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A few keys to understanding Spanish contemporary fiction, and five authors to—at least—enjoy it

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Essay by Antonio J. Rodríguez — Published on March 7, 2011

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I. From the Nocilla Generation to the Granta List: Where should we look now?

It is well known to observers of Spanish fiction that for about the last five years most debates on our emerging authors have taken into account the so-called “Nocilla Generation,” a journalistic label coined after the publication of Agustín Fernández Mallo’s *Nocilla Dream* (2007) and used to group some writers whose works experimented interestingly with elements from Anglo-Saxon (McCaffery’s Avant-pop, David Foster Wallace, George Saunders . . .) and pop culture that were not very common or appreciated in Spain at that time. Vicente Luis Mora, Agustín Fernández Mallo, Robert Juan Cantavella, Germán Sierra, Juan Francisco Ferré, Jorge Carrión, and Oscar Gual are some of the most recurrent names. These authors were looking for new ways to—once again—bury the good old realism, and at the same time raise—once more—questions on the art of storytelling. In doing this, one of the main features of their style would be fragmentarism.

Many essays and texts published by these (relatively) young authors created a necessary disruption in Spanish fiction’s most recent history. But problems came once these efforts changed from innovation to mere trendy gesture; that is, when their way of doing things became the *rule* and not the exception. In our literary market, this change in trend, combined with the recently published *Best of Young Spanish-Language Novelists* list by Granta (which is devoid of names linked to the “Nocilla” literature) and, even more importantly, what we may call the power vacuum brought about by the lack of a leader of American fiction (in Spanish eyes) after the death of *Infinite Jest*’s author, brings about one question: Where do we look now? Where do we find new references?

These are the questions floating right now in our literary atmosphere, which was made up, in recent years, by a geopolitical triangle of references made of American, Latin American, and Spanish fiction. The names we suggest throughout this essay refer to poetics that do not belong to traditional narratives nor show themselves as being part of particular trends. On the contrary, they are true innovators; they just may be responsible for the most powerful books published in Spain over the last months

II. The most influential essayist?

If we pay attention to the youngest generations of writers from Spain—those born in the ’80s—the first impression doesn’t seem to give any ground for optimism: Where on Earth are they? What has happened in the last ten or fifteen years—from the times of Ray Loriga, José Ángel Mañas, Alberto Olmos, and so on . . . all of them established authors in their early twenties? Is it true what they say about the Internet being responsible for the lack of interest towards the writing and reading of fiction?

Well, the specific feature of our youngest literary scene, as blogs and other digital media have already demonstrated, is that young adults don’t want to write novels; they want to be, that’s right, *cultural commentators*. This is quite a turn of events, since it’s likely that in years past nobody thought that an essay could be funnier than a good old fiction. Of course, there have been some post-structuralist theoreticians and recognized and popular contemporary thinkers (from Lipovetsky to Zizek, Bauman, Baudrillard . . .) that have helped reconfigure the rhetoric and discourses related to the *form* of the essay; but now contemporary Spain offers its own contribution to this change with the thinker who is most influential among the young Spanish readers and writers: Eloy Fernández Porta (b. 1974).

According to his publisher—Anagrama’s mythical founder Jorge Herralde—he is a strange cross between some kind of punk and Walter Benjamin. After publishing two short fiction collections, Fernández Porta started in 2007 an important project of cultural criticism, comprised of —up to now—three books: *Afterpop*, *Homo Sampler* (2008), and *€@0\$* (2010). Whereas *Afterpop*—a concept derived from the work of literary critic Larry McCaffery—was about the relationships between high and low cult culture today, and whereas *Homo Sampler* analyzed new ways of dealing with time in the afterpop era, the final book in this triad examines the relationships between love and capitalism. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Fernández Porta’s perspective is aligned with the Marxist tradition. Instead of—for example—Erich Fromm, we should look for his predecessors in authors like Eva Illouz, Pierre Bourdieu, or even Gary Becker, keeping always in mind that his objects of study range from the semiotics of Ashley Madison—the online dating agency organizing marital infidelities *exclusively* for people already in a relationship—to the spectacle of Paris Hilton, which he compares in his book to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

Now just forget the question—sometimes asked with a slovenly tone by all of us cultural journalists—of how the author had the outrageous idea of matching up such references from very different worlds. Fortunately for us, Fernández Porta—possibly the only Spanish-language thinker with the ability to make his readers roar with laughter—has sublimated the high and low divide. Rest assured that, paradoxically, his theme is serious. On the sentiments’ market—or rather, in an *commodity and hyper-consumerist*

culture that turn people into things—, are married people undervalued? Do they have more sex than those who believe that our era is at the forefront of sexual liberty? These and many more questions about love in our time are brilliantly considered in €@0\$.

