The Presence and Function of Russia in the Fiction of José Manuel Prieto

Britton W. Newman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages (Spanish).

Chapel Hill
2008

Approved by

Advisor: Professor Rosa Perelmuter
Reader: Professor Oswaldo Estrada
Reader: Professor Juan Carlos González Espitia
Abstract

Britton W. Newman: The Presence and Function of Russia in the Fiction of José Manuel Prieto

This thesis explores the recreation of Russia in the works of José Manuel Prieto and the concerns which lead this Cuban author to write about Russia. It takes into account Prieto’s experience as a Cuban immigrant to Russia, and seeks to add the study of the literature of this migrant experience to the larger body of work on the Cuban diaspora.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the intricacies of Prieto’s portrayal of Russia, how he serves as a cultural guide who opens Russia for the uninitiated Hispanic reader. This chapter also explores the manner in which the portrayal of Russia often serves to develop the character of the Cuban narrator who otherwise hides his own identity in the shadows.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the themes of politics and nationality which Prieto is able to approach through his use of Russia.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction........................................................................................................1

Chapter 2: Recreating Russia

  2.1. Selling the Russian Brand......................................................................................13
  2.2. The Philosophy of Frivolity....................................................................................15
  2.3. The Influence of the Russian Setting.................................................................19
  2.4. Russian Characters in Prieto’s Fiction.................................................................25
  2.5. The Importance of Language...............................................................................33
  2.6. Cultural References to Russia.............................................................................37

Chapter 3: Reading Russia as Cuba

  3.1. Russian Politics and History...............................................................................39
  3.2. Prieto: A Post-National Writer?..........................................................................44

Chapter 4: Conclusion......................................................................................................50

Notes................................................................................................................................53

Bibliography.......................................................................................................................55
Chapter 1: Introduction

José Manuel Prieto is one of tens of thousands of Cubans who studied in and graduated from Soviet universities in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. While most of these students later returned to Cuba, Prieto and others did not. Born in Havana in 1962, Prieto moved to Novosibirsk, the third-largest city in Russia, in 1981, to pursue a university degree in engineering. During the final years of the 1980s, the height of perestroika and glasnost, Prieto moved to Leningrad, where he finished the first of many translations into Spanish of the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, Joseph Brodsky and other Soviet masters and worked, as the biographical blurb on the dust jacket of his novel Livadia puts it, in “otras ocupaciones menos confesables.”

Prieto’s is one of thousands of bi-cultural families that are left over from the days of Soviet-Cuban ties. He married a Russian woman, and his daughter was born in Saint Petersburg, while he was writing his first novel, Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia (Escobar 7). Prieto moved to Mexico City around 1993-94, where he taught Russian History in the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica from 1994-2004. Since the late 1990s, Prieto has been a contributor to the well-known Mexican journal Letras Libres, has held various prestigious fellowships (including the Guggenheim) and most recently has worked in US academia as the director of the Latino Institute at Seton Hall University in New Jersey and, during the spring of 2008, as a Visiting Professor at Cornell University. He and his family currently reside in New York.
Prieto occupies an unusual place in Cuban literature. He is isolated from the national dialogue on the island, first by his own rejection of socialism and second by Cuba’s denial (following the end of Soviet aid) that Russian influence had been of any cultural significance. In the nasty early-1990s break-up between the two countries, Prieto came down on the side of Russia, whereas other Russian-Cuban authors, such as Anna Lidia Vega Serova (daughter of a Cuban father and a Russian mother) have chosen to live in Havana. But Prieto is equally isolated from the mainstream of the Cuban Diaspora, which is dominated by the Cuban-American community in Miami. Tanya Weimer has discussed Prieto in relation to other Cubans living and writing in Mexico, which she considers a Third Space of Cuban identity, outside of the dominant poles of Havana and Miami (2). Interestingly, Prieto has twice occupied third spaces in relation to Cuban identity: first Russia and later Mexico. Even now, inside the United States, he inhabits not the capital of the Cuban diaspora, Miami, but the more mixed environ of New York. This experience does not make him unique. Other third-space writers of the Cuban diaspora such as Zoé Valdés, who lives and writes in Paris, and Jesús Díaz, who lived and wrote in Madrid, come to mind. Nevertheless, living outside of Florida and of Cuba certainly puts Prieto in the minority.

To date, Prieto is the author of three novels, one collection of short stories and one travelogue. He also pens articles and reviews for such journals as Letras libres and has published at least one essay, “Nunca antes habías visto el rojo” (2001), which shares its title and a good deal of its subject matter with the titular story of Prieto’s short story collection. Stories of his have been collected in numerous anthologies. One piece of juvenilia, a science fiction story entitled “Viaje a Gea,” was anthologized in 2000, fifteen years after its composition. Though the story makes no reference to Russia, and thus does not fall within
the purview of my study, it foreshadows many elements of Prieto’s later fiction. It relates the tale of J.T., a “nómada espacial” who finds in the planet Gea a “segunda patria cósmica” (201). These elements will be shared by Prieto’s later narrators who inhabit a second homeland in Russia. Likewise, this story reveals the protagonist’s Cuban identity only in the final word, an evasion and return to nationality that becomes central to later Prieto works. A Borgesian fascination with mirrors drives the plot, indicating that from the beginning of his career as a writer, Prieto has been fascinated by the Argentine writer.

Prieto’s sole collection of stories is *Nunca antes habías visto el rojo* (Havana, 1996 – republished in 2002 in Mexico City as *El tartamudo y la rusa*). It chronicles the experiences of a young Cuban man living in Russia during the 1980s. The collection is unique in the corpus of Prieto in that it is the only work of his published in Cuba, and it also contains a story (“El tartamudo y la rusa”) which is his only work set in Cuba. The narrator of these stories, José, becomes a familiar figure in Prieto’s work. We learn in later works that he is a budding author, and from internal references in various works (Livadia makes reference to one of the stories, *Rex* to Livadia and Enciclopedia), we can surmise that the narrator is in fact one character who progresses somewhat in age throughout the books. In each of the works the narrator appears to be an alter-ego of the author, thus creating a degree of continuity among all of the works. Though Prieto does not insist on the narrator of his works being one coherent character, he has referred to his three novels as being linked by “ese personaje nómada” (Gómez 58), which suggests that he, too, conceives of the narrators as one character. In order to distinguish between the author and narrator, I will refer to the narrators by their first names, often José, and to the author by his last name, Prieto.
Each of Prieto’s novels derives its style from a different archaic form of writing. *Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia* (Barcelona, 1997) adopts the encyclopedic form, combining a fragmented collection of entries, some of which define concepts central to Russian life, others of which, when pieced together, form a narrative of a young Cuban man again named José. The work aims, we learn in the introduction, to “reunir una cantidad mínima de voces que combinadas … lograrán reproducir Moscovia, el mundo desconocido” (11). Thus, the work presents itself as a guide for the Hispanic reader, an aid in uncovering the mysteries of Russia. José comes to Russia with the plan of finding a beautiful Russian girl, converting her to his hedonistic, consumeristic philosophy of frivolity and going on a spending spree to enjoy life to the maximum while the money lasts. He finds and woos the young Nastya in Saint Petersbourg and they continue their spending spree in Yalta.

Prieto’s second novel, *Livadia* (Barcelona, 1998), follows the epistolary form, presenting itself as the draft of a letter. It tells the story of a globetrotting character referred to only as J., again a young Cuban man, who traverses the remnants of the former USSR seeking financial gain and a comfortable life. Numerous hints throughout the novel suggest that the narrator’s initials – J.P. – stand for “José Prieto.” J. meets and falls in love with a beautiful Russian prostitute, V., whom he helps to escape from her Turkish pimp and return to Russia, only to then be abandoned by her. The text which we read is the draft of his letter to her, written in response to her numerous letters. The novel’s fragmented chronology and rich intertextuality add spice to the story of love and contraband.

The travelogue *Treinta días en Moscú* (Barcelona, 2001) chronicles Prieto’s sojourn in the Russian capital during July, 2000. Prieto limits himself to writing only about what he experiences during that month, but through interviews with a variety of figures, he attempts
to capture the Russian condition at the start of the new millennium. The work is part of a larger project in which numerous authors visited world capitals and wrote travelogues chronicling the year 2000. Though we assume that the narrative voice is Prieto’s the sole reference to the narrator’s Cuban nationality comes in the final word. This evasion and return to nationality mirrors precisely that found in Prieto’s early short story.

Prieto’s third and most recent novel, Rex (Barcelona, 2007), adopts the form of a medieval gloss. It takes place in Marbella, Spain and is the only major work of his set entirely outside of Russia. It is the tale of Psellus, a pseudonym for the otherwise unnamed narrator who is, again, a young Cuban man who lived many years in Russia. Psellus works as a tutor for the child of a pair of wealthy Russian expatriates, who, it turns out, are producers of artificial diamonds in hiding from the Russian mafia. In order to escape the mafia, Psellus proposes a plan that would lead to the installation of his employers as the new monarchs of Russia. The novel follows the advancement of this outlandish plan only tangentially, as much of the central space is occupied by a reading and commentary of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time.

Prieto’s fiction has some constants, one of which is that the works share a narrator who is a young Cuban man surrounded by Russians. The fact that he writes from the point of view of the Other within Russia has not kept Russian book reviewers from reading Prieto as a part of Russian literature. Livadia is the only novel by Prieto to have been translated into Russian to date, and one reviewer there has described it as “a unique work of Russian literature in Spanish” (Danilkin). Another calls it “a completely Russian novel” (Vizel’), and a third reviewer has gone so far as to argue that “Right away we need to stake our claim on this talented Cuban writer for Russian culture. After all, the Americans claim Nabokov”
(Levental’). Even allowing for a dose of nationalist sentiment behind those claims, I agree that there is an argument for considering Prieto a part of Russian literature. He is in a sense a Russian émigré author, writing about Russia after having left, and his worldview was shaped in large part by his late adolescence, spent in Russia.

In the two years during which I lived in Russia, I, like Prieto, married a Russian woman, and my first child was born in Russia, as was his. Like Prieto, I experienced being a foreigner there. Having returned to US academia, I find Prieto’s hybrid literature provides a bridge which allows me to connect the disparate parts of my own life as a US-born scholar with very strong personal links to Russia and a deep interest in Latin America. As readers, we are most often attracted to that literature which reflects some part of ourselves. Along with the themes of complicated identity and bicultural families, I find in Prieto a degree of nostalgia, which I share, for our adopted homeland. The Russian nostalgia seen in Prieto provides an interesting twist to this sentiment so characteristic of Cuban diasporic authors. At least from the time of José María Heredia in the nineteenth century, prominent Cuban writers have written exilic literature defined by nostalgia for their homeland. That nostalgia is arguably the central aspect of Cuban-American writing. Prieto’s fiction, however, exhibits nostalgia not for his homeland of Cuba but for his adopted homeland of Russia. We should keep in mind that while Prieto may have begun his early works in Russia, they were all completed and published once he was living in Mexico. Writing about Russia is a way of returning. One function of art for displaced artists can be to allow the author to recreate a homeland, to visit a place that is desired but at the same time not a place where the author would really want to live. Prieto’s works allow him to relive Russia and yet not actually have
to stay there. In a sense, my critical work on Prieto allows me, a US Latin Americanist with Russian ties, to do the same.

