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after love: queer intimacy and erotic economies in post-Soviet Cuba

Noelle M. Stout, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, 248pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5673-8, \$84.95 (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-0-8223-5685-1, \$23.95 (Pbk)

Noelle M. Stout's *After Love* is a brave new ethnographic exploration of affective experiences of love and its ends, queer life and the co-constituting relationships between intimacy, economic policy and practice. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the complicated ways in which subjectivity, relation and intimacy are being unmade and remade through free markets and neo-liberal policies. Stout's reading, in other words, goes far beyond studies of sex tourism, post-Soviet market transitions and queer life, exploring the very undoing of familiar ways of understanding self and other.

The book travels in and through different sites—from state-sponsored medical and cultural agencies, the homes of gay men and women trying to get by in an urban post-Soviet Havana, and the working street environments of hustlers and their clients, to the worlds of gay European tourists in the city. It examines these sites on their own terms, as well as in relation to one another. By travelling through them, Stout works through the complex relationships between assumed categories of 'respectable' gay people and *pingueros* and *jineteros* (different terms for hustlers or sex workers). Each chapter delves into one of these different worlds, showing how what one does is not necessarily propped up by what one feels and considers ideal—especially when life becomes a daily struggle for survival.

Starting in the Cuba of the early 1990s, when gays simultaneously experienced the end of Soviet subsidies and ensuing economic disparities, while also gaining conditional access to respectable life, Stout shows how 'tolerance' did not and does not always mean acceptance. While some gay and lesbian Cubans were offered inclusion as non-normative sexual persons, many more were further displaced through economic hardship. The introduction of US dollars through the tourist industry made working a government job earning pesos not only less lucrative than catering to the needs of foreigners—from which one could earn ten times more than from a regular job—but sometimes not enough to make ends meet. Stout takes us into the intimate lives of urban gay men and women, hustlers, sex workers, *travestis*¹ and foreign tourists, as well as the complicated networks through which intimacy, love and sex are almost always—though in often ambivalent ways—mediated by commodification of self, other and relation.

True love, Stout tells us, was threatening to rot as Cubans experienced post-Soviet 'ontological crisis within which love and intimacy symbolized neo-liberal incursions and national uncertainty' (pp. 4–5). She shows how those who exchange gifts, money or shelter for intimacy and sex—and vice versa—are not deluded or duped, but often experience the heavy burden of realising that sex

¹A South American term that refers to males who either dress as women, identify as women, or have undergone sex-change operations to become female.

and intimacy in mixed-market economies are always tainted with some form of interested exchange. She traces the ways in which Cubans view *por interes* (for interest) relations as a loss of national values that were once based on hard work and decency, and lament a time when the cultural capital of education—not money and access to it—set the terms of social value. These shifts in social worlds and ways of knowing self have transitioned along with the market in the post-Soviet era, rupturing into felt crisis regarding the ability of Cubans to have ‘true’ relations. While the book takes up Cuba and its particular historical context, readers will find it relevant to wider interests in a global era of precarity and nostalgia for better times.

The most compelling congealing of the ambivalent entanglement of intimacy and commodification in the book comes through Stout’s presentation of a conversation between Oscar and Ruben. Two men who often enter into relationships with hustlers and sex workers, Oscar and Ruben discuss the ways in which the commodification of love has come at the cost of the most basic elements of being human and has left post-Soviet Cuban citizens with feelings of emptiness and lacking heart (pp. 94–95). Stout offers that like ‘zombies’, these hustlers, sex workers, and those who often build long-lasting relations with them become a symptom of the introduction of capitalist values ‘in which relations *por interes* vacate an emotional self and leave a money-seeking shell’ (p. 96) or otherwise a person who can only enter into intimate relation through money/commodity.

The text continues to demand interventions into queer theory on the meanings of subjectivity in transition. In other words, what would it mean to take up this study as a way of both engaging and challenging an assumed autological (Povinelli, 2006) subjectivity in North American queer theory? Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014, p. viii), for example, take up the possibilities of ‘encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation’ that can produce a non-sovereign subject. The urban gays, hustlers and others with whom Stout engages are in a nostalgic mourning of these very encounters through which ‘true love’ was possible in a time when subjectivity was not necessarily mediated through money and the commodity form. In other words, the Soviet subject was a ‘subject in relation’—a subject constituted by relation based on affective care and love.

The introduction of capitalist markets and the mediation of relations through money (especially US dollars, which shifted the ideological equality in which these subjects lived during the Soviet era) transform the subject from a ‘subject in relation’ into a subject who can only be ‘in relation’ through money/commodity mediation—or, a sovereign subject detached from others except through this mediation. How can we understand this feeling of the zombification of Cuban subjectivity as the very crux of economic crisis, as the very way in which markets do not just change how people experience their daily lives, but how they become constituted as people? These are, at this historical juncture—with twenty-five years of post-Soviet reality and postsocialism in a large part of the ex-Soviet world unfolding—the questions that studies of intimacy, love and subjectivity necessitate. Stout’s ethnographic tracing of the intervention of the dollar in relationships, kinships and love opens up the grounds on which to think these questions.

references

Berlant, L. and Edelman, L., 2014. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Povinelli, E.A., 2006. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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