III. Gothic horror, gorgeous writing

Fernández Porta published *Caras B (B Sides)*—his second short fiction collection—in 2001, the same year that Javier Calvo (b. 1973) made his narrative debut with *Risas enlatadas—Canned laughter*. Both books—written by two very young authors at the time—would become the origin of the group of writers now known as Afterpop or the Nocilla Generation. Since 2001 there's been no doubt that Javier Calvo has been one of Spain's most prolific and strongest writers; he has to his name four novels and two short fiction collections. The end of Calvo's obsession with postmodern culture and a certain sort of experimentalism came for good in 2007, when he published *Mundo maravilloso*—translated into English as *Wonderful World*. Three years later, Calvo published *Corona de Flores* (“Flower Crown,” Mondadori) and *Suomenlinna* (“Alpha Decay”), a radical and very positive change in topics and style.

At the end of the day, every reason we may give you for reading *Corona de Flores* will pale in comparison to the fact that the prose is simply superb. As the very good connoisseur of Victorian and 19th-century novel that he is, Calvo aped Stevenson's transfer of the gothic from the country to the city with *Jekyll & Hyde* by bringing the best gothic and crime tradition to the city he adores: Barcelona. Now more than ever, Calvo's influences make sense: from Charles Dickens—whose *A Tale of Two Cities* creeps up in the very beginning of *Corona de Flores*—to Mary Shelley or Conan Doyle, but also thinkers like Julia Kristeva, whose idea of *abjection* could not be more present here, or Edmund Burke's *sublime* notion: everything in order to offer a colorful metaphor about the relationships between rationality and feelings and political power and citizenship, plus an examination of the cultural effects of technology.

Suomenlinna works in a similar way. It's the story of a troubled and difficult teenager called Mirrka, who lives in fortress-like Suomenlinna neighborhood, near Helsinki. *Suomenlinna* deals with black metal, the survival of Germanic paganism, and, as a corollary, the belief that our time is not quite as much Enlightenment's heir as we might think; it shows traces of esoteric and sinister scenarios that the author has been using since *Los ríos perdidos de Londres* (“London's Lost Rivers,” 2005). No other Spanish writer, I dare say, could believe that such a miserable place could provide such a story.

IV. Could monogamy become cool? (Yes, of course it could . . .)

In *Del sentire* (“Sensology”), Italian philosopher Mario Perniola applies the concept of ideology to the universe of feelings; so, recalling Fernández Porta's latest book's theme, we might think that, in today's world, the idea of liquid love, as presented by Zygmunt Bauman among other thinkers, has become a commonplace.

This is not completely true. Although it's clear that nowadays most essayists tend to experience a certain kind of wishful thinking on the new, liberated (and hypothetical) sexual order after May 1968, which leads them to defend new types of relationships, the real challenge seems to be defending new interpretations of old types of relationships. On this subject, Gabriela Wiener is the best answer. In 2008 Wiener published her first book, called *Sexografías*, in which she showed herself to be a follower of the Gonzo journalism tradition: here were chronicles of her first experience in a swingers club or in an egg donation clinic, a meeting with the pornstar Nacho Vidal or a visit to the terrible jails of Peru. A year later Wiener published *Nueve lunas* (“Nine moons,” Mondadori), in which she recounted her experiences during her pregnancy. This book dispels any doubt about Wiener being one of the best writers under 35 in the Spanish language, although her non-fictional writing doesn't make it easy for reviewers wishing to come up with new canons.

