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Mi chino, mi china: Exoticism and peripheral discourse: re-thinking orientalism within Cuban identity

While Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provided the momentum for a whole range of critical engagement, including the development of postcolonial theory, "the Orient – Occident dichotomy has been largely (de)constructed and its essentialism debunked" (Sah 464). Moreover, Said overlooked representations of the Orient Other from peripheral discourses in which the Oriental has also been present. Said did not consider, for instance, representations of the Orient from the developing New World, i.e. Latin America. According to Julia Kushigian, Said ignored what she has called Hispanic Orientalism and its potential strategic openness. For Kushigian (1991), Hispanic Orientalism represents the Asian Other from a vantage point – a perspective outside contradictory referents of power and domination, as the discourse has been created from real contacts within the margins.

Through the analysis of two Cuban-American novels, this article explores whether Hispanic Orientalism presents a real alternative to Said's *Orientalism*, examining the way in which the Chinese exotic Other has been represented from the perspective of Cuban cultural production in the diaspora, which whilst peripheral and minority, is for many a source of original and nostalgic creation. In addition, the





research analyzes Cuban hybrid identity through the inclusion of the Chinese component within the construction of *cubanidad* or Cubanness.

Hispanic Orientalism has been defined by Kushigian as “the south to south dialogue, the alternative reading, engaging the Other in a compelling, more interactive and parallel systems of knowledge” (2). In this way, the narratives dealing with Chinese communities in Cuba, where both cultures have coexisted, confirm the fact that national borders are no longer home to homogeneous people and thus, the texts should include not only the process of migration and exile to the postcolonial border, but also engage in dialogues between those outside imperialistic cultures; cultures that although different may be complicit. In fact, according to Bhabha: “The problem is not simply the “selfhood” of the nation as opposed to the “otherness” of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population” (98).

For Kushigian (1991), far from confronting realities, Hispanic Orientalism aims to preserve one’s own identity and emphasizes coexistence within peripheral cultures defined by hybridity. Indeed, Cuban perception comes not only from an imagined interpretation of the Orient, but also from substantial contact with its people, culture, and customs, due to immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries and, in addition, the more active communication with China after the fall of the Soviet





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Union. Therefore, it seems as if the Chinese presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba, might well be understood as the counterpoint to the European recurrent vision of Asia as the exotic Other, subverting Said's dichotomies and constituting itself as a collage that embeds and incorporates several commonalities between the two regions.

However, whilst the Trans-Atlantic ties between Europe and Latin America have been scrutinized by critics for many years, analysis of the Trans-Pacific connections are still considered to be a relatively new subject, despite the fact Cuba has been a crucial landmark in the history of Chinese interaction with the West. According to Du Hart, Asians have received little attention by historians (1993, 2009) but having had the first Chinatown in Latin America and the second most populated in the Americas after San Francisco, the contributions of the Chinese diaspora in the building of the Cuban nation are now far too obvious.





Barrio Chino (Chinatown), La Habana, Cuba
<https://www.tampapix.com/cubapics18.htm>



Collage of Barrio Chino (Chinatown), La Habana, Cuba
<http://memoriascubano.blogspot.com/2014/05/barrio-chino.html>





La Puerta de la Amistad o Puerta de los Dragones (Friendship Gate or Dragons' Gate)

La Habana, Cuba

<http://carlosbua.com/barrio-chino/>

The fact is that the Chinese presence in Cuba, as we know it, dates basically from the coolie trade, which took place at a very critical time, from 1847 to 1874, when the politics of economy and labor, and the politics of class and race, converged. Despite being described as a trade based on voluntary contract, which lasted for a minimum of 8 years, the reality was far from it.¹ In fact, according to Knight, Chinese labor in Cuba in the nineteenth century was slavery in every social aspect, as “Chinese coolies in Cuba were being bought, sold, re-sold, rented, named and renamed” (119).





The arrival of Cuban Chinese came before the dismantling of African slavery in Cuba and before the beginnings of the Cuban nation and thus, they were active agents in the making of the Cuban nation. Nonetheless, they were not accepted as an integral part of Cuban identity. Chinese were being marginalized and described mainly by stereotype. They were referred to as “the people without history” (Pérez de la Riva 1971). However, paradoxically, Cuba was already a hybrid space at the time of the Chinese arrival, and migration should have reinforced the collective experience of communities in the Diaspora, undoing the notion that just one people correspond to one nation state. Instead, the Chinese were mistreated and/or rejected by the different ethnics already living in the island and given little attention in cultural, political and historical discourses (López 2013, Hu-Dehart 2009). This led to self-denial, alienation and a strong sense of shame towards their own ethnicity and culture.

Indeed, one of the more lauded anthropologists of 20th century Cuba, Fernando Ortiz, made specific omission of the Chinese as a significant component in Cuban society, relegating the Chinese to its invisible position. According to Frank Scherer (2002), it is possible that Ortiz was perpetuating Cuban patriot José Martí’s own erasure of the Asian component in Cuban-ness. Martí, who himself was born during the period of highest Chinese immigration, stands out for the very few references to it in his works.²





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Ortiz (1940, 2002), who is mostly known for concepts such as transculturation and Cuban-ness and is himself a strong defender of “mestizaje” and hybridity within Cuban identity, considered that the Chinese element consisted of too many individual cases to be considered. Therefore, in this light, and although Ortiz rejected the arguments of “lo cubano” based on residence, nationality or birth, his oriental erasure is evident. Likewise, the melting pot or what Ortiz named “ajiaco cubano”, a culinary and homey metaphor to express heterogeneity in a more appropriate Cuban way, combines the African name of an Amerindian component, the ají or green pepper, with a Spanish suffix –aco, and no inclusion of any Chinese influence. This obliteration is because to him, the elements do not seem to have enough relevance, having been reduced to the mysterious spices from the Orient (3). In doing so, he was certainly departing from any ethnocentric perspective of Cuban-ness and embracing Afro-Creole national identity but, whilst promoting Afro-Cuban-ness, he was facilitating the politics of exclusion when it came to the Chinese. Moreover, Ortiz’s denial of the Chinese as an integral part of Cuban identity was accompanied by stereotypical comments, much too present in Cuban modernist and hygienist discourse, such as their coolness of execution and their tendency to gamble, among others. What is more, the homogenizing of Asian people under the label of “yellow mongoloids” it would be a wildly inaccurate definition as research tells us Chinese





coolies arriving to Cuba were mostly coming from the southern region of Guan Tang. Consequently, this undeniable component of Cuban-ness was also misunderstood and marginalized in Cuban literature, despite certain references by authors such as Guillén, Carpentier, or Sarduy —the latter always in strong denial of binaries and being of oriental ascendancy himself.³

Nevertheless, “otherness” is a necessary tool for understanding oneself. And it was at the turn of the 21st Century when the search for our own identities and the desire to connect with others brought about the need to re-open the Afro-Creole discourse of Cuban-ness to include the so long dismissed Chinese element as an integral part of Cuban national identity, and to explore the various ways in which the encounter took place. Analyzing the way in which the creative, although “painful” process of transculturation experienced by the marginal community, shaped the previous, hybrid, Afro-