Prieto writes with a degree of nostalgia, and yet his nostalgia for Russia never erases his cubanidad entirely. The Russia that he knows is Russia as seen by a foreigner, and in his fiction he does not purport to write from a purely Russian perspective. Though the gaze is cast on Russia, the reader is made aware that the narrator is Cuban, and thus the lens through which we see Russia is Latin American. Prieto himself refers to his novels as “mi ‘Trilogía rusa’” (Gómez 58), and calling them a trilogy may imply closure, the end of his “Russian period.” Rex in fact takes us geographically away from Russia, and at its conclusion the narrator inhabits the US and his love-interest lives in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Prieto’s most recent short story, “No pisés a los durmientes (Veracruz, 1949),” is at least nominally set in Mexico, and while nothing appears in the story to distinguish the characters or themes as Mexican, the story also avoids references to Russia or Cuba. Outside of his fiction, Prieto’s recent activity seems to corroborate a move away from Russia. For several years now he has published reviews and articles on Spanish American topics. Since his move to the US, he has become a founding member of the New York-based writers’ group Café Nueva York, a group of Spanish-language writers who seek to raise the profile of Spanish letters in the city’s culture. In the end, however, it remains to be seen whether these suggestive facts signal a general shift away from Russia and towards latinidad in his fiction.

To put Prieto in the larger context of the Cuban Diaspora, we should note that he left Cuba in 1981, soon after the wave of the Marielitos (1980), but he does not appear to share the motivations of this group. Rather than escaping socialism, Prieto moved in the opposite direction, not defecting to the US, but moving to the very heart of the socialist world. If we
accept the account which Prieto himself gives in his essay and stories, we see that he moved to the USSR as a firm believer in socialism. His disenchantment with socialism stems from the Russian experience, not the Cuban one that inspired enormous groups of exiles to go directly from the island to the capitalist world. It was along with the vast majority of Russians during the 1980s that Prieto lost faith in the system of the USSR and adopted the philosophy of frivolity. In the short story “Nunca antes habías visto el rojo,” one of his earliest works, Prieto’s alter-ego narrator notes specifically:

[Q]uisiera llamar la atención sobre el hecho de que mi descubrimiento de la ‘levedad’ de la existencia tuviera lugar precisamente en la URSS. Mi acercamiento a ciertos valores del consumismo, tomado como fenómeno de magnitud global fue pues, y nada más, una evolución política, o mejor, un proceso de desideologización ocurrido a principios de la década del ochenta, durante el pagado fin del socialismo real. (80)

If we assume some degree of correlation between the author and his fictional alter-ego, who rejects socialism and embraces consumerism, Prieto’s decision not to return to socialist Cuba is understandable. Indeed, in a 2004 interview with the journal Culturas, Prieto states, laughing, that he will not return to Cuba “a menos que me paguen mucho dinero” (Pacheco).

Were he a part of the Cuban-American immigrant community, Prieto would fall into what has been described as the 1.5 generation (Pérez Firmat 4). He left Cuba at age 19, comparable to one quintessential one-and-a-halfer, Desi Arnaz, who left the island at age 17. Had Prieto remained permanently in Russia, perhaps we could talk of him as part of a Cuban-Russian 1.5 generation. However, because Prieto eventually left Russia for Mexico, and later moved again from Mexico to the US, he is probably, as I mentioned earlier, more of an émigré author who spent time in Russia than an immigrant to Russia. Here we have touched on one of the complications of Prieto—he is not simply split between two countries. He is multiple times an émigré, but all of his emigrations were voluntary and apparently on good
terms, thus complicating any conjecture of a rejection of or traumatic break with either Cuba or Russia.

To date, Prieto’s literary reception has been scant. Juan Carlos Betancourt compares Prieto’s novel Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia to El mapa de sal by Iván de la Nuez (a Cuban of Prieto’s generation who lives and writes in Barcelona), and concludes that what unites these two authors and isolates them from the mainstream of Cuban diasporic writing is their rejection of nostalgia and their insistence on living in the present. As we will see, Prieto’s philosophy of frivolity values above all the present moment.

Isabel Álvarez Borland treats Prieto briefly. Her categorization of Enciclopedia and Livadia is accurate, for she includes Prieto in a group of intellectuals who recently left the island and who “view extraterritorial Cuban culture as a cosmopolitan body of writing that claims recognition outside Cuba” (254). Her conclusions that Prieto’s work explores the “symptoms and not the causes of the exile of the 1990s” and that he seems “more concerned with the human predicament than with the politics of exile” (255) are again largely accurate, particularly for Livadia. In this novel, the narrator declares directly, “Tampoco era exiliado. No me gustaba esa palabra” (117). However, we should not overstate the belief that Prieto entirely avoids contemporary politics, for Enciclopedia contains a good deal of exploration of the end of communism in Russia as it affected the lives of the people.

There are some points of Álvarez Borland’s analysis that we can clarify if we study Prieto more in depth. First, she states that Prieto creates “nomadic characters who avoid at all costs the exploration of the historical causes of the displacement of their authors” (255). In Livadia we see little exploration of recent historical events, though there are allusions to the “Gran Explosión” (273) that was the fall of the USSR. In Enciclopedia the fall of the USSR,
its causes and the subsequent change in the worldview of Russians are the central themes. Prieto’s narrator does not analyze Cuba directly, but he does mention that he came to the USSR from Cuba to study, and that only later did he become “echado a perder … políticamente, para decirlo de una vez” (89).⁶ We might find the explanation for the lack of discussion of Cuba in the author’s biography. After all, he left Cuba voluntarily and, presumably, with the idea of returning. This experience is a far cry from the traumatic flight experienced by other Diaspora writers. Álvarez Borland also exaggerates the degree to which Prieto’s narrator erases his cubanidad when she states that “the protagonist of Livadia never once mentions the name of his home country” (255). Actually, the protagonist does mention Cuba, albeit only once and only hinting that it may be his home country. He also says directly that his mother lives in “La Habana” (143). I will discuss his erasure and subtle reinsertion of Cuba at greater length below.

While I agree with Álvarez Borland with regards to the protagonist of Livadia, that “J.’s name, reduced to a single letter, indicates an existential concern” (255), I would add that the reduction of the name is also a part of Prieto’s ludic intent. Throughout the novel we get hints that the character corresponds to the author–first a Russian acquaintance refers to him as “Joska” (26), a logical Russian diminutive from José. Then we learn that his initials are J.P. (José Prieto?). Enticing clues such as these, while they may well carry the philosophical significance Álvarez Borland describes, also serve as practical tools which enable the author to pique the interest of the reader.

Beyond the perceptive articles of Betancourt and Álvarez Borland, I must also acknowledge the work of Tanya Weimer, whose doctoral dissertation discusses the works of Prieto and Eliseo Alberto as examples of Cuban diasporic writing in the Third Space of
Mexico. Of Prieto’s works, Weimer treats almost exclusively Livadia, concentrating largely on J.’s qualities of traveler, on the parenthetical style of the book and on the use of multiple languages.

Rafael Rojas includes Prieto in numerous lists of diasporic authors of the 90s, but he does not discuss his work with any specificity. He simply notes that Prieto, along with the others in his lists, writes autobiographical (405), terse and erudite (363), and post-national prose (420). Prieto’s post-national quality and what Rojas means by the term will be discussed in Chapter 3. Rojas has also written a book review of Livadia, in which he applauds the multiple levels of travel explored in the novel—“la foránea, la doméstica y la íntima” (231).

All told, over twenty book reviews have been written on Prieto’s works, primarily on Livadia. The reviewers have described above all Prieto’s intertextuality, noting both his debt to Nabokov and the manner in which “works by Conrad, Chekhov, Poe, Dostoevsky, Ovid, Raymond Chandler, Pushkin, Aldous Huxley, and Oscar Wilde are all mentioned as though they were old friends” (Wood). Others are drawn to Prieto’s formal experimentation in the disjointed time scheme of Livadia (Bernal 92). Given that I analyze Prieto’s vision of Russia, it is particularly interesting to see Russian reviewers’ vision of Prieto, for they all seem to share the opinion that Livadia is a Russian novel, “even if it is written by a Cuban” (Danilkin). Lev Danilkin also comments on the level of intertextuality in Prieto, pointing out parallels between the plot of Livadia and those of numerous Soviet films.

As we have seen, Prieto’s writing is defined in large part by two characteristics: intertextuality (i.e., the many writers and works to which he alludes in his writings) and Russia. Weimer offers perhaps the best analysis of Prieto’s complex relationship with
Nabokov (206-210), an aspect which many book reviews of Livadia have noted as well. Less attention has been paid to the function of Russia in the fiction of Prieto, and it is there that I will focus my attention. To the Russian settings and characters of his works, Prieto adds a generous sprinkling of Russian language, idiosyncratic Russian customs and behaviors, and even historical anecdotes, of which, as a professor of Russian history, he has a plentiful supply. A first glance tells us that Russia plays an important role in these works, but pinning down its precise significance is a more difficult proposition. Does it replace Cuba as the narrator’s new homeland, erasing his cubanidad? Or should the treatment of Russia really be read as a veiled treatment of Cuba? The narration of the experience of Otherness in Russia and the narrator’s relationship to Russia and Cuba offer a peculiar vantage point for observing the negotiation of identity, personal and national, in a transnational world. In the following pages, I will explore the manner in which Prieto recreates Russia in his work and the degree to which we may read Russia as a stand-in for his native Cuba.
Chapter 2 – Recreating Russia

2.1) Selling the Russian Brand to Hispanic Readers

Interpretive readings of the function of Russia in Prieto’s work should not ignore the more obvious, commercial role which it plays. If in the 1990s “Cuba se ha convertido en una moda” (Aguilera), becoming a marketable literary commodity, the late 1990s witnessed a similar growth of the production of Russian literature for foreign consumption. A series of Russian-born authors became literary stars while living abroad and writing in the language of their adopted nation. Andrei Makine, the earliest author of this trend, lives and writes in France. Since 1990, he has published eleven novels that capitalize on the French, and more broadly, Western, fascination with Russia and have achieved great commercial and critical success. Similarly, Wladimir Kaminer and Gary Shteyngart have since 2000 become stars of German and American literature, respectively, both drawing on their Russian heritage and the public appetite for Russia.7 Prieto occupies a similar niche within the world of Hispanic letters. In lieu of a Russian-born immigrant to the Hispanic world, we have a Cuban, an adopted Russian, who has returned to the West and shares his eastern adventures with us.

I do not argue that Prieto’s writing imitates that of Makine (and chronologically, Prieto’s publications precede those of Kaminer and Shteyngart). Though it is possible that Prieto was familiar with Makine’s work before publishing Nunca antes habías visto el rojo, his style bears no resemblance to the sort of high-modernist epic novels of Makine. But the marketing of his work certainly accentuates the presence of Russia. Let us take for example Prieto’s short story collection. The original title, Nunca antes habías visto el rojo, is the title
of the final, and thematically most important, story. When Tusquets reprinted Prieto’s stories in 2002, the title was changed to El tartamudo y la rusa, the title of another story which thematically is not as central to Prieto’s work, but which has the advantage of containing an explicit reference to Russia. Tusquets also added as cover-art a fragment from Alexei Maximov’s 1987 painting Picnic in Orekhovo-Borisovo. The fragment portrays a fair-skinned woman with a swarthy man, a romantic dynamic common to all of Prieto’s works, and its style is vaguely reminiscent of Russian avant-garde art of the early twentieth century.

