

González Echevarría, Roberto. *Cuban Fiestas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Print. 339pp.

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Over the course of his extraordinary career, Roberto González Echevarría has allowed us to understand anew the Baroque, the Neo-Baroque, the Spanish Golden Age, Alejo Carpentier, Severo Sarduy, the relationships between literature and power, and the visible and invisible webs that link Cuban, Caribbean, Latin American and Hispanic subjects. In *Cuban Fiestas*, he gets a chance to put together a spectacular lineup: there is trenchant critique on major works from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries; intimate facts and public memories of major and seemingly minor events; a study of fiestas (he does not italicize it) in Cuban films and in North American films on Cuba, and a chapter on Cuban baseball (a game that “requires a special time and place, deliberately and explicitly set off from normal time and everyday spaces” (182). And there is also the joy of a new encounter with some of the materials he has covered in other books: Carpentier’s Afro-Cuban ballet “La rebambaramba,” the eternal fiesta that is Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres*, and the many delights of Severo Sarduy’s *De donde son los cantantes*. At the end of each chapter, González Echevarría includes autobiographical vignettes on many events that have marked him—part of a method he calls working by “apposition,” not really intending to give a sense of unity or direct connection between the autobiographical elements and the literary analyses. Some of these vignettes are longer pieces—one, dated November 28, 1978, has nine pages—and they take specific dates as points from which to read a life. As he himself states, one can celebrate a fiesta, but one is always watching oneself as the fiesta is celebrated. The mood here is never detached, yet it allows a certain kind of distance that is conducive to an important form of release. A celebration of all the good that literature and the study of culture can bring into the collective sense of self, I want to think of González Echevarría here as “despojándose,” which would roughly translate as “unburdening” oneself. And this is why; above all, *Cuban Fiestas* seems to me a very generous book: new vistas and new approaches towards work he has covered in the past, as these works can still yield new insights onto Cuban culture.

It is a deceptively straightforward book, born out of an idea that, like all the good ones, proves to be richer the more one proceeds reading, and thinking about it. Yes, Cubans are *fiesteros*, *jaraneros*, they enjoy *choteo*. They dance, they make jokes, they tend to render drama into levity while never losing their flair for drama or, even, melodrama. González Echevarría studies *fiestas* “to probe Cuban culture and art and, through it, the elusive core of my own sense of Cuban culture and understanding of Cuban literature” (10). He explains why he does not italicize “fiesta” throughout the book (neither will I, in this review): he wants the word to keep its own particular semantic connotations—at a certain remove from the English universe, where *fiesta* opens up different meanings to the word. Taking off from those almost self-evident structural principles, a very unsettling reality emerges.

Fiestas are powerful events where identity, social realities, history and community are dismantled, deconstructed, and reconstituted. They “transform violence but do not diffuse it; they tend to deflect it through ritualistic practices” (160). At the heart of the fiesta, there is a notion of time. The fiesta is a “mixed cultural practice, pure in some distant past that it often constructs but shattered by time and history” (4). As González Echevarría is well aware, there is a tension here with carnival, but there are important differences that he also explains: for Bakhtin, the medieval laughter generated by carnival starts to dissolve with the appearance of the modern state. In Cuba and in Latin America, this sense of disappearance needs to be nuanced, because that “lost” tradition is still resonant in the fiesta. Thus, nineteenth-century writers in Cuba were aware of the presence of a kind of medieval laughter around them. Taking Domingo del Monte as a point of departure for the study of Cuban literature, González Echevarría rescues *costumbrismo* not as a movement that celebrated all things Cuban, but rather as one that took into account the elements that were fissuring Cuban society. Although in later years the *costumbristas* were read chiefly because of their “patriotic iconography”, González Echevarría uncovers here a more disquieting movement. His reading of Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s *Francisco* views the novel not as a celebration but as a warning—a kind of study of the different elements that impossibly coalesce in Cuban society. The same can be said of *Cecilia Valdés*, the great Cuban epic novel that reveals culture organized by a system that is demonically uncontrolled. (Parenthetically, this argument was also made by Reinaldo Arenas in his orgiastic parody *La loma del ángel*). In his study of the prints by Frédéric Mialhe, Landaluze, as well as in the art produced around the culture of cigars, González Echevarría sees “a barely deflected or sublimated violence by which relations of power are negotiated symbolically” (106).

