

Loss, Jacqueline. *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Print. 254 pp.

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The discovery of a Cuban collective imaginary filled with all things Russian displaces the endlessly revisited Cuban American cultural relation, and reveals a reality that may still cause some discomfort in the more traditional circuits of Cuban studies. As Jacqueline Loss's *Dreaming in Russian* demonstrates, Cuba and the Soviet Union's ideological and economic relations have been carved with an intense emotional and cultural connection.

Most of Loss's work focuses on the bicultural condition, specifically in Cuba, as well as in other geographical and metaphorical borders. This book full of insights and provocative ideas, inaugurates a new and timely field of inquiry in contemporary Cuban Studies. In this sense, *Dreaming in Russian* goes against the grain of the suffocating image that portrays Cuba as a country culturally doomed to undergo the fate of insularism. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Russia's influence over Cuba has created affective and cultural bonds that have gone beyond the mere political and economical influence. It also shows that any serious study about the cultural production of the last three decades should take into account the Soviet legacy.

The book's large scope is manifold. It is the first archive of contemporary Cuban cultural production of Soviet influence. This by itself is enough of an accomplishment, since the book maps a previously uncharted territory and reveals the presence of a vast array of cultural production dealing with the impact caused by the longstanding and complex relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The richness of the book also resides in the variety of genres that it discusses: fiction, as well as non-fiction, poetry, visual arts, film, popular culture, theatre, institutional discourses, exhibits, and cultural policies, among others. The diversity and quantity of materials included in the book serves to prove two major points. First, it shows the pervasiveness and importance of Soviet cultural influence in contemporary Cuba, especially for the generation of the seventies. Second, it shows that Soviet influence has permeated Cuban culture and ideology beyond the political boundaries.

Third, the book breaks with the dichotomy between the cultural bond between Cuba and the USA, by adding one more cultural and ideological dimension.

Dreaming in Russian does not follow a master theoretical narrative. Instead, it lets the works speak for themselves, and this approach contributes to its originality and its complexity. By drawing on a very thorough contextual research, the book offers an intellectual history of the period and a highly contrasted reading of each one of the pieces. Loss unveils lost moments of history and, by piecing them together, she creates an organic narrative which becomes the testimony of an epoch. The author looks at the complexity of the emotional attachment to the past, yet she never falls into the temptation of fetishizing or mourning it. Of the many fine insights offered by the book, the most important is the claim that the cultural production at hand shows a full range of emotional reactions concerning the Soviet influence, none of which shows a naive nostalgia for the ideologies of the Soviet Union.

Dreaming in Russian investigates different questions, specifically around the experience of hybridity and memorialization. It is exceptional for being one of the few books that, while talking about subjectivity and culture, does not rehearse questions of national identity and discourses about transculturation. Hybridity is seen as an experience that can challenge identity politics outside and inside the island. Chapter 1, for example, deals with cultural production by the offspring of mixed marriages. Polina Martínez Shvietsova's performances and short stories represent the uncomfortable position of the subject without roots. The documentary *Todas iban a ser reinas* directed by Gustavo Perez, focuses on Russian women who were once brought to Cuba where they were actually married to Cuban men. Whereas Martínez Shvietsova's syncretism reveals a space out of place, the women who were interviewed in *Todas iban a ser reinas* did not identify themselves as Cubans, nor did they feel at ease anywhere else. Loss argues that these women are the victims of the historical catastrophe of utopia and the unequal ties between both countries. Russian women are also victims of Soviet's ideological and economic influence over Cuba. Conversely they also represent a rich transnational past.

Chapter 2 analyzes what Loss calls "the queerness of the Soviet-Cuban union," a metaphor that describes cultural representations resulting from relationships between Soviets and Cubans without biological ties or emotional connections. The author neatly ties this idea with Pedro Manuel Gonzalez Reynosa, also known as La Ruse Roxy Raja, a drag performer,

who represents what Loss calls the “translucent” (a queer extension of the notion of transculturation). Once more, the book bypasses the notion of cultural identity and interprets the performance as an allegory of the return of the past in the form of pastiche. Gonzalez Reinoso retaliates against Soviet’s former of control over Cuba, by materializing the worst examples of the Soviet memorabilia that have come back to the island. This performance is also a parody of the state discourse of memorialization and official commemorations of Soviet heroic figures. The chapter also focuses on Ernesto Pérez Castillo’s story “Bajo la bandera rosa” and on his novel *Haciendo las cosas mal*. These two narratives show that, as Iván de la Nuez argues, the fall of the Berlin Wall not only symbolized the end of socialism. It also made visible the failure of capitalism. The author makes a similar argument about Pérez Castillo whose work admits to the end of Cuba’s utopian dream, yet also shows that capitalism is not the solution. *Dreaming in Russian* argues that *Haciendo las cosas mal* is made of interrelated stories of “cross-fertilized” subjects whose lives are mediated by the relationship between the former Soviet Union and Cuba.