Similarly, although Prieto’s first edition of Livadia carried just the one-word title (the name of a small Crimean town featured in the novel), most of the translations adopted the title of the English edition, Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire, indicating rather misleadingly to these readers in French, English, Italian and other markets that this book treats not only Russia, but also the glamorous czarist era. For the reprinting of the Spanish version of the novel, Mondadori decided to follow the lead of its translators, and changed the title to Mariposas nocturnas del imperio ruso. The Russian edition simply combines both titles with “or.”

The manipulation of the titles may be the most obvious example of marketing “Russianness,” but the biographical sketches included in the books add to this effect. All of the sketches mention Prieto’s time spent in Russia and his translations of Russian masters. At the same time, the blurbs seek to capitalize on his cubanidad and his proximity to the 1990s Cuban boom, as we see on the back cover of Livadia, which declares that “Livadia es una de las historias más originales de la nueva narrativa cubana.” For the Spanish or American consumer, Prieto is a two-for-one exotic author. Rex may be the beginning of a trend away from this focus on Russia. Along with the geographical displacement of the
setting farther west, the title chooses the Latin *rex* over the Russian *czar*, a word which would have been just as recognizable internationally. However, as I mentioned earlier, whether this movement away from Russia is part of a larger trend remains to be seen.

### 2.2) The Philosophy of Frivolity

A more subtle invocation of Russia appears in the worldview which underlies all of Prieto’s work. His writings are imbued with a philosophy of frivolity, a rejection of idealism and of the self-sacrifice and delayed fulfillment which it entails. The essay “Nunca antes habías visto el rojo” offers the most direct definition of the concept. He relates frivolity with the culture exported by the United States during the Cold War, “la cultura del disfrute del presente, de lo lúdico” (74). The Russian frivolity that Prieto describes and adopts is a direct reaction to the privations suffered under socialism, a rejection of the Soviet culture of “ascetismo de corte religioso [y] severidad escatológica” (74). Building upon the philosophy of Schopenhauer that the present moment is all we ever know in life, he presents frivolity as a way of living the present moment to the utmost degree. He explains that he and his early cohorts in a journal entitled *Naranja Dulce* avoided “deliberadamente transitar zonas de ‘actualidad política’ porque buscábamos transitar zonas de real actualidad” (79). Finally, foreseeing the charge of superficiality, he adds that where he has used the term frivolity, one could just as easily and accurately use the term “humano” (79). History has underestimated frivolity, Prieto argues:

En 1991, al querer explicarse la Caída del Imperio, los pensadores de ambos bandos incurrieron en el error de proyectarse demasiado lejos, de concentrarse en el análisis de causas fundamentales y desatender lo nimio, lo aparentemente faltó de importancia: la moda, los hits musicales, los chocolatines suizos, las fragancias de marca. (73)
Prieto chooses to focus not on fundamental problems of socialism but on the psychology of Russians who felt “minados por la angustia de trajes mal cortados y muebles producidos en masa” (73).

In the context of a socialist system, frivolity is an act of rebellion. Prieto’s narrator considers the subversive effect of musical hits in the short story “Nunca antes,” concluding,

Para el socialismo ortodoxo, su efecto es el de una bomba de profundidad de apagado funcionamiento, capaz de cambiar imperceptiblemente la mentalidad de la gente; de desvirtuar la responsabilidad ineludible de que debemos llegar a algo, ser útiles … El socialismo promueve una especie de ascetismo, de doctrina del sacrificio, de vida política en todas las esferas, que en última instancia no niegan las alegrías terrenales… pero que las supedita a un gran objetivo. Dos o tres hits, a la moda, la irresponsabilidad juvenil, entran en franco conflicto con esos postulados (esto es lo que se llama “lucha ideológica”). (91-92)

This quotation bears out the fact that Prieto is given to political commentary, even in his fiction, and it is in moments such as these that Prieto outlines the philosophy which the “dramatic” sections of his fiction enact. This passage, like most of the story “Nunca antes,” was later incorporated into Enciclopedia. José, the novel’s narrator, elaborates on the political effects of frivolity:

La frivolidad atacó las cadenas carbónicas del IMPERIO con la fuerza reductora del FLÚOR. El IMPERIO, que había proyectado su pesadez plantigrada hacia la lejanía de un futuro perfecto, cayó gravado por el peso de perros de raza, de imposibles jaguares descapotables y mullidas alfombras de Persia; debilitado por la meta de un vivir placentero que, a la larga, logró remplazar todos sus objetivos celestes. (53-54)

The goal of frivolity, however, is necessarily apolitical. As José describes it, the goal of frivolity is none other than “detener el paso del tiempo en los segundos perfectos de una percepción aguzada: el grato roce de una camisa de hilo, tus cejas arqueadas y llenas, la brisa que nos seca tras un tibio baño” (101). Throughout Prieto’s works we find mentions of simple pleasures such as beautiful handwriting and the texture of rice paper. The narrator of Livadia adds the goal of living a bookish life of aimless erudition. But Prieto’s narrative
alter-ego is not a Romantic who seeks to find the pleasures available in a rustic life. Rather, he is the ultimate consumer who in Enciclopedia plans and executes a day of hedonistic spending with a beautiful Russian girl. In Livadia the fascination becomes less with things and more with time and freedom from working, for J. could not be happier than when he laizes around town reading obscure collections of letters. But J. recognizes that the achievement of leisure depends on the accumulation of money, a process scientifically fetishized in his imagination: “Hay dinero en el mundo como vapor de agua en la atmósfera y se condensa sobre una u otra persona, sobre superficies frías, las sales de plata. Sólo hay que imaginarse a sí mismo como una partícula favorable, permitir que descienda la temperatura de tu cuerpo” (224). The same scientific language, which reflects Prieto’s preparation in engineering, appears in Rex, as Psellus imagines the would-be king as a figure “que atraería hacía sí, del mismo modo que las inclusiones metálicas atraen hacía sí y permiten que se condensen sobre ellas, átomo a átomo, la riqueza de todo un país” (172) [sic]. Psellus concludes the novel by telling Petia, his pupil, that the Proust novel which contains the meaning of life has as its theme “el dinero … cómo hacer dinero” (231).

The frivolity which Prieto describes and which he relishes in his fiction is not unique to Russia. Certainly irreverence, playfulness and a rejection of the role of the “engaged artist” are present in the work of glasnost Soviet writers (Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, etc.), in the music of Victor Tsoi and his rock band Kino and in Russian films of the late 1980s and the 1990s such as Igra (“Needle”) and Brat (“Brother”). However, we see a similar rejection of self-sacrifice and a turn to hedonism in Special-Period Cuba itself (Pedro Juan Gutiérrez), and the call of Mexico’s Crack Manifesto for a return to lightness directly parallels Prieto’s work. The desire for frivolity surfaces during the prolonged fall of
socialism and its aftershocks, when people around the world begin to cease to believe in their ideologies and search for new guiding principles.

The humor which pervades Prieto’s work comes part and parcel with frivolity. It is a negation of the seriousness of life. The short story “Nunca antes” ends by recommending a dose of frivolity to the “lector que se toma demasiado en serio la carne de ballenas en extinción que desayunan los japoneses y la universalidad del parlamentarismo como sistema político. Todo lo que, en resumen, he evitado mencionar aquí y que con tanto esfuerzo trato de sortear cada día” (95). Yet, this advice of frivolity is paradoxical, for the narrator has just told us that the dandy that he once was and that he recreates as the protagonist of the story has passed on and has been replaced by a more philosophical self, “reflexivo y mal vestido” (94). Thus, a latent ambiguity towards frivolity is present in this and other works. In the same way, the narrator of Enciclopedia appears to be looking back, recounting his experiment of hedonism and, with a more somber and reflective voice, delving deep into the psychological trauma of life in the USSR and socialism’s demise. Alternatively, these two threads could be read as coming from separate narrators.

In general terms, Prieto’s frivolity has its roots in a perestroika-era flowering of individualism and materialism. Its roots, though, reach back to the decadent czarist period. As José of Enciclopedia tries to convert Nastya to frivolity, he argues that for all of the years of socialist slogans, Russians are no different from the more openly frivolous Westerners. “No,” he tells her, “ustedes son esencialmente iguales. Sólo que lo han olvidado. En 1915, la Jalódnaya vendió más posters que la familia imperial; algo perfectamente comprensible, creo” (113).10 The greatest sign of the essential frivolity that underlies the socialist veneer of
the Soviet Union is its arquitecture, an aspect of the setting that leads directly to José’s conversion.

2.3) The Influence of the Russian Setting

Though the Russian settings of Prieto’s works generally receive little development or detailed description, at times they rise to play a significant thematic role. Though these moments may be relatively few, it bears noting that the Russian setting is the only one to receive such development from Prieto. Description of the Cuban setting is absent from “El tartamudo y la rusa.” The entire story takes place within a house, and the majority of the story is in fact a story within a story, following a “Russian doll” structure, and this inner story takes place in Russia. Similarly, Prieto’s recent story “No pises a los durmientes (Veracruz, 1949)” foregoes any description of Mexico or references to distinctly Mexican culture. Only the title allows us to identify the setting as Veracruz.

The settings of Prieto’s Russian short stories include a train, a Siberian lake and a city that could be either Moscow or Saint Petersburg. Indeed, from references to the events of this story in his other novels, I infer that it is the latter. In most of the stories, the author does not draw the reader’s attention to the physical surroundings. He frequently reminds us that the setting is Russia, not by showing onion-domed churches or snow banks, but through the language or through idiosyncratic cultural gestures.

Setting plays a key role in the final story, “Nunca antes,” which gives us a vision of all that is to come in the writings of Prieto. Here he introduces his philosophy of frivolity, and one of the tools which he uses is the lavish architecture of Saint Petersburg, the former imperial capital: “las proporciones neoclásicas de sus fachadas, el verde mar de sus jardines.
Todo aquello influyó mucho en el desarrollo de mi frivolidad” (84). During a visit to Saint Petersburg, José appropriates the wealth and indulgence of the Russian empire as a precursor to his own frivolity. The narrator praises not simply the beauty of the city but also the effect of this beauty on the lives of the inhabitants. “Esa es la clave,” José explains, “una ciudad es bella, sus alamedas y callejuelas valen la pena si todo esto te ayuda a vivir sin pensar nunca en la magnificencia o el encanto de sus edificios; limitándose a utilizarla nada más” (85). Wealth and beauty have value not as status symbols but as instruments which enable the enjoyment of life. José connects this revelation, the utility of space, to his homeland, relating how “al año de aquel viaje al Norte, ya otro, estuve de vacaciones en la Habana y me dejó atontado su belleza nunca antes aquilatada por mí en su justa medida” (85). As a convert to frivolity, or a heretic of socialism, the narrator is now able to detect the frivolous, or human foundations of Havana, what he calls in his essay its “fuerte tradición de frivolidad y paganismo” (“Nunca antes” essay 75), that before had remained hidden to him behind a dehumanized mask of ideology.