The twentieth-century fiesta begins in the 1920s. At this time, Cuban writers, musicians and artists created the Afro-Cuban movement—validating what was also being “discovered” in Europe during and after the Avant-Garde. González Echevarría pauses at the right moments in order to explore this tradition and its after-effects: there is a wonderful reading here of the relatively humorless Jorge Mañach essay *Indagación del choteo* and, of course, a close engagement with the work of Carpentier and Lezama Lima, writers that understood the importance of the fiesta throughout their work. Indeed, Lezama turns language into the constant excuse for a fiesta—an aesthetics that is also present in Severo Sarduy. An interesting detail structures part of González Echevarría’s reading of Cabrera Infante, one that I think is important to note (at least I had not seen it before): the constant obsession with social climbing in *Tres tristes tigres*, and throughout Cabrera Infante’s work. Within the fiesta, class structures are undergoing enormous changes.

The last chapters of the book focus on films, with particular attention paid to Cuban pre-revolutionary productions like *El romance del palmar* (1938) and *Maria la O* (1948). Their melodramatic plot lines were condemned after the Revolution by critics such as Mirta Aguirre, part of a facile dismissing of the genre by the left in Latin America in the 1960s. In the case of the American films that González Echevarría discusses, fiestas become the sites for simulacra: their notion of the genuine is based “on artificiality, on using already codified signs to express Cubanness” (233). *Weekend in Havana* (1941), as well as *Holiday in Havana* (1949) exploit the nightclub clichés, while at the same time they codify a sense of glamour whose excess later spilled over onto the figure of the guerrilla fighter and Revolution, in films such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather II* (1974), or Richard Lester’s *Cuba* (1979), or Sidney Pollack’s *Havana* (1990). Of these three, the latter one fares better, and avoids the gaffes and the implausible “factoids” of the other two. Staging the fiesta with the inevitable historical backdrop of revolution, these films steer away from the Hollywood productions

that used Cuba for a different kind of setting. They were produced in the “new Hollywood” (or the “dismantled Hollywood) of the 1970s, and they were driven by a desire for “immediacy” and relevance vis a vis the older products. This is why the celebration of the fiesta that González Echevarría explores in a later film such as *The Mambo Kings* (1992) feels so different—the historical backdrop is suffused with nostalgia.

As for Cuban films produced after the Revolution of 1959, “[t]he more authoritarian the state became, the more destabilizing to the established order it found the fiesta to be— unless it sponsored and controlled it” (250). These words refer to the government’s banning of the documentary *P.M.* (1961) and the acts of censorship that followed it, but they are somewhat symptomatic of the general tenor of the fiesta in the post-revolutionary universe. In this meticulously researched chapter, two important readings bracket the discussion, one is *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1967), which begins with a shot someone fires during a street fiesta in Havana, and the other *La última cena* (1976), which is a dour account of a fiesta given in the nineteenth century by the owner of a sugar mill, during the course of which he grants freedom to his slaves. Taking note of these films as representative of the pedagogical and political aims of an institutionalized Revolution, the author underscores that a better account of the fiesta can be found in Enrique Pineda Barnet’s *La bella del Alhambra* (1989). Other films that González Echevarría explores are Humberto Solas’s *Cecilia Valdés* (1981), Gutierrez Alea’s *Fresa y chocolate* (1993) and *Guantanamera* (1995), as well as Gerardo Chijona’s *Un paraíso bajo las estrellas* (1999). Of all these, Chijona’s is the one closest in spirit to the kind of fiesta that González Echevarría talks about.

The last chapter, “A Drum is Calling,” notes more contemporary events, and serves as an unsettling conclusion to the volume. It is really a meditation on death as fiesta, and while it does not exclude the anticipation for one’s own, impending, ultimate rumba, the main subject here is the eventual (or, perhaps, “always-already”) death of Fidel Castro as denouement. It is an interesting chapter in many ways—not all of which are immediately obvious. It is a curious return to Carpentier, evident for me in the chapter’s title, as well as in its validation of a certain theory of Cuban culture that Carpentier also constructed as a mixture of rationality, myth and ritual. The three important discourses here are James Frazier (*The Golden Bough*), Freud (*Totem and Taboo*), and Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialects of Enlightenment*. It is an explosive combination: Freud, Frazier, Adorno and Horkheimer represent not only myth, psychoanalysis and state formation, but they also allow us to understand the relationship between religious and social time. Placed here at the end of the book, they allow us to return to a certain kind of origin that is always in the present—within the material records that culture in itself produces: a fitting emblem for a book where the scholar faces up to his social and literary engagements on so many interlocking levels.