

Imagining Independence

Radost Rangelova

Gettysburg College

Acosta Cruz, María. *Dream Nation: Puerto Rican Culture and the Fictions of Independence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014. Pp. 222. ISBN 978-0-8135-6546-0.

Dream Nation is María Acosta Cruz's insightful exploration of what she terms "the fictions of independence" – the ubiquity of independence discourse in Puerto Rican literary and cultural production, which stands in stark contrast to the preferences that Puerto Ricans have demonstrated for different political options – commonwealth or statehood – as evidenced at the polls. Acosta Cruz argues that this cultural discourse of sovereignty is enabled by a "dream nation" – a literary trope as much as an affective symbol – associated with nostalgia, heroism, reconstructions of the past, and desired yet unrealized independence.

The book begins by introducing the fundamental questions that guide the subsequent chapters, key of which is why and how independence continues to be imagined as indispensable for Puerto Rican culture and national identity. It then proceeds to contextualize and problematize the issue, interrogating the ways in which the "dream nation" has been sustained by the continuous production and reproduction of heroic figures and key historical events, analyzing some of the reasons (both internal and external to the independence discourse) why voters on the island have rejected independence. The chapter situates the case of Puerto Rico in relation not only to the independence of other Hispanic Caribbean nations, but also to the Francophone Caribbean, taking a much-needed broader comparative approach in the contextualization of political ideologies and social realities in the region.

Chapter 1 argues that, for over a century, the Puerto Rican intellectual and cultural community has reaffirmed the fictions of independence and has constructed the "dream nation" in a number of ways – from thematic treatments of the issue of the island's political status, to its privileged position in journals like *Guaiana*, and at educational and cultural institutions like the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, the Puerto Rican Atheneum, and the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Acosta Cruz notes that the fictions of independence continue to be reproduced nowadays through the reaffirmation of a literary canon that shares the independence ideal. She examines in detail Mercedes López-Baralt's 2004 anthology *Literatura Puertorriqueña del Siglo XX. Antología*, and effectively

demonstrates how a number of elements of the compilation – the focus and the tone of the introduction, the themes of many of the texts, the authors’ political engagement, and the reaffirmation of the Spanish language as a marker of cultural belonging – reimagine the literary “dream nation” and reestablish it as the leading impulse of *independentista* thought in Puerto Rican culture.

Chapter 2 focuses on writers (José Luis González, Rosario Ferré and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá) that have challenged orthodox independence ideology in creative ways. The section on González uncovers the multiple ways in which he strays from traditional independence discourse by criticizing its tendency towards (white, conservative, landowning) *criollismo*, the idealization of the landscape and of the figure of the *jíbaro*, and underscores his nuanced discussion of the role of the United States in women’s and labor rights on the island. In a meticulous analysis of González’s early short stories, Acosta Cruz recognizes his defense of Puerto Rican culture, and at the same time eloquently underscores his critique of *ruralismo* and *paisajismo*, evident in his efforts to steer clear from nostalgic representations and instead to accentuate the peasants’ struggle and oppression. Similarly, she analyzes the political and literary trajectories of Ferré and Rodríguez Juliá, noting the ways in which they break with traditional ideals of independence and representations of national culture, either by proposing notions of hybridity (Ferré) or by taking a critical stance without committing to any one national imaginary (Rodríguez Juliá). The chapter concludes with an analysis of more recent authors (the postmodern critics of the 1990s, as well as Mayra Santos-Febres, Ángel Lozada, and Luis Negrón, among others) that have eschewed the traditional literary construction of independence by employing globalized contexts, by rejecting essentialist notions of authenticity, and by making use of irony.

Chapter 3 explores the link between the landscape and the imagined nation, arguing that, even as the landscape (and its literary representations) have changed, the dream of national identity remains entangled with the emotions associated with the national space. While the first part of the chapter is dedicated to “the lush landscape” depicted in the work of Francisco Oller and Margot Arce de Vázquez, the second focuses on more recent representations of what the author calls “the blighted land” exemplified by the trope of the traffic jam. Acosta Cruz’s multilayered analysis examines both those works that lament the transformation of the idyll into a dystopic landscape, and those that embrace chaotic modernity, albeit without ever fully evading the specter of exceptionalism.

Chapter 4 analyzes the construction of the dream nation through the rewriting of Puerto Rican history in fictional accounts, exploring the relationship between different independence discourses, images of national culture and hispanophilia. Acosta Cruz argues that, as authors like Luiz López Nieves engage in the (re-)making of myths and martyrs, they put forth a problematic relationship between history, memory, and nation. She proposes a dialogue between López Nieves’s *Seva* and novels by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, Rosario Ferré and Ángel Lozada that diversify and decenter the nation, or employ anti-heroes to expose the violence embedded in it.

The book’s final chapter focuses on the construction of the dream nation in the work of Puerto Rican authors living in the United States. It begins with an overview of the dream of independence as represented in the work of Nuyorican poets, critically examining the relationship between history, belonging and national mythology that emerges in their

work. At times Acosta Cruz subtly points out contradictions like the Nuyorican authors' impulse to embrace a cultural discourse that excludes them by virtue of privileging the use of the Spanish language, and at times she openly criticizes the idealization of the island's landscape and the reaffirmation of traditional gender roles. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to a comparative analysis of the work of Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer that reveals their contrasting claims to memory to construct the nation. While Santiago uses memory to reproduce the trope of the Lush Land in the diasporic context, Ortiz Cofer self-reflexively acknowledges the failures of memory and from these fissures enables the emergence of a critique of the colonial condition that rejects utopic images of the past and instead attempts to negotiate cultural identity and national belonging by accepting biculturalism and bilingualism.

There are many reasons why Acosta Cruz's *Dream Nation* is a welcome contribution to Puerto Rican and diasporic literary and cultural studies, and, more broadly, to Caribbean and U.S. studies on identity, belonging, nationalism and representation. She examines an impressive array of authors, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, allowing for a broad overview of the trajectory of the construction of independence discourse in Puerto Rican literature. Her language is unapologetic and transparent, and enables readers to grasp the numerous ways in which the nation has been (re) framed in Puerto Rican and diasporic literature.

More importantly, Acosta Cruz masterfully engages the theoretical discussion of the nation (dialoguing with José Luis González, Juan Gelpí and Juan Flores, among others) in an implicit conversation with the field of cultural geography and the analysis of space. The spaces that *Dream Nation* privileges are both real and symbolic (the house, the countryside, the island, the diaspora), and always political. The book does not simply probe these spaces for weaknesses and rarely looks for easy exceptions; on the contrary – it challenges traditional interpretations and proposes renditions that subvert the foundations of cultural discourses on nation, culture, and identity.