

BOOK REVIEW

Is 'Postnationalism' Liberating?

Edén E. Torres

Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture. By Ellie D. Hernández. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. Pp. 255. \$25.00 (paper).

Ellie D. Hernández—an associate professor of Women's Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara—poses interesting and highly arguable questions in her book, *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*. These questions, as well as her assertions in regard to postnationalism and its relationship to citizenship (as well as its usefulness to Chicana/o Studies), should have a long lasting impact within the field as well as in American, cultural, and feminist studies. To the extent that Hernández successfully argues that postnationalism is about “human beings resisting any notion of ‘illegal’ personhood, [or] of being aliens upon any land,” we can clearly see the emancipatory potential of the concept (14). But where the text relies most heavily on a western notion of progress (which ensures horizontal hostility between similarly oppressed groups and hierarchical relationships), the author merely reconfigures U.S. hegemony rather than proposing a new political space.

In chapter 1, “Postnationalism: Encountering the Global,” Hernández discusses what she considers the foundational theories and critical ideas that have come out of—and contributed to—the expansion of postnationalist thought. Ambitiously, Hernández explores notable aspects of history and popular culture from the 1960s through the first few years of the new century to demonstrate an increasingly transnational aesthetic. She raises a question

that should be contemplated throughout reading the text and beyond: Are new technologies and representations in popular culture adequate vehicles for moving away from the limitations of nationalist politics and toward a kind of postnationalism that is about more than mere consumerism?

In chapter 2, "Idealized Pasts: Discourses on Chicana Postnationalism," Hernández argues that Chicana feminist thought is "a unique component of postnational discourse," by virtue of "its critique of exclusion from both the U.S. feminist movement and the early Chicana/o movement" (14). While necessarily limited to key texts and scholars, the second chapter follows the historical development of Chicana/o Studies, tracing the transformation of scholarly and political thought from a nationalist perspective to a postnational one, demonstrating the importance of the critical *mestizaje* that has come from scholars like Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Cherrié Moraga, Emma Pérez, and Chela Sandoval, among others.

Hernández explores the "the excesses of border culture" in chapter 3, "Cultural Borderlands: The Limits of National Citizenship" (14). Here the author makes perhaps her boldest intellectual leap in departing from the more often deployed notion of the borderlands as a particularly creative (and thus potentially revolutionary) space, focusing instead on the many ways in which a borderland space is a highly regulated and heavily policed space of containment. Hernández puts Norma Alarcón's thoughts on the socially constructed nature of citizenship to good use here as she argues that we must not fall for the romance of the border "as an endless site of possibility" (91), when this kind of postmodernism only serves to mask some rather old-fashioned colonialist desires.

In chapter 4, "Chicana/o Fashion Codes: The Political Significance of Style,"

Hernández focuses on the “postmodern play of fashion codes as they facilitate a more direct relationship to identity formation within consumer culture” (14). It is in this chapter that the author exhibits the most conventional form of American Studies or cultural studies description and analysis. As someone who lived through the 1960s, I could not help but notice a less than thorough understanding of style and the meaning of certain clothing choices that were made at the time. An example of this might be Hernández quoting Angela Davis as she declares that the hats of the Chicano Brown Berets were borrowed from the Black Panthers. In fact, the beret has a long global history as a symbol of militarism and resistance. Has Hernández never seen photographs of Che Guevara in his iconic beret taken years before the Panthers were formed? This small lapse aside, the chapter does offer interesting links between clothing styles as constitutive of nationalistic normative expressions and representative of political consciousness and identity declarations in opposition to these norms.