This section from the short story is echoed by a central image of Enciclopedia – the PALACIO CHINO (128). In this episode, the narrator visits the museum-estate of an unnamed Russian pre-Revolutionary noble.11 The building, named the Chinese Palace, turns out to be a standard, Russian building which houses an enormous collection of Chinese artifacts. This accumulation of things enabled its pre-Revolutionary owner to “engañar su aburrida existencia europea… rodeándose de chinerías” (129).12 He reads into these things the psychology of the nobleman, who “había acumulado bronces y porcelanas, esferas de marfil calado, tapices con la grulla de la sabiduría y la tortuga de la longevidad, como si no fuera a morir nunca, que es la ilusión de quienes viven el presente perfecto de las bagatelas”
The owner of the Chinese Palace sets an example which José and all other Prieto protagonists follow—that of living in the present and seeking maximum enjoyment. Much like the praise of Saint Petersburg and Havana in the short story, here Prieto’s alter-ego describes the Chinese Palace as “un palacio ideal para vivir” (129). The Chinese Palace provides a similar revelation for this narrator:

Pasearme por sus salas fue como ir tensando las cuerdas de muchas lecturas e imágenes que hasta aquel momento habían pendido flojas en mi caja torácica. Llevaban años allí, emitiendo a veces bellas notas, pero el proceso de su afinación culminó en aquel palacio y me dejó listo para ser pulsado por los largos dedos de estímulos esencialmente insigñificantes. (130)

The Chinese Palace, another example of the lavish possessions of pre-Revolutionary Russian nobility, brings out in José the desire of ownership, a desire that we see in the description of his first pair of Western-made BOOGIE SHOES (25), one of the first purchases made by José after converting to frivolity.

Other Russian spaces also appear in Enciclopedia. Along with the Chinese Palace, Saint Petersburg’s urban space appears in references to the “puente de los leones alados” (39), a monument of imperial Russia that adds fuel to the fire of José’s frivolity. ALDEA, BOSQUE DE CONÍFERAS, DACHA and ESTEPA each have their own entry. Prieto does not so much describe these spaces as discuss their effect on the Russian psyche. ALDEA reveals the ingrained village mentality of Russians, BOSQUE elaborates on Russians wastefulness and DACHA ridicules the Russian fascination with country life and its supposed benefits for writers. ESTEPA takes a more historical tack, sketching the Tatar-Mongol presence in current-day Russia and briefly discussing the calming effect of contemplating the steppe, “interminable, vacía, desolada, sin alimento” (48).
Livadia draws a great deal upon the exoticism of its locales–Stockholm, Saint Petersburg, the Caspian Sea, Istanbul, and, of course, Livadia itself (a small town near Yalta). Interestingly, however, the exoticism does not arise from any lavish descriptions of these very different places. In large part, the names themselves serve to conjure up images, requiring of the reader basic geographical knowledge. Through various means Prieto subtly signals that we are in a given country–phrases in Turkish or Russian, Arabic music in the bazaar (and the bazaar itself) of Istanbul. Yet, as for the physical descriptions of the surroundings of these places, there is very little of it.

The Russian location which receives the most descriptive development and which plays a role thematically in the novel is the Caspian Depression, where J. hunts for the rare yazikus butterfly in the delta of the Volga. This portion of the book is in many ways similar to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (a book referenced directly by J. during the novel), for J. takes a trip into the depths of Russia and begins to question his philosophy of life. Surrounded by forest and rivers, J. wonders, along with the reader, why he accepted leaving Saint Petersburg to go on this hunt. Then another element is added to the setting–an izba, a log-cabin house of a country family. This house provides us a glimpse into the life of the heart of Russia–a banya (Russian sauna), the family’s initial suspicion of an outsider followed by profuse hospitality and the childhood of one born into that environment. The son of the family cannot believe that J. would come to the Volga for a butterfly when everyone else who comes does so for illegal caviar hunting. Although just a young boy, he “ya había sospechado la existencia de otro centro de organización para el mundo, una vida organizada en torno a cosas que no fueran el caviar y el río. Se detuvo indeciso ante el rojo brillante de aquel descubrimiento” (87). This boy’s realization is not unlike the conversion to frivolity
experienced by Prieto’s earlier narrators. In each case, the character breaks free from a given mindset and becomes aware of an entirely different perspective. Even the language used to describe the boy’s discovery, “el rojo brillante,” is reminiscent of the advertising slogan, “Nunca antes habías visto el rojo,” which Prieto adopts from *Vogue* magazine to communicate the eye-opening nature of his conversion to frivolity (“Nunca antes” essay 79).

The Volga delta exercises a powerful magnetism on José, narrator of *Enciclopedia*, as well. In defining “BRODIAGA” (vagabond), he imagines:

> El Volga, y Ástrajan en el Volga, y Samara, sus muelles fluviales con barcazas repletas de sandías. Vastos espacios ganados por el alma rusa en los cuales uno podía diluirse sin dejar rastro, perder su identidad y ganarse los kopecs de una magra cena descargando sandías hasta el anochecer, descalzo sobre cubierta. (31)

In this quotation we see a compilation of Russian symbols and cliches: the Volga River, which traverses the Russian heartland, the vast Russian territory and the Russian Soul. The possibility of anonymity also attracts the narrator. The Volga delta offers him the chance to “perder su identidad,” which in his case means losing his foreignness, blending in. Here the Russian setting connects directly to the theme of Otherness which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

*Livadia* distorts geography to a degree. Throughout the book, J. refers to the city of Livadia as a part of Russia. In fact, it is located in the Crimea, which is a province of Ukraine. The conflation of Russia and Ukraine occurs repeatedly, as when J. declares, “Estábamos en Rusia” when he and V. have in fact arrived in Odessa, Ukraine. Three potential explanations come to mind. First, many Russians in Russia proper and in the Crimea consider this province, traditionally a part of Russia but ceded to Ukraine by the Ukrainian-born Nikita Khruschev in 1954, to be “Russia irredenta,” and want it returned to Russia. Other Russians simply are accustomed to considering Ukraine a part of their country, as it was during Soviet times, and refer to Ukranian cities as Russian more from forgetfulness.
than from irredentist motives. A final possible explanation is commercial interest. Prieto knows he is writing for a Hispanic readership and can only ask for so much geographical knowledge of Eastern Europe. Perhaps for the sake of not confusing his reader, he refers to the more familiar Russia rather than the less familiar Ukraine.

If Livadia offers a border-crossing trajectory that digresses from its Russian center, Rex abandons the Russian center altogether and looks at it from afar. The action of book takes place mostly in Spain, with the final pages indicating that Psellus has moved to the US—where, interestingly, he is promptly assaulted by the police (227-28). Nevertheless, Russian space continues to play a role. In the opening pages of Rex, we learn that the home of the Russian family for whom Psellus works was in Angarsk (14). Prieto does not tell the reader that Angarsk is a city in Irkutsk Oblast, a province of eastern Siberia, or that Siberia is itself simply the portion of Russia east of the Ural Mountains. This name is divorced from any description or context. For the reader unfamiliar with Russian geography, as most of Prieto’s readers must be, it holds little meaning beyond its exotic sound. Yakutia, another province of eastern Siberia, is sprinkled in similarly, as are the names of several exotic-sounding nationalities native to Siberia—“los nenets, los yakutos, los buriatos” (85). These exotic names, presumably unfamiliar to most readers, heighten the image of these Russian expatriates as a rags-to-riches family. They also raise the question of what illicit means enabled them to achieve their vast wealth. Thus, even in a work set entirely outside of Russia, Prieto uses Russian space for its suggestiveness, in this case the middle-of-nowhere connotations which Siberia, Prieto’s former home, carries for the Western reader. Perhaps this use of suggestive Russian allusions will become more frequent if Prieto indeed continues to shift away from Russia and Russian culture as central aspects of his fiction.
2.4) Russian Characters in Prieto’s Fiction

With the sole exception of “No pises a los durmientes (Veracruz, 1949),” all of Prieto’s works have a similar cast of characters—a young Cuban narrator surrounded by Russians, non-Russian citizens of the former USSR and the occasional Eastern European. The characterization of Russians serves specific thematic aims for Prieto, for it is largely through the mirror of the Russians that we learn something about the Cuban narrator. Specifically, through their characterization he explores the experience of foreignness, of being the Other in Russia. Two aspects of this theme that appear prominently are the portrayal of the Russian attitude towards foreigners and the absence of a Cuban community.

The Russians of Prieto’s works share a general xenophobia that varies in intensity from person to person. In its more benign form, this attitude leads Russians to lump all foreigners together, as we see in “Sin descansar ese verano”:

Los choferes, al vernos la primera vez, nos echaban miradas, extrañados, y comentaban: ‘no son rusos esos muchachos.’ Al segundo día se nos acercaron y nos dijeron lo mismo: ‘Muchachos, ¿ustedes no son rusos, eh?’ Nos preguntaban si éramos extranjeros. Nos tomaban por no rusos sencillamente: uzbecos, turkmenos o algo así. No rusos. (66)

This quality of being non-Russian resurfaces at length in Enciclopedia, where Prieto dedicates an entire entry to NIERUS (not Russian) (111). The episode offers a much more acerbic criticism of the Russian attitude towards foreigners. The narrator relates a personal anecdote:

Otra vez platicaba con un amigo en un lugar público, y una mujer, tomándonos quizá por NIERUS (no rusos, representantes de alguna minoría del IMPERIO) se volvió indignada: ‘Pero por qué no hablan en ruso? Llevan media hora hablando en esa lengua de pájaros y me tienen la cabeza hecha un verdadero rollo. ¿Cómo no les da vergüenza?’ Después nos estudió mejor y ESCUPIÓ al suelo: ‘¿Qué se puede esperar de estos NIERUS?’ (112)
Though anonymous, the Russian woman of the anecdote is anything but insignificant, and her attitude is anything but exceptional. The narrator follows the anecdote by explaining, “En el IMPERIO ignoraban la existencia de millones de NIERUS que hablan otras lenguas. Los soportaban a duras penas” (112). *Enciclopedia* is full of moments such as this, in which José is reminded of his foreignness. The novel opens with a vision of a protagonist-narrator entirely fluent in the culture and language of Russia, who knows how to order around a train-station porter “con la fluidez propia de un natural” (9). Yet, Russians do not accept him as Russian, and even his accomplice in frivolity, Nastya, asks “¿cómo puedes pretender conocer Rusia? Tú, un extranjero. Jamás lo lograrás” (114). The definitiveness of her statement is significant. The gap between the narrator and the Russians who surround him appears insurmountable.

The Russians of *Livadia* fall into groups based on their attitudes towards J. Interestingly, in *Livadia*, set during the post-soviet 1990s, the Russians’ frustration abroad is not that people do not speak Russian, as was the case in *Enciclopedia*, but just the opposite. The nierus speaking Russian seems to blur the lines of identity, and this is the threat to which V. reacts. In the first dialogue in which we meet V., whose full name, Varvara, we learn only in the final pages, she laments that all of the non-Russians in Istanbul know Russian: “Es horrible. Tengo la impresión de que todo el mundo sabe ruso. Tú mismo …” (105; ellipsis present in original). J. follows, “E iba a decirme: ‘Tú mismo no eres ruso, pero lo hablas; una verdadera calamidad’” (105). Even V., with whom J. falls in love and who, to some degree, falls in love with him, feels uncomfortable with J.’s intrusion on Russian identity.

