Baron, Guy

Reseña de "Cuba and the Tempest. Literature and Cinema in the Time of Diaspora" de Eduardo González

Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
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From Darío’s “El triunfo de Calibán” (1898) to Fernández Retamar’s *Caliban* (1971), Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* has often been used to analyse modern Latin American culture, the figure of Ariel being used by Darío as metaphor for the cultured Hispanic while the uncouth Yankee is represented by Caliban. For Fernández Retamar, however, Caliban represents the Cuban Martian project of developing a specific national identity to undermine, as Ricardo Castells points out, the many “assumptions that shape the region’s history and politics” (Castells 1995:171).

In Eduardo González’s remarkable book, *Cuba and the Tempest: Literature and Cinema in the Time of Diaspora*, Shakespeare’s work once again serves as cultural referent or literary precedent but this time with an altogether different tone. Here, in an analysis of work by three Cuban authors, *The Tempest* plays a part along with myriad other literary antecedents, from classical Greek literature through Byron, Poe, Freud, Nietzsche, Martí, Joyce, Hitchcock and Almodóvar. But, of course, as in *The Tempest*, the themes of power and kingship, servitude, nationhood and belonging all resonate, as well as the theme of colonialism, with, for González, Caliban representing the repressed native of the island and Prospero the Imperial invader. These themes all play their part in Cuban cultural and literary studies but as the author says, this book is not about Cuba as a nation or a book about politics but it concerns the “condition of being Cuban at home and abroad,” a book about “lives and afterlives” (p. 2).

The book is divided in three parts, examining “European and post-colonial drama of Romantic literary authorship, in overt or covert reference to Cuba” (p. 3), in the works of two émigrés, Guillermo Cabrera Infante (b. 1929) and Antonio Benítez Rojo (1931-2005), and Leonardo Padura Fuentes (b. 1955), who still lives and works on the island. But this is no ordinary examination as the book is awash with so many literary references and textual parallels that remove the analysed works from their Cuban settings, thus creating a strong sense of deprovinciality. Cuba as “Repeating Island,” repeating itself across temporal and geographical boundaries in a complex and elaborate analysis where both classical and modern references serve to illustrate a temporal conflation that reflects the styles of the works being analysed. This is carefully thought-out writing.
Thus, on the one hand, the Sibyl may be seen holding her Mummy-muse office in the Reader-Writer collaborative affairs inside the renewal zone of elongated generations Time (p. 11).

Chapter One analyses the story “La Habana para un infante difunto” (1979) by Cabrera. González speaks of the work and its Borgesian thematic—the “temporality of authorship,” a work that represents the authorship of self-myth-making. Cleverly he shows how the work involves both reader and writer in this temporal collusion, a cross-over between the conflation and at the same time separation of reader and writer. References twist and turn from the classical to the modern, from Odysseus to Ulysses with a subtle connectivity that unties and unpicks all the threads before putting them back together in a different form. It has the same “manic velocity” of Cabrera’s work, the work he is describing.

In Chapter Two González describes Cabrera’s tale “La voz de la tortuga” in which a poor man, in search of fortune in order to marry his sweetheart, dies while attempting to copulate with a large sea tortoise. A tale of “catastrophe and misplaced lust” (p. 17), the author argues that the incidents and motifs of the tale are the same as those of myths and folk tales where events are often humanly impossible (the man copulating with the sea tortoise), but created as plausible acts, thus creating myths. Using a marvellous mix of techniques from scientific explanations of the mating habits of sea turtles to a comparison with Lewis Carroll’s “The Lobster Quadrille,” González examines the parody at the heart of Cabrera’s story. It is this kind of sophisticated examination that fills the book with interest beyond the provinciality of the purely Cuban—to a state of positive transnationalisation.

