The first section analyzes novels that describe false utopias or haunting in the modern city. García-Caro explains that both Fuentes and Pynchon envision the city as a space where national and global discourses fuse, and thus, we are led to believe that this fusion is a key part of the postnational discourse in both authors' oeuvre. *After the Nation* considers that this focus on the future and the city celebrates modernity and points out its problematic aspects. This approach to positive and negative aspects in both Fuentes and Pynchon comes out of a slightly forced comparison, based on close readings of the narrator Ixca Cienfuegos in Fuentes's *La región más transparente* (1958) and the narrative voices in Thomas Pynchon's novel *V.* (1963) and related short stories. When *After the Nation* turns to Pynchon, it suggests that in *V.*, he recasts U.S. history as the history of genocide. García-Caro argues that both authors refuse to rescue history through nationalist discourse; this reluctance to share in nationalist discourse, would thus lead these novels to participate in a postnational tradition. He proposes, instead, that the novels counter the official telling of history by rupturing with linear temporality. This ludic comparison leaves us with the impression that the city holds incredible promise for breaking with traditional understandings of the past and of the nation; we are disappointed, here, not with García-Caro but with ourselves. We realize that the city most often does not live up to the potential for recasting the past, or problematizing the present, as demonstrated in these early works by Pynchon and Fuentes.

The book's second section examines the way in which "narrations of the nation underline and denounce all-encompassing notions of national identity promoted by the Cold Warriors at the service of enforcing political consensus while concealing undeniable cultural and social divides" (80). *After the Nation* critiques these visions of the then-present by analyzing ideas of ailment. Although he does not engage with disability studies, or in studies of narratives of disease and contagion, this section proposes a deft comparison of three novels, Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Fuentes's *Cambio de piel* (1967). In each case, García-Caro notes that the novels play with central national symbols, and we realize how much we could have learned from these works in the fifty years since their publication. In an innovative analysis, he posits that Artemio Cruz plays with a symbol central to Mexican identity, the Malinche. It is here that we see García-Caro's genius. Even though he engages with a novel that has undergone intense scrutiny, and the role of a symbol that is crucial to Mexican studies, he makes a new observation. Cruz is "a playful avatar of the stereotypical duplicitous nature of the Mexican, a *malinchismo* that cuts

both ways” (93). This notion of avatar and identity also relates to the postnational, and we are left wondering how to relate avatars and digital culture to the contemporary context.

Following this brilliant analysis, *After the Nation* turns to Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. It suggests that the novel’s female protagonist is unable to counter the national discourse that has colonized her unconscious. We return to connections with today, as it seems that similar discourses of fear have colonized and militarized the collective unconscious. In a similar lesson for the contemporary U.S. context, this chapter follows on the concepts of fear and the unconscious as it turns to race and the Watts riots. This perceptive analysis should instruct the contemporary U.S. context, and suggest that we place current narratives in a transnational context in order to gain a more complete understanding of them, and how we might change them.

García-Caro’s observations in this section’s final chapter pertain to Fuentes’ *Cambio de piel* and elaborate on how this novel problematizes consumerist ideology and its relationship with nationalist discourses. He mentions Pepsicoatl, a figure whose name conflates Pepsi-Cola and the Mexican national symbol, the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl. *After the Nation* explains that this figure epitomizes how: “the nation and its symbols are revealed as commodities to subdue and colonize a politically anesthetized society where even artists are seduced by the nationalist establishment” (144). This section shrewdly implies that exclusively national studies replicate the sick nature of nationalist discourses, which colonize the mind and the academy when they are inured to political realities. At the end of the second section we are again confronted with the fact that we must work to change our institutional surroundings as we learn from literature. Again, as with the end of the first section, we are disappointed with our own failures to heed the literary critic.

The final section of *After the Nation* turns to the ways Pynchon and Fuentes’ oeuvres explore alternative understandings of myth, history and time. To do so, it places their works within a Hemispheric understanding of the Enlightenment. For García-Caro, “Thomas Pynchon and Carlos Fuentes satirically reinscribe the American Enlightenments and their revolutions as a straightforward change of colonial agents in the Western course of empire. And in doing so, they deconstruct the mythical origins or modern nations throughout the hemisphere by uprooting their foundational constitutions: their sacred histories and their vaunted mappings” (160). This outstanding analysis should turn conventional histories on their head, and force us to include what some (but not García-Caro) would consider peripheral nations in our understandings of the Enlightenment. Once again, *After the Nation* has practical applications that we ignore at our peril. This section contends that both novels purposefully avoid voicing the subaltern and respectfully portray this experience from the

outside. Thus, they pay attention to under-heard voices, rather than to the trope of giving a voice to the voiceless, and encourage us to do the same.

This groundbreaking analysis allows us to question the foundations of nationalism and national literary canons in Mexico and the U.S. In spite of these contributions, the book would be well served through a title that encompasses the way García-Caro explains that Fuentes and Pynchon's work critique nationalism, its temporalities, and the way nationalism colonizes the minds and bodies of its subjects. In other words, it is not always clear how categories such as parody, metafiction, and intertextuality form part of a broadly defined satire. With a stronger definition at the outset, perhaps we would be able to better arrive at his conclusions, and a fuller understanding of the positions of Mexico and the U.S. within the long Cold War period in the twentieth century. In spite of this lack of clarity, *After the Nation* encourages us de-nationalize our thinking and to wake up from the consumerism and nationalism that colonize our unconscious.

García-Caro's work will interest scholars who explore categories such as the postnational or the transnational, as well as those whose work centers on images and representations of illness and disability. It will serve those who seek to reframe fiction usually classified as canonical, because, as he establishes, "the realization that their critique can be absorbed back into the national megamachine does not defuse them automatically as political acts, but it should rather underscore their renewed capabilities... that... promote a break in the national discourse of consensus with every new reading, every time they are activated" (86). One would hope that those future readings would realize *After the Nation's* call for a postnational ethics, and that such ethics would permeate our thinking and reach all the corners of our institutions.