While chapter 5, “Performativity in the Chicana/o Autobiography,” claims in its title a broad look at Chicana/o autobiography, Hernández actually focuses on the work of Richard Rodríguez. With insightful precision, she demonstrates what she calls his “performative display of shame” (151), and links this to his often-puzzling ideas around citizenship. Rodríguez’s work becomes an example of the way in which traditional autobiography in Chicana/o Studies has functioned as a “social text with exemplary and national features such as an idealized masculinity” (14). This chapter is simply one of the finest pieces I have read analyzing the weighty and poetic work of this important, if often reviled, public intellectual. Like the exemplary work of independent scholar (and no relation to Richard), Randy Rodríguez, in the 1990s, Hernández argues that Richard Rodríguez cannot be understood using traditional Chicana/o Studies methods of inquiry, and that his ideological deviations

require new postnationalist models of subject formation.

In chapter 6, “Denationalizing Chicana/o Queer Representations,” Hernández looks at the development of Chicana/o aesthetics. She explores the institutional social locations, historical contexts, movement politics, and intellectual arenas for aesthetics that have arisen specifically out of Chicana/o queer experiences. There is also a strong critique of various scholarly positions and theories from which Chicanas/os have drawn, but have proven inadequate for creating a new subject position within a transnational culture and often fail to arouse ideological support for anything beyond academic interventions.

At times, there is an overriding binary feel to the book’s arguments and an assumption of a rather facile progression from what she considers a time of political naiveté to one of transnational complexity in which the nation-state has ceased to hold any legitimate meaning. But, this is a bit too much like normative histories that recite facts in order to tell the story of progress, when in reality complexity has never been the sole domain of modernity or dare I say it, postmodernity. It has always existed—even in those earlier eras that young scholars now seem to view in rather uncomplicated ways. Perhaps they do this out of necessity in order to create useful comparisons between the past (a nationalist era), and the present (or post-whatever). While this may give short shrift to the process and to the people who were aware of the complications and contradictions even in the 1960s, it does facilitate an examination of ideological struggles in relation to differing political climates and cultural landscapes.

Yet, we arrive at something like “postnationalism” precisely because nationalism didn’t work for everyone and couldn’t contain or stop all the inconsistencies from leaking out and making an ambiguous mess. But,

you would need to talk to people who actually participated in those earlier movements to understand that the simplicity and naiveté we see from this time and space are themselves only a product of that which various media outlets and institutional practices have been willing to recognize and record. You would need to listen not just to their archived or published complaints about what went wrong, but to ask new questions and to tease out what was right—what drew them into the Chicana/o Movement in the first place? What was it that inspired not just ideological shifts, but also action? How were some Chicana/o activists already thinking in postnationalist terms—*even as* government infiltrators encouraged the most narrow of nationalist sentiments and promoted the most sexist and homophobic actors within the movement? Why were mainstream media and publishing outlets happily recording this less than complex thinking for the general (and very fearful) public as well as ignoring more transnational (and maybe communist/socialist) voices within these earlier movements?

While scholars like Hernández have been quite successful in challenging a static notion of what citizenship means as well as shaking up the idea that it happens within a bounded nation-state, we must beware that this does not always have the emancipatory consequences we desire. In the brutality of the global marketplace, citizenship can be bought and repackaged in a way that convinces some people to act against their own interests. In light of the horrific nationalism that has been so easily (re)created across generations and deployed in the current anti-immigrant debates—or the struggle to determine legitimate citizenship—we might want to reconsider the way in which postnationalism has been used to engender cultural shifts that support supranational economic organizations and transnational trade policies while hurting U.S. labor and poor people across the globe. We might want to think again how easily this comes back to the public forum in neonationalist, homophobic, sexist, and

racist terms.

Unlike many scholars in Chicana/o Studies, Hernández eschews a first-person, auto-ethnographical voice in favor of focused, analytical essay writing. She has a clear vision of what she wants to convey and argue. Thus she is quite successful at elucidating key theories and raising important questions. Far too rich to describe in a short review or to absorb in one reading, this book deserves much more study and discussion. I expect that many readers will appreciate the breadth of the scholarly work that Hernández addresses and be intrigued by the density of her theoretical deliberations.

Works Cited

Hernández, Ellie D. 2009. *Postnationalism in Chicano Literature and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.