In the city of Livadia, three other characters receive fully developed characterization. María Kuzmovna, the elderly owner of the hostel where J. stays, shows a more positive side
of the Russian personality. Although the advertisements of many hostels specify that they only take “rusos de nacionalidad” (21), Kuzmovna eventually warms to J. Through her, Prieto shows the two sides of Russians, the cold official face put on for strangers and the warm intimate face for friends and family. Kuzmovna is the stern landlord who calls J. into her office “fríamente, porque el estilo de gobierno que impera en un país se transparenta en la actitud que asumen los padres de familia, los directores de escuela y hasta los administradores de poca monta” (140). Yet after this show of authority, performed for the benefit of the other residents, she throws off her “traje de funcionario” (141), and behind closed doors she laughs with him about his romance with “la tártara del correo” (141). Likewise, Alfiá, the young, mute Tatar woman with whom J. has a brief romance in Livadia, recognizes J. as different, but without any negative connotations. When a letter arrives in Livadia for J.P. (a foreign name) she gives it to J., assuming that it must be for this new foreigner who has appeared. Her own status as nierus, as a member of the Tatar ethnic minority, may partly explain her openness to J.

The final character who receives full treatment is Mikhail Petrovich, an elderly man who lives in Kuzmovna’s hostel. His attitude towards nierus mirrors closely that of the anonymous woman in Enciclopedia. Petrovich spends his days wandering the city, taking notes about the abuses committed by immigrants (principally from the Caucasus and Central Asia) and writing to Chernomorskie Viesti, the local newspaper, “denuncias sobre el alarmante incremento de la presencia extranjera en Crimea, en todo el sur de Rusia” (146). We see then that the characters of Livadia offer a range of responses to the foreign J., though some degree of xenophobia tends to be present.
The family of Russian expatriates around whom Rex is centered pays less attention to the narrator’s nationality. At one point, the father, Vasily, even expresses admiration for the narrator’s command of Spanish, leading the narrator to ask himself, “¿Debía interrumpirle ... explicarle o aclararle que el español era mi lengua materna?” (96). Vasily seems not to imagine that a man whose intelligence he respects, as he does the narrator’s, could be anything other than Russian-speaking.

The narration of Rex is limited to the psychology of the narrator, and the internal workings of the other characters are not developed beyond the narrator’s unreliable interpretation of them. We do find episodes, however, that seem to express what may be below the surface of these characters. One such moment comes when the narrator approaches an unknown Russian man in a hotel lobby. Before addressing the man, the narrator recalls that, “Siempre les extrañaba ... ser interpelados por mí. Son mis amigos, pero no lo saben, reniegan de mí, de mi amistad. Juntos, les decía, en las trincheras del socialismo. ¿Qué tal? En las trincheras, ¡y del socialismo!” (158). We get an overview of Russians’ surprise at and resistance to being addressed in Russian by an obvious nierus, and the interaction in this hotel lobby is no exception:

Y sin apartarse el teléfono de la oreja me estudió de pies a cabeza y me espetó: Nu i kak banani v etom godu v tvoem Gondurace? ‘¿Qué tal las bananas este año en (tu) Honduras?’ (O de dondequiera que seas, quiso decir.)
El habla ultrajante, el tono. Al punto que me hizo lamentar haberme dirigido a él. Urgido él mismo a abandonar las profundidades asiáticas, poco dado a fraternizar con un ex aliado, todo eso. (158)

Another episode that similarly hints at what is below the surface of a character from Russia comes near the end of the novel. If the romantic connection between the narrator and Alfiá suggests a sense community between nierus in Livadia, such a sense of community is entirely absent between Psellus and Batyk, Vasily’s Buryatian assistant, in Rex. The Cuban
and the Buryatian “servants” develop a ridiculous rivalry in which they fight for the favor of their Russian “lord.” During a lavish party in which Vasily hopes to win the political support of the Russian expatriate community, Batyk seeks to destroy the narrator by embarrassing him in front of the formal crowd. To do this he attacks a perceived weakness based on the narrator’s Cuban identity: he plays a CD of rumba music. The narrator, as Batyk foresaw, is powerless to keep his body from dancing this undignified, from the Russian point of view, dance. The episode turns out well for Psellus, as his pupil, Petia, quickly changes the music, and Psellus proceeds to dance a breathtaking waltz with Nelly, his employer’s wife; but it shows that while nationality is practically unmentioned in the novel, the Russian characters are aware of his Cuban nationality, or at least of his Caribbean roots, and at times seek to exploit them.

Try as he might to blend in, the narrator’s own body betrays him. His cubanidad, here manifested humorously as a genetic predisposition to Latin rhythms and dances, surfaces and threatens to break the tenuous relationship that he has with the Russians. Similarly, J. in Livadia perceives his body as a lightening rod for xenophobia. He imagines, and presumably he is right, that Petrovich looks at his dark skin and hypothesizes—“un extranjero a secas, quizá un marroquí, o de Túnez. ¿Un italiano? Poco probable. Español quizá; en fin, de algún lugar del sur (detestable)” (146). Several such instances appear in Prieto, in which the Russian characters run through a list of olive-skinned nationalities in an attempt to guess the nationality of the narrator. Curiously, at no point do the Russian characters explicitly guess that the narrator is Cuban. The closest anyone comes to correctly identifying the narrator’s nationality is when Batyk plays the rumba, a Cuban musical form. Perhaps with this detail Prieto intends to show the very small presence that Cuba has in the Russian psyche. Again in
Rex, the narrator himself describes his Otherness in terms of skin color, explaining that in Vasily’s court, a restoration of Russia’s monarchy, he will play “el modesto papel de tenante: un moro u hombre salvaje natural, un americano, de cabellera larga, el pie adelantado, la pluma de preceptor en ristre” (177).

This constant isolation of the Cuban narrator within a circle of Russians serves to underscore a key difference between Prieto and mainstream Cuban diasporic writers. Prieto’s narrator does not try to form or maintain a Cuban community abroad, nor do the works themselves seem to carry the intention of inspiring such a community. His protagonist is alone and is a loner. He is isolated not just from other Cubans and from his almost unmentioned Cuban roots, but also from the Russians around him, limited by his constant Otherness. Most of the relationships that he has are based on money—a landlord (María Kuzmovna), employers (Stockis, Vasily), a bought friend (Nastya). He does come into contact with other non-Russians and seems to have more of a connection with them, such as a Frank of unstated nationality in “Sin descansar,” a Panamanian smuggler in Stockholm and Alfiá in Livadia, but these relationships are limited both in number and in duration, and they do not serve to reverse the general trend of isolation in his existence.

This isolation may derive from Prieto’s own experience, first as a student in Siberia and later as an immigrant in Saint Petersburg. By treating this isolation, Prieto avoids making a discussion of Cuban identity the driving force of the novels, but at the same time he speaks from a point of view that is a justifiable part of that Cuban identity, for it represents the Cuban experience in Russia and, perhaps, in other countries outside of the Miami-Havana axis.
Given the Russian environment of general xenophobia and the absence of a Cuban community, one may wonder what counterbalance draws the narrator to the country. What does he like about Russia? We have seen one positive aspect in the Russian spaces that inspire the narrator’s frivolity. Another attraction for the erudite narrator is the apolitical, learned tradition embodied by Livadia’s Vladimir Vladimirovich, a literary recreation of Vladimir Nabokov, an elderly man huddled in his Saint Petersburg bookstore and ignoring the outside world. In his essay “Nunca antes,” Prieto refers to the “rusos buenos” who abandoned socialism. He obviously feels that in this sense Russians are an admirable people. What is more, in Livadia, the globetrotting J. enjoys the freedom from border control and regulation that the chaotic Russia of the 1990s offers.

Yet, the most obvious attraction that Russia holds for the narrator is its women. In Enciclopedia, José looks for a beautiful woman to convert to frivolity, a woman who is “la media matemática de todas las mujeres que había conocido en Rusia, sus perfiles superpuestos,” and he exclaims, “¡Hay tantas rusas francamente hermosas!” (91). J. reinforces this point multiple times in Livadia, noting that “abundan las mujeres bellas en Rusia” (134), and recounting a strike held by Turkish prostitutes to protest unfair competition from Russians, “mujeres tan bellas” (187). Prieto’s protagonists invariably come into contact with beautiful Russian women and reach varying levels of romantic involvement. At times we see descriptions of the female body which the narrator obviously enjoys. We should not discount these lavish descriptions of females as simple male fantasy or eroticism (the descriptions seldom become sexual, and even the one sex scene—which appears in Livadia—takes place in the dark and without many details). This attraction to the opposite sex may be
in fact an expression of attraction to Russia. Gustavo Pérez Firmat argues in *Life on the Hyphen* that, for Desi Arnaz,

who came to [the US] as an adolescent, sexual maturation and cultural adaptation are so tightly wound together that it may be impossible to pry them apart. Gender identity merges with cultural identity, as sex becomes a way of finding and defining one’s place in the new world. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Desi’s womanizing was one way—perhaps his dominant way—of conversing with American culture. (73)

Prieto’s fascination with Russian women may be a similar process of synecdoche. Russia is embodied by the Russian woman, and the narrator’s attraction to the Other, to Russia, becomes articulated in his fascination with rusas. In each work the narrator has at least one love-interest who is a Russian woman. *Livadia* adds to the usual romantic storyline several historical anecdotes about Russian women, in particular noting their intelligence and their capacity for trickery, topics which mesh nicely with the plot. But just as often as J. denounces the perfidy of V., he forgives her and wishes for her to join him in Livadia. The attraction never ends, and just as J. never abandons the hope of reunion with V., so he never considers abandoning Russia as the home-base of his globetrotting life.

Prieto’s narrator does not resemble the stereotype of the “latin lover.” Both his erudition and his vulnerability (he is, in the end, abandoned and left heart-broken by most of his would-be lovers) help him to escape the somewhat sinister connotations of seducer. In keeping with the synecdochical function that Russian women play, often the moments of romantic rejection remind the narrator most strongly of his foreignness. These moments appear when least expected, as when, in *Livadia*, J.’s historical anecdote about Roxana, a Ukrainian peasant girl who rose to be the powerful wife of Suleiman the Magnificent, digresses to a rumination about Russian woman in general and to the specific example of one Russian woman with whom he exchanged a few words in a market in Brussels. J. recounts
his attempt at flirtation, offering some friendly advice, in Russian, on the shoes the woman was considering. After a moment, the woman smiled, “porque comprendió que había caído tontamente en la trampa de mi falso interés. Rodeó el mostrador, me volvió a mirar desde el otro extremo y sin decirme una palabra, considerando algo, tal vez mi procedencia, se alejó” (135). There is nothing xenophobic about the woman’s response, but in J.’s interpretation of her response, he seems to suspect that his Otherness scared the woman away. The rejection itself takes his mind directly to his Otherness.

The narrator’s attempts at romance offer Prieto the opportunity to explore the experience of Otherness, of being forced to recognize an ever-present barrier between yourself and those who surround you. The xenophobia exhibited by Petrovich in Livadia and the anonymous woman of Enciclopedia may offend the narrator and complicate his life in Russia, but he can discount them to a degree as extreme, unrepresentative cases. This failed flirtation in Brussels is more troubling. Here we see an example of the difficulties faced by the outsider in trying to establish interpersonal relationships. Prieto shows us the objective experience of the narrator’s failure to make a connection with the Russian woman, and then we see the nagging suspicion, which plagues the émigré, that such failures derive in the end from his unavoidable outsider status.