One thing is clear, though: even if she is a cross between a literary writer as a journalist, when all is said and done her work is undoubtedly literature. Her books are beautiful explorations of the question of subjectivity. Wiener knows perfectly well how egotistic literature works, how to rethink female literature by going beyond the commonplaces, how to write about being married without sounding like she's from the 19th century or omitting the worst details of a relationship. (While male thinkers that write about emotional life under capitalism tend to turn to essay and abstractions, it would seem that female writers give to their texts a more autobiographical turn—think Beatriz Preciado, Virginie Despentes, and so on). Wiener is one of the strongest writers in today's (male or female) young Hispanic literature. On top of that, she is also part of a new *literature of migration* that takes place in Spain: it is well known that the United States, Great Britain, and other European countries have produced very interesting cultural flows based on the work of writers that came from different countries and languages (Cuban-American fiction, Asian-American, Puerto Rican-American in the U.S., and people like Hanif Kureishi, Vikram Seth, Kazuo Ishiguro, and others in the United Kingdom). But the immigration of content that James Wood talked about took a different turn in Spain. Inasmuch as most big Spanish-language publishing houses are in Spain, there is a very important number of writers from Latin America that have moved to our country: Santiago Rocagliolo, Rodrigo Fresán, Jaime Rodríguez, Patricio Pron, among many others, all of them coming from South America, and Gabriela Wiener is a fine example of this cultural flow that has an impact on Spanish literature.

V. How to rejuvenate as time goes by? A very very brief story of Luis Magrinyà lit

Like Calvo, Luis Magrinyà (b. 1960) started by reading 19th-century masterpieces. This author, as he has showed in his work as director of a publishing house specializing in classics, has always been very interested in the works of Thackeray, James, Hardy, Dickens, the Russians . . . But oddly enough, his first book—*Los aéreos*, 1993—had a more classical feeling than his latest one, and this undeniably owes a lot to Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. In 1993 Magrinyà was a promising writer who debuted under the strong influence of his idols, writing short stories that lacked any references to time and space in an age in which urban realism was the trend. Almost twenty years later, after having published the exceptional *Intrusos y huéspedes* (“Intruders and Hosts,” 2005)—in which MDMA (better known as Ecstasy) might have been one of the main characters—he published *Habitación doble* (“Double Room,” 2010). *Habitación doble* is a narrative artifact that explores simultaneity in short stories organized in pairs. In an interview, the author explained thus his will to try new things: “literature needs a narrative experience: you read one page and another, not all the book in only one look as you can do with a picture or a sculpture.” In addition, with this book Magrinyà demonstrated that he can easily combine psychological, intelligent, and lyrical writing with impeccable scripts and outlines. Magrinyà tells stories about a dreadful middle-aged publisher, her skills at business when it comes to hire new authors, and her affair with an attractive young musician, or about the father of the butcher of Milwaukee's human slaughterhouse. Or another one about a dealer hooking up with an old friend in a little village. He likes to joke and call himself a new representative of social realism, which would not talk about the working class but the bourgeois bohemian. Another obsession of his relates to recent uses of autofiction for personal vanity: “I don't like the common temptations of autobiography or autofiction, that offers a self-portrait as photogenic as possible,” he states.

VI. The new girl on the block

Probably the most-read—and -reviewed—independently published book in 2010 has been *Las teorías salvajes* (“The Wild Theories”), written by the young Pola Oloixarac, from Argentina. Oloixarac was not only the big literary discovery of the year, she also helped redefine the public image of the writer in Spanish publishing. Oloixarac arguably wrote a kind of *bestseller* for minorities. As an academic novel (it’s not difficult to think that writers and characters, such as David Lodge, David Lurie, David Kepesch, Kingsley Amis, Roberto Bolaño, or Elizabeth Costello might be some of the author’s references), *Las teorías salvajes* is about the experience of undergrads in the Argentinean university, the broken hopes of socialism, the emotional and intellectual relationships between teachers and their students, the sexual, emotional, and intellectual relationship of a couple of nerds, and the emotion that comes with the discovery of a beloved author (the same pleasure experienced by the first reviewers in Spain who made Oloixarac “the next big thing”). For this reader, however, the strongest aspect of this story is the sensibility with which it has been written. In other words, Oloixarac manages to pull down Andre Gide’s maxim, which assured us that “*it’s with noble sentiments that bad literature is written,*” so much so that one begins to believe that if the best literature of 20th century was written from pain, the next hundred years might very well provide writers a challenge to play with aesthetics of innocence, naivety, and happiness. Or maybe we are fed up with neurotic writers and now we want other stuff. And when we think of Oloixarac’s potential to shift the debate, we should bear in mind that Argentinean literature has already recently experienced a significant change of paradigm, when the likes César Aira, Héctor Libertella, and the recently disappeared Fogwill fought for recognition in the mid ’80s. Now many Spanish reviewers have good reasons to believe that Argentina will continue to be a strong source of change.

Antonio J. Rodríguez lives in Madrid, Spain, and contributes regularly to various cultural publications. He also runs the blog [Ibrahím B.](#)

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