The book is so rich in references and word-play, however, that sometimes one is in danger of losing the reader to externalities and the works themselves then become lost in the excess. But the power of the work cannot be ignored, such is the versatility of González’s writing, suggesting a literary mathematician at work and one who is more than happy with long division and the creating and solving of puzzles.

As he continues his analysis of “La voz de la tortuga,” he brings in a critical biography of Cabrera Infante himself, referring to a speech the writer made in Tenerife in 1984 in which he talks about his grandparents (his grandfather tragically killed his grandmother and then committed suicide), and he skilfully links this speech to the Greta Garbo film Queen Christina (1933). Perhaps the detailed analysis of the film is a little out of place, too detailed and unnecessary, but there is no denying the skill
of the author.

In Chapter Five he examines Antonio Benítez Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* in terms of the construct *Peoples of the Sea* developed within the book and seen as a resistance to geographic and historical placement, one which creates a “fable of legitimation,” in Benítez Rojo’s terms, that is different from dominant, Western narrative. Via Carpentier, González argues that these People of the Sea have created what he describes as a “memory apparatus of diaspora” and that the foundations for Benítez Rojo’s work are found in Carpentier’s *El siglo de las luces*. This of course goes back to Ulysses, the importance of that paradigm being noted by González, who never fails to discover the literary origins of the work he is discussing.

In an examination of Cabrera Infante’s *La Habana para un infante difunto*, the author describes the phalansterian nature of the promiscuous tenements Cabrera Infante describes and how this promiscuity spills over into the movie theatres.

The analysis of Cabrera Infante’s work is dense and complex but richly exuberant and all-encompassing. Using Freud he examines Cabrera’s fascination with blood, menstruation and defloration and then moves swiftly to a comparison with Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945) before more detailed psychoanalysis of Hitchcock’s first U.S. movie, *Rebecca* (1940) and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Morella*, via a lecture made by Cabrera Infante in Havana in 1962 on the film *Vertigo*, that Cabrera (in his role as film reviewer under the pseudonym G. Caín) had watched on three successive nights in 1959.

The point of all this it seems is to reach out beyond and to escape Cuban provinciality, despite the book’s title, which is perhaps a little misleading as the book deals as much with the Other, where the Other is seen as Western literary influences, as with the Cuban work itself.

At times the intertextual referencing appears excessive. In successive paragraphs González moves swiftly from references to Cabrera’s film reviews on *North by Northwest, Psycho* and *Rebecca*, to *Más allá del olvido*, an Argentine film from 1956 by Hugo del Carril, to Norman Mailer’s 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe, to Plato’s character Phaedrus—all in the course of three pages (pp. 119-121). The diasporic intent is obvious but the reader could be left bewildered by such a furious literary journey.

However, this is undoubtedly a major work by a major critic whose talents are unbounded and whose voice is allowed to roam freely across temporal, geographic and intellectual boundaries to places where analysis
of Cuban literature has rarely ventured. It is thus a very important book and one that starts to fill a large chasm in Cuban literary studies.

Guy Baron
University of Nottingham
United Kingdom
Guy.Baron@nottingham.ac.uk

References


From about 1868 to 1898, the economy, labor, and political status were among the principal themes of discussion in Puerto Rico. Too frequently, scholars exploring these developments frame their work around an “insider” perspective that leans heavily or exclusively on Spanish colonial archival sources. In contrast, Puerto Rico en la mirada extranjera enables investigators to consider the “outsider” angle through the eyes of consular agents stationed on the island. A non-Hispanic gaze of Puerto Rican affairs during the last third of the nineteenth century, the dispatches penned by French, British and U.S. consular agents broaden the scope of primary materials on this critical era of the island’s trajectory.

Almost half of the reports included in the section, “Economy and Society” were composed by U.S. officials, a clear indication of the growing mercantile and strategic expansion of the North American republic in the Antillean “back yard.” This part sheds light on natural resources, agricultural exports, transportation systems, public works, climatic conditions, natural calamities, public health, finance, maritime movement,