2.5) The Importance of Language

As may be expected given the cast of characters that participate in Prieto’s works, the dialogue of these works may be written in Spanish but is understood to take place generally in Russian. In addition to this implied use of Russian, all of the stories and novels are peppered with terms and phrases in Russian. However, knowledge of Russian is never
necessary in order to read the works. Russian words are sprinkled in probably for exotic effect and to grant the writer authority with regards to Russia. Other languages such as English, German and Turkish also appear, though to a far lesser degree. Prieto’s method for including Russian has developed over the years, leading to more parenthetical translation in his more recent novels. In Nunca antes, Prieto includes many individual Russian words, and generally they are not translated but are understandable from the context. Enciclopedia aims in part to define some of the principal Russian words and concepts which appear in Prieto, and thus it may be considered something of a primer for readers of Prieto. When chunks of Russian do appear, a translation generally follows in parenthesis, a practice continued in Livadia. In Rex, the author uses much less Russian than he had in earlier books—only a few instances of individual words, which are not translated, and one full sentence with parenthetical translation.

In some cases, we see the joy which a professional translator such as Prieto takes in the challenge of converting the nuances of one language into another. Numerous entries of Enciclopedia take up the task of translating in depth a single Russian term for the uninitiated reader. These entries also revel in the possibilities for humor, as when Prieto explains the term HAM (60). Prieto takes the opportunity to explore the nature of Russian rudeness, and he humorously proposes that each Ham sees himself as a king in hiding (à la Peter the Great), “que descubre, desagradablemente sorprendido, que además de llevar el delantal y el lápiz tras la oreja–indispensables para el disfraz–debió también correr de la cocina al salón, apuntar los pedidos y soportar las quejas de la clientela” (61).

In Livadia, moments of translation appear when the narrator relishes in the translation of particularly rich phrases. When María Kuzmovna learns of J.’s romance with Alfiá, she
erupts in laughter with “Nu ty daiosh!”—(Frase intraducible que aquí tiene el significado de: ¿Cómo, con tantas muchachas que hay aquí, de toda Rusia, vienes a enredarte con la muda del correo?)” (Livadia 141). Later, in an argument between V. and her fellow prostitute Leilah, we see V. yell threateningly in Russian “Ponial, Masha?” Prieto explains,

Le gritó–: Ponial?—que quería decir ‘¿Has entendido?’, pero en masculino, como dicho a un hombre, sin la a final, indispensable para poner la frase en femenino; cambio de género que debía transmitirlse a Leilah la gravedad de su amenaza …. Le dijo también Masha porque es como si dijeramos un “Iván cualquiera” y más tarde, aquel mismo día, descubrí que era como las rusas del Saray se llamaban entre ellas para dejar claro la lejanía de la patria, la comunión niveladora del oficio, la sencillez campesina con que podían poner en práctica la amenaza, como una María, una Masha de aldea que, dando alaridos, mesándose los cabellos, mata al amante infiel con un cuchillo de cocina y cumple luego cinco años en presidio, absolutamente en paz con su destino, bordando pañuelos y entonando romanzas campesinas. (182)

Here Prieto dedicates a sizable paragraph to the translation of two words. Translation in this case becomes an opportunity not only to display knowledge of the intricacies of Russian grammar, but also to deepen the psychological portrait of the Russian character and to sketch out the violent nature of the village life from which she has come.

The narrator’s own relationship to Russian is somewhat ambiguous. It is clearly not his mother tongue, and yet it almost is. “En ruso,” he writes, “para impostor tienen (tenemos) samozbaniets” (Enciclopedia 142). Here we see that the narrator’s identity has one foot in the Russian circle and one foot out, a topic that will be discussed more at length in Chapter 3.

Yet, as we see in Livadia, Spanish is still the language which produces in J. visceral reactions. Realizing that he has been abandoned by V., J. looks over the rail of the ferry and discovers “en la estela del barco cómo me había dejado engañar por una … Iba a decirlo, pero temí pronunciar en español aquella palabra que empañaría irremediablemente los días pasados en Estambul, el peligro vivido juntos, y pasé automáticamente al ruso” (18). Here
Russian is undoubtedly the second language, in which words such as prostitute do not have the same emotional impact as the words of the native Spanish.

_Livadia_ is an interesting case in that the text of the novel is in fact the rough draft of J.’s letter to V. Because we are told that V. does not speak Spanish, such a draft would have to be written in Russian. Considered in isolation, this status as “translated” novel may seem to explain _Livadia_’s standardized Spanish. However, Prieto’s other works, none of which maintain the translation artifice to the same degree, also use standard Spanish not particularly identifiable as Cuban. In all of Prieto’s works, we find only a handful of Cubanisms, which tend to appear when the protagonist, frustrated, abandons Russian and breaks into Spanish. In _Livadia_, for example, J. declares: “me desahogué profundamente, en español. Proferí, lo puedo confiar a este borrador: ‘¡Manda pinga!’ y hasta ‘¡Le roncan los cojones!’” (251).

Aside from these very few exceptions, Prieto’s Spanish is standardized, unanchored to any particular place or dialect. Perhaps the international flavor of his Spanish aims to create an ambiance of foreignness, much like all foreigners in some older Hollywood films speak with a British accent. Or perhaps it is just another example of the narrator, or the author, hiding his _cubanidad_.

2.6) Cultural References to Russia

One of the most appealing aspects of Prieto’s fiction is his ability to recreate the experience of Russia. He accomplishes this recreation in part through all of the elements that I have discussed to this point, by compiling Russian attitudes, personality traits and figures of speech. He also includes a wealth of cultural idiosyncrasies which identify his Russian setting and prove his own familiarity with it. Much of _Enciclopedia_ consists of Prieto’s
humorous explanations of Russian customs or contradictions to the uninitiated outsider. In one example, he recounts the Russian custom of pretending to spit when talking about a disliked person or thing, and he contrasts it with their strong aversion to actually spitting. “Una ESCUPIDA real,” he notes, “–tan inocente–un salivazo al césped, los pone al borde de la histeria; primero porque se trata del césped y son muy amantes de lo verde, y luego porque es ‘feo’. ¿Acaso no lo es también la falsa ESCUPIDA sonora?” (47). Later, he ridicules the Russian “prurito de hacerlo todo comprensible, de inventariar el cosmos” by reproducing over a page of absurdly obvious “Reglas para la utilización del ascensor para pasajeros” posted in the apartment building of the narrator (87-88).

While most of the cultural references of Enciclopedia appear as individual entries, isolated from the narrative thread, those of Livadia are woven into the story of J. Multiple times in Livadia, J. remarks on the manner in which Russians address envelopes, noting that none of V.’s letters “consignaba la dirección del remitente, que en Rusia se escribe en el ángulo inferior derecho del sobre” (175).

J. has internalized some of the Russian customs to which he alludes. We see an example of his “Russified” nature when, in the town of Livadia, he rises from his bed to close the window, adding, “No sentía frío en ese momento, pero prefiero que no haya corriente cuando estoy acostado” (124). Russians generally argue that air blowing on a sleeping person causes sickness. J. also refers to the Russian custom of requiring a dance before handing over a letter, “cuando alguien tiene una carta para ti, y te ordenan, jocosamente: ‘¡Baila!’, y uno debe levantar una pierna y luego otra, como un oso de feria, torpe” (123). This particular cultural reference is interesting from multiple angles. First, Prieto devotes time and space to explaining at some length an action, a manner of teasingly waving a letter, that would have been understood immediately by Russian readers or those
culturally familiar with Russia. Thus, we see that Prieto’s intended reader is not Russian, and perhaps this weakens the case that his work should be considered Russian literature. Second, the disdain with which he describes the necessary dance—“como un oso de feria, torpe”—implies that the narrator knows another, better way to dance, hinting at his own Caribbean roots.

The recreation of the experience of Russia likely derives in part from Prieto’s own nostalgia for his adopted homeland. Prieto also appears to enjoy his function as a cultural guide who introduces his Hispanic readership to the warts and the beauties, the contradictions and the virtues of Russia. But at the same time, he looks beyond Russia, and a metaphorical reading of his work takes us back to his native island, Cuba.
Chapter 3 – Reading Russia as Cuba

3.1) Russian Politics and History

For an interpretive reading of Prieto’s work, his use of Russian politics and history is perhaps the most intriguing aspect. On one level, we may read Russia as a stand-in for Cuba and the criticism of socialism in the USSR as criticism of the Cuban Revolution. Although Cuba almost never arises in his fiction, Prieto has dealt with Cuba and Cuba’s recent past at length in his essay “Nunca antes.” To illustrate the correspondence that I see between Russia and Cuba, let us compare the language used to criticize the Soviet Union with that used to directly criticize Cuba in Prieto’s nonfiction. First his take on the Soviet Union:

Es decir, se evidenció un profundo antagonismo entre el quietismo de la Doctrina y el vertiginoso escándalo de los pañales desechables; entre la búsqueda de un reino de verdad en la Tierra y la “línea general” del siglo, que era consumir el presente, considerar el futuro una mera realidad mental. Los pueblos cautivos del Imperio se asomaban a la noche oscura y al mar cargado de gratos efluvios por el que avanzaba la nave iluminada que era el carnaval permanente de Occidente, y suspiraban pensativos: “Sí, está en vías de descomposición … Pero ¡qué bien huele!” (Enciclopedia 74)

The image of the Carnival reappears in Prieto’s essay, “Nunca antes,” in which he criticizes Cuba specifically. Here he recounts the appropriation and banalization of the Carnival by the Cuban socialist state:

A principios de los setenta se nos explicó que elegir una Reina del Carnaval partiendo de excelencias físicas, otorgándole clara prioridad a lo biológico sobre lo social y ético, constituía un deplorable espectáculo, un proceder que debíamos relegar al olvido junto con las Fiestas de Quince (¡tan frivolas!). Tiempo después, los carnales dejaron de acompañar la Epifanía y ganaron un inequívoco cariz político: su apertura venía precedida de un largo y tedioso discurso inaugural …. En la Habana cerraron todos los salones de baile y la veleidosa moda, no sujeta a un plan, era
Both cases show Prieto’s argument that the self-sacrifice of socialism was doomed to give way to a more enjoyable lifestyle of frivolity. And the similarity of language and tone in passages such as these, which deal with Russia and Cuba, opens the door to a broader reading of Russia as a replacement for Cuba.

The politics surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union play a prominent role in Prieto’s earlier works, *Nunca antes* and *Enciclopedia*. He studies the events from a human rather than historical perspective. The work in which politics figures most prominently is without doubt *Enciclopedia*. Although the incessant self-sacrifice of socialism was tiring for inhabitants of the USSR, the shift to frivolity was not easy. The “encyclopedia” entry CAÍDA DEL IMPERIO explores the trauma of the fall of socialism. Ever conscious of his Otherness, José describes himself as “el testigo de excepción, el fámulo que oculto en la caballeriza descubre al emperador tembloroso … y lo ve ensillar su pura sangre de la huida” (33). He recounts watching—“el alma en vilo”—the appearance of beggars on the streets of the USSR and the runaway inflation that devoured his savings. And he relates his eventual acceptance:

“Aprendí a vivir sin la seguridad, la esperanza, el centro del Universo que era la Doctrina, y cada día despertaba con una porción menos de alma, más claro, pero más disminuido por la conciencia de mi error, de los años idos en vano, de que había apostado a un falso emperador” (33). Entirely absent here is the playful tone which dominates other parts of *Enciclopedia*. This trauma continues later in the novel, as the narrator laments that in his portrayal of Russia he does not have words to capture

la indiferencia dulce de quien muere de inanición y frío, ni para el abismo descomunal de la condena inmerecida, ni para el horrible descubrimiento de que no existe error alguno, sino el refinado absurdo que es la ausencia total de sistema, el
pulular del caos bajo el orden aparente, los millones de muertes y una concreta …
(62; ellipsis present in original)

With the exception of the millions of deaths and the cold, all of the horrible realizations listed here could just as easily refer to Cuba. CAÍDA and a handful of other entries stick out for their somber tone of loss and trauma.

An interesting comparison may be made between this trauma and the trauma of exile that figures so prominently in mainstream Cuban diasporic literature. Javier Betancourt argues that Prieto diverges from mainstream diasporic literature precisely in his rejection of nostalgia and his “tenaz reorientación hacia lo inmediato” (230). Nostalgia is one response to the trauma of exile, but another response to trauma in general is to take refuge in the present, to avoid reliving the unpleasant past or worrying about an uncertain future. One way to interpret the frivolity and humor so prevalent in Prieto’s works is as an effort to escape the trauma of disillusionment with socialism and with Cuba, to evade thoughts of “los años idos en vano.” This sense of having wasted one’s life by bowing to “un falso emperador” informs his relation both to Russia and to Cuba. For the narrator of Enciclopedia, Russia may have been the source of a painful “desidealización,” but this experience in the end increases the narrator’s affection for Russia. As regards Cuba, on the other hand, the narrator loses his homeland by converting to frivolity, for abandoning socialism means that he will not likely return home to socialist Cuba. His traumatic loss is not the experience of ejection or flight shared by exiled writers, but it is a similar experience, one shared perhaps by all émigrés who at some point realize that they will never return to their homeland.

Thus, one purpose of Prieto’s frivolity may be to serve as a mode of escape, allowing the narrator, and perhaps the author, to avoid the trauma by concentrating on the present. But a reading of frivolity in these works as a way of coping with trauma eventually breaks down
because of the narrator’s own ambivalence towards frivolity. This unconscious motive may be applicable to the dandy protagonist of “Nunca antes” and Enciclopedia, but as we have seen, the narrator himself is an older, more reflective version of the protagonist. Such entries as CAÍDA show clearly that the narrator does not avoid discussion of his trauma. Rather than connecting trauma to the apparent escape of frivolity, perhaps we should consider trauma in connection with the cathartic process of writing. One common psychological treatment for trauma victims is that of journal writing, in which the patient unburdens himself about the event. Writing appears to have a cathartic effect for Prieto’s narrator as well, and perhaps this catharsis explains the absence of such political references in Prieto’s later novels.

The fall of socialism becomes less prominent in Livadia and all but disappears from Rex, but anecdotes from Russian history are common to all of his works. These numerous anecdotes help fill in the Russian backdrop over which the action of the novels takes place. They vary from some of the most extraordinary events of Russia’s tumultuous history to minutiae such as the entomological interest of the last czar, Nicholas II. As with the presence of Russian words, these references impress the reader with the narrator’s in-depth knowledge of Russia.

One anecdote that appears in multiple works is that of the letter from Karl Marx to Vera Zazulich. In both Enciclopedia and Livadia, a Russian character explains to the narrator the story of Marx’s letter, a letter that declared that the historical inevitability of socialism applied only to Western Europe and not to Russia. The Russian characters tell us how the letter was “escamoteada por los bolcheviques” (Livadia 149), dooming Russia to a failed socialist experiment. The anecdote as a whole paints a picture of revolutionary leaders who guide their country down a path that they know will not lead to a successful socialist state.
Here again one cannot but wonder whether we may read Russia as Cuba, for Prieto’s description of Cuba also underscores the awkwardness with which Marxism was made to fit the island:

“A menudo me he preguntado cómo siendo tan frívolos aceptamos, a la vuelta de pocos años, los principales dogmas de la Doctrina …. Es cierto que la evangelización fue violenta: se hizo un titánico esfuerzo para convertirnos a la seriedad, para que alcanzáramos la adustez de un país “consciente del momento histórico”. (“Nunca antes” essay 75)

In the treatment of Russia and of Cuba we see a picture of a violent leadership which disregards its people while trying to impose a system inherently unsuitable for the country.

In the cases both of the historical anecdote and of the treatment of recent Soviet-Russian history, the connections between Russia and Cuba are only implicit. And yet, the correspondence between his treatment of Russia in fiction and of Cuba in non-fiction is undeniable. Though Prieto’s works do not limit themselves to the realm of political commentary, there is an aspect of political commentary present in them. To the extent that Prieto’s politics enter his work, we see that he is anti-socialist and, by extension, anti-Castro. However, Prieto argues for leaving the political realm entirely. His commentary focuses on the trauma experienced by individuals, not on sweeping matters of policy. He is not a nation-building dissident, but rather a proponent of personal freedom, in particular the freedom to create any type of art, even that which deviates from social engagement (“Nunca antes” essay 78).

3.2) Prieto: A Post-National Writer?

Rafael Rojas has noted a post-national quality in the work of Prieto (420). Yet, as we have seen above, a valid reading of these works places Cuba as the veiled referent behind
much of the discussion of Russia. Prieto is a post-national writer if by that we mean that his primary concern is not the nation. Even while criticizing socialism, Prieto’s writing does not seek to influence the political fate of Cuba. We should not assume, however, that post-nationalism entails the abandonment of the homeland, even though at first glance Prieto does abandon Cuba. And what about the Russian reviewers’ claims on Prieto? To what degree does he adopt an alter-ego who is Russian? The Cuban-born narrator is a hybrid figure, his identity lying somewhere between Russia and his almost unmentioned native island.\textsuperscript{18} We see this hybridity in his ambivalent relationship to the Russian language (almost claiming it as his own), in his recognition of Tchaikovsky as “mi casi compatriota” (Enciclopedia 52) and in his reference to Russia as “mi patria de adopción” (Rex 223). The narrator-protagonist also chafes at his exclusion from Russianness, as when the xenophobic Petrovich refuses to hear J.’s opinion about kisel (a syrupy Russian drink), responding “Usted, cállese. Usted es extranjero” (115). J. thinks, in response, “Yo no había tenido una infancia con vasos de kisel en el desayuno, es cierto, pero ¿no contaban los litros, los cientos de litros que había tomado…?” (115).

To a large degree Prieto seeks to erase the cubanidad of his narrator, and yet, this erasure is accompanied by constant hints about the narrator’s nationality and about his Otherness within Russia. As with the reduction of the narrator’s name to J., or José, or the adoption of a pseudonym such as Psellus (in Rex), the veiling of the narrator’s nationality adds to the work both by indicating an existential concern and by creating a cat and mouse game between the author and reader, wherein the reader tries to piece together the clues of the narrator’s unspoken past. Let us evaluate now the manner in which Prieto tries to erase
his narrator’s **cubanidad**, the manner in which he bit by bit reintroduces it and my interpretation of why he resorts to this process.

We have already seen in the discussion of setting and language that Prieto does not situate his works in Cuba and he does not write, in general, with identifiably Cuban Spanish. The protagonist also avoids identifying himself as Cuban. This evasion appears both in his interaction with other characters, generally Russians, and in his narration directed to the reader. Perhaps the best example of how the narrator avoids revealing his nationality to the Russians who surround him comes from **Livadia**, when a young Russian man strikes up a conversation with J. and the conversation leads to Bacardí rum:

“¿No es lo que toman en tu país?”
“¿En qué país?”
“Bueno, pensé que eras de alguno de esos países donde lo toman.”
… No me gustaron nada sus preguntas. Yo era extranjero, ¿qué importaba de qué país? (298-99)

Here J. wraps himself in his anonymity as though for protection. Indeed, he worries soon afterwards that the young man was actually a member of the state security apparatus that was bringing “desde Moscú, una **lettre de cachet**, el despacho con el sello oficial que encerraba la orden de mi destierro o encarcelamiento, y había querido observarme” (294). We see a concern that derives from the vulnerable legal situation of the migrant, whose Otherness is clearly defined by immigration laws and who, as a non-citizen, lives with the constant threat of deportation. Perhaps by trying to erase his nationality, the narrator is really taking a step towards erasing his Otherness, eliminating any foreign past that would set him apart from Russians both in the cultural and the legal spheres. **Enciclopedia** opens with a vision of José arriving in P*** (from later description of the setting we know that the hidden name here is “Peter,” the name Russians use for Saint Petersburg). José feels obliged to adopt
the confrontational “street face” common to Russians: “Ése era yo, hablando como el capitán de un barco que mantiene a raya a la marinera revuelta. Un conocimiento indispensable para moverme impune por Moscovia” (9). To function freely in Russia, José must first defy his own foreignness, threatening the train-station porter in flawless Russian. Still, in other cases, the protagonist adopts Russianness as a tool not to blend in, but to assert himself vis-à-vis other non-Russians. As J. sells contraband night-vision goggles in Stockholm, he rudely dismisses casual onlookers, “déspota como una tendera moscovita” (Livadia 57).

But if at times the erasure of his Cuban nationality, or even of his foreignness altogether, arises from practicality and caution, at other times the narrator’s evasion of his nationality has a more playful quality. In Enciclopedia, Marif, the young Russian boyfriend of Nastya, attacks José as “uno de esos extranjeros pobres con ínfulas de grandeza” and asserts, “Mientras tengamos extranjeros tomando y bebiendo en nuestros restaurantes … seduciendo a nuestras mujeres, el mujik ruso nunca podrá …” (65). The ellipsis, present in the original, seems to imply that Marif does not know exactly what it is that Russian men should be doing, just that the foreign influence is keeping them from doing it. Yet, another acquaintance of José’s jumps to his defense, scolding Marif: “¿Cómo puedes renegar de tu amistad con Hussein?’ (Hussein, el escriba asirio. Yo. Más o menos acertado. Me había bautizado con un nombre extranjero. Como si dijéramos un Iván cualquiera.)” José playfully constructs his own identity. He toys with the ignorance of his Russian acquaintances who, unable to distinguish between a Cuban and “un shah del desierto” (66), accept whatever fabricated roots he wants to create for them.

That this evasion of cubanidad should continue when the narrator is not talking to Russians, when he is communicating in the intimate medium of writing, suggests that the
evasion does not serve only for protection and amusement. In Livadia, he speaks of books “en ruso, en inglés, francés y en mi propia lengua” (43), but he does not specify which language is his native one, and given the soup of languages which appear throughout the book, such imprecision creates a level of doubt in the reader. Similarly, he refers to “mi país–un país lento” without naming the country (114). Enciclopedia contains such circumlocutions as “Yo, que venía del Trópico” (17). Rex, structured as a private dialogue between Psellus and his pupil, Petia, also contains such evasions, even to the point of seeming to suggest that Psellus is a Spaniard, as he remarks on “nosotros, los españoles” (25). These deeper evasions, in which the narrator seeks to deny his nationality even to himself, appear to serve two purposes. First, they suggest a traumatic break with his past, and the psychological need to avoid the past. Second, they heighten in the reader’s mind the uncertainty of the narrator’s identity. The reader enters the plot as a detective trying to piece together the clues. We would do well to recall Borges’s riddle in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”: “En una adivinanza cuya respuesta es el ajedrez, ¿cuál es la única palabra prohibida?” (115). The answer is, of course, ajedrez. Similarly, the careful elision of Cuba throughout Prieto’s work paradoxically serves to suggest Cuba, for the very act of painstakingly avoiding Cuba means that he writes with Cuba in mind. Thus, we should not read into his elision a simple rejection of Cuba or cubanidad.