Chapter 3 describes another type of spatial movement by focusing on travel narratives. Most of the works show the incongruence between the real Russia experienced by travelers, and the Cuban official portrayal of Russia. For example, in *Siberiana* Jesús Díaz represents the alienation of an Afro-Cuban subject in Russia, who is both sexually objectified, and denigrated as a stranger. *Las cuatro fugas de Manuel* also written by Díaz shows the incommensurability between universalism, and national origins, or particularities. Antonio Armentero’s *País que no era* also represent the Soviet prejudices against Cuban subjects who travelled to Russia for work or academic reasons. An important part of the chapter deals with José Manuel Prieto, one of the paradigmatic authors of the Soviet influenced Cuban literature. Like many other students and intellectuals of his generation, Prieto moved to the Soviet Union as a result of the academic exchanges between Cuba and Russia. In 1986 he graduated from Novosibirsk with a degree in engineering, and unlike most of his peers, he decided to stay in Russia where he spent the next 12 years. Most of Prieto’s characters are Russian travelers, who like him, inhabit several worlds simultaneously, but Cuba is hardly ever present or mentioned in his works. For example, in *Treinta días en Moscú* the narrator is assimilated into Russian culture and his origins are not relevant for the plot. Emilio García Montiel is a poet who also spent some years in Russia, but like many poets of his generation, he understands literature in a universal fashion, and thinks that national archives undermine

and limit its potential. For all of them, travelling opens the possibility to understand the world, in ways that go beyond ideological concerns. In this regard, Loss argues that García Montiel's work goes "beyond prescribed internationalism and is manifested through his traveling without any attachment to political commitment."

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on Russian memorabilia, and the ways in which artists represent and relate to them. These two chapters tease out the nostalgic relationship that some of these artists entertain vis-à-vis odd commodities. It shows that for artists from the seventies the value of these commodities goes beyond ideological or material concerns. The case of the *muñequitos rusos* exemplifies the contradictory and heated reactions that some of these objects produce. The *muñequitos rusos* is a slang word to refer to the various televised Russian cartoons of the seventies and eighties. Aurora Jacome, a blogger born during the seventies, created a blog in order to bring back those cartoons, whose disappearance from Cuban TV transformed them in cult *animés*. While some members of this generation, such as independent blogger Yoany Sánchez have harshly criticized these cartoons for what they symbolize, others have "developed a sentimental relationship with them," Loss argues. The author also claims that this fascination with the *muñequitos rusos* eliminates old patterns of identification such as the old bourgeoisie or the Afro-Cuban community. While I agree with Loss, I am also wondering if this fascination is not the product of the type of restorative nostalgia that Ricardo Pérez criticizes in his poetry.

The parody or outright criticism of these objects as seen in Rubén Rodríguez's short story "17 abstractos de una agenda", Gertrudis Rivalta's *Quinceañera con Kremlin* or Estebán Insausti's documentary *Existen*, create relations of alienation and detachment. For example, *Existen* is a recontextualization or parody of the two exhibits about Cuba that took place in Havana during the period of alliance between Russia and Cuba. Loss cites the parodic works of artists active during the 80s, an epoch announcing the promise of a perestroika, which only lasted for a very short period. Among these artists were René Francisco, Glexis Novoa, and José Angel Toirac, who were part of the visual arts movement of the 80s. Chapter 5 ends with an profound analysis of Antonio José Ponte's story "Corazón de skitalietz", where Loss shows once again the split subjectivity of a Cuban generation educated in Russia, a country that has abandoned its offspring, but whose language irremediably haunts their writing.

The book closes with an analysis of the most recent official acts of memorialization of the Soviet experience, and one of them was the 2010 Book Fair of Cuba, dedicated to commemorate Russia as a guest of honor. This event leads the author to claim that “Cuba persists in many ways in a performance of a Soviet theme park.” Loss also suggests that Cubans entertain a nostalgic fascination with Soviet commodities, albeit they are also critical of the Soviet ideology that is still ingrained in their country. I believe that this contradiction shows that Cubans are also heirs of the postmodern condition. Thus, while it is true that their ironic, parodic, and critical gestures show an inconformity with the Soviet ideology, it is also a fact that a real political engagement can never spring from a nostalgic attachment to the past, be it purely sentimental or restorative. Loss ends the book with a very similar remark by short story writer Yoss. This reference also points to Loss’s skepticism about the cultural critique of Soviet artifacts. Yet, this last remark does not imply that the book should be read as a political interpretation of an era. This type of reading would obliterate its complexity and miss its main point, namely, that the Soviet Union still populates Cuban’s memories.