Now let us analyze the manner in which Prieto subtly reintroduces Cuba into his texts. Foremost are the constant hints at a correspondence between author and protagonist. Brief biographical notes appear on all of Prieto’s books, so the reader cannot help but assume that the young Cuban narrators named José who live in Russia are in fact alter-egos of the
author. As I have discussed above, internal references among the books suggest that the narrators are in fact the same character.

Second, though the texts begin without revealing the narrator’s nationality or even native language (unless we assume that his native language is the language in which he writes), hints pop up that suggest that his country may be Cuba and his language Spanish. Such hints are evasions of Cuba which still bring us to that general part of the globe: “Yo, que venía del Trópico” (Enciclopedia 17), “Tú [José] creciste rodeado de frutas” (76). In more extreme cases, the name of his homeland appears, but is not identified as his native country: “puntos tan distantes del globo como Japón o Nueva Zelanda (¡o incluso Cuba!” (Livadia 35). Rex offers a clear example of the progression of hints which leads us step by step to a discovery of the narrator’s nationality. He first reveals that “el español era mi lengua materna” (96), later that he is from somewhere around “América del Sur” (102), that his homeland was together with Russia “en las trincheras del socialismo” (158), and finally he reveals directly that he is from Cuba (201). The clues bring the reader closer and closer to Cuba before finally allowing him to solve the mystery of the narrator’s origin.

There are a handful of moments that may be identified as nostalgia for Cuba. Interestingly, all of these moments have to do with dancing. Even in the short stories, one might see a certain Cuban approach to the philosophy of frivolity, for the narrator declares, “Sólo cuando se baila y se vive alegre bajo el cielo azul deseamos detener el tiempo, sufrirlo en todos sus resquicios” (92) [emphasis added]. In Livadia, one night J. hears a merengue coming from somewhere in the darkened, Crimean town and,

sin que nadie pudiera verme, feliz, me deslicé con suavidad por el asfalto, marcando los pasos de la manera que sabía perfectamente que debía hacerse. Me extrañó oír esa canción, un merengue, aquí en Livadia. Alguna pareja de adúlteros se habría dado cita entre los pinos y la escuchaba como música de fondo, sin otorgarle mayor
This scene gives us an interesting view of the tug-of-war between native land (or at least native region, since the merengue is technically a Dominican musical form) and adopted land. J. dances happily “sin que nadie pudiera verme.” The empty street is a context in which he can take off his mask, expose his Otherness without the risk that Russians will see, without creating a barrier between himself and his adopted culture. Not only does the unexpected Caribbean music lead J. to dance, but he later tries to find the music and buy it. For all of his globetrotting, something in him yearns for Cuba.

An equally curious dance scene appears in *Rex*, in which, as discussed above, Psellus’s rival, Batyk, tries to discredit him by making him look ridiculous. He puts on a CD of rumba music, and Psellus is physically unable to resist dancing: “Escuchando y obedeciendo al son de aquella música y dejándome llevar en la única dirección de aquel son diabólico, ante el que sin defensas, Petia, el más mínimo control. ¡Tanta perfidia!” (198).19 Although his intellectual self tries to reject the resurgent cubanidad, his body betrays him and dances.

The identity of Prieto’s narrator is constantly in play. He hides his nationality from those Russians who surround him and, at times, even avoids mentioning it to himself. Sometimes this evasion arises from fear and sometimes from a more playful motivation. Either by adopting Russianness or by erasing the particulars of his origin, the narrator tries to blend in with his Russian surroundings. His ultimate inability to pull off this chameleon-like feat may be read as a commentary on continuing relevance of nationality in our seemingly transnational world.
Chapter 4 – Conclusion

Russia plays multiple roles in the work of Prieto—a commercial strategy, an object of nostalgia and a veil behind which appears Cuba. Prieto’s own choice of subject matter establishes him as a voice of the Russian diaspora within the Hispanic world. The author may not have had the final say in decisions regarding titles of his translations, cover art, etc., but in each of these cases the final products reflect a strategy (be it Prieto’s or his publisher’s) of marketing Russia. Though Prieto’s narrator at times faces a kind of xenophobia that reflects poorly on Russia, much of the portrayal of Russia has the tone of nostalgic reminiscences of an émigré who writes from Russian culture towards Hispanic culture, translating the Russian experience for his readers. Prieto’s works add a new dimension to the diasporas of both Russia and Cuba, serving as a reminder to the field of Cuban literary studies that there is a Russian component to the Cuban diaspora.

He carefully reconstructs Russia for his Hispanic readers, taking advantage of traditional novelistic elements such as setting, character and language, as well as adding more unique aspects such as the philosophy of frivolity. The goal of opening Russia to his readers is stated openly in Enciclopedia and is shared implicitly, to varying degrees, by his other works. Such attention is given to the reproduction and exploration of Russian culture that Russian reviewers have seen Prieto’s work as a piece of Russian literature. And yet, the centrality of Russia to Prieto’s work does not result in the complete erasure of his native Cuba. Conspicuously avoiding direct references to Cuba actually serves to suggest it as a veiled referent behind the presence of Russia. Particularly in Prieto’s earlier works, Nunca
antes and Enciclopedia, the reflections on the politics of the fall of the USSR open themselves to being read as reflections on and criticism of socialist Cuba. In these works we see what may be termed an “émigré trauma,” an experience which provides interesting parallels and contrasts to the trauma of exile. His later novels Livadia and Rex do not dwell on the rejection of socialism, and thus they do not share this angle of political commentary on Cuba. They do, however, continue to offer scenes of the Cuban narrator trying unsuccessfully to blend in with his Russian surroundings. The struggles of Prieto’s narrator show the inescapable nature of nationality. Any definition of these works as post-national will have to acknowledge the curious bursts of cubanidad which the narrator experiences from time to time. The experience of Otherness in Russia is one of the most interesting aspects of Prieto’s writings. His works, which at first glance so carefully avoid nationality, in fact return to it as a central, though often implicit, theme. Not even a polyglot traveler in a world of fading borders can escape his body, which—whether through skin color or dance style—fixes and displays his point of origin.

Interesting work remains to be done regarding the influence that the experience of Russia has had on Cuban literature. Organizing my study along a spectrum of proximity to Russia, I will begin with a look at writings from the island about Russia, such as Manuel Pereiras 1982 novel El ruso. The vision of Russia produced by other Cubans outside of the island may be seen in Alejo Carpentier’s La consagración de la primavera (1978) and Jesus Díaz’s Las palabras perdidas (1992) and Siberiana (2000). At the closest point to Russia, we find actual Cuban immigrants to Russia, such as Prieto, or bi-national authors, such as Anna Lidia Vega Serova and Polina Martínez Shvietsova. The study of these authors could be complemented by a look at the image of Cuba seen in Russian literature. Though Cuba never
occupied the Russian imaginary to a great degree, such well known Russian authors as Danil Granin and Evgeny Evtushenko devoted pages to it in their works. Martínez Shvietsova is currently compiling a bilingual anthology of Russian-Cuban writings that will help to bring to the fore the group of bilingual authors and the relations between both literary traditions. This aspect of the Cuban diaspora has received relatively little attention and is fertile ground for future study. My thesis has been an attempt to bring to light the rich avenue of investigation found in the literary interplay between Cuba and Russia.
Notes

1 The 1989 USSR census lists 2,811 Cuban residents, though it does not mention whether this total includes university students. By the time of the 2002 census, the number of Cubans in Russia had dropped to 707.

2 To avoid confusion when citing this essay as opposed to the short story, I will note in parenthesis that the citation comes from “Nunca antes” essay if the source of the citation is not explicitly named in the context.

3 The pseudonym is borrowed from Michael Psellus, an eleventh-century Byzantine writer and philosopher well-known for his service as advisor to numerous emperors, and is an example of Prieto’s penchant for subtle historical or literary references.

4 This most recent story does not share the narrator-protagonist common to all of Prieto’s Russian fiction.

5 The page numbers for Prieto’s short story collection are taken from the 2002 reprinting.

6 This section of Enciclopedia is taken verbatim from his earlier short story “Nunca antes habías visto el rojo.”

7 The rise of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina to the top of the bestseller list in the United States in 2004 testifies to the American public’s appetite for things Russian, though it also indicates the power of endorsements made by Oprah Winfrey.

8 The sole exception is the 1998 edition of Enciclopedia, which mentions only his work as a translator. The omission was corrected for the 2004 reprinting.

9 The words in capital letters are a part of Prieto’s unorthodox style in this particular novel. He explains the structure of Enciclopedia as being that of hypertext (Pacheco). Each word that has its own entry appears in all caps whenever it is used throughout the novel, thus making clear the web of interrelated terms which help to explain each other and which, when considered all together, form the “encyclopedia” of a life in Russia.

10 Prieto is referring here to Vera Khalodnaya, the leading female star of silent Russian cinema. He explains Khalodnaya’s biography to the reader earlier in Enciclopedia (94-96).

11 In fact, the Chinese Palace was originally built as a dacha, or country cottage, by Catherine the Great, who ruled Russia from 1762-1796.

12 A parallel comes to mind between this orientalist and Prieto, who in his fiction surrounds himself with things Russian.
13 Here I use the term Russian in a non-ethnic sense. Batyk, as a Buryat, belongs to one of the traditional ethnicities of the Russian Federation. He is a citizen by birth of Russia, whereas the narrator is not.

14 Russian speakers use the name of the son of Noah somewhat like English speakers use the word jerk.

15 It bears noting that this particular custom is one that had changed by the time I arrived there in 2004.

16 We should note that Prieto published this essay in 2001, long after he adopted and articulated the philosophy of frivolity. Thus, the denunciation of the Fiestas de Quince as “¡tan frívolas!” should certainly be read as tongue-in-cheek.

17 The letter itself is authentic and is accurately quoted by Prieto. However, others have interpreted it as allowing for a “special” kind of socialism in Russia. For his part, Prieto says that all of the letters quoted in Livadia are real (Gómez 58).

18 The effect of Prieto’s time in Mexico and the US may be discernible in Rex, for in this latest novel the narrator does not seem as concerned with maintaining a Russian identity.

19 This quotation offers a good example of the unorthodox syntax used in Rex. The syntax is something between conversational and scatterbrained, with the narration jumping to a second thought before finishing the first one.
Bibliography

Primary Works:


---. Nunca antes habías visto el rojo. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1996.


Secondary Works:


Betancourt, Juan Carlos. “La misschtung de la nostalgia como estrategia creativa en dos obras literarias de la diáspora cubana de los noventa.” Aves de paso: autores


Martínez, Gabi. “El filón sabroso trágico de Cuba.” Rev. of Se me olvidó que te olvidé by Gabriel Mendoza, Prisionero del agua by Alexis Díaz-Pimienta and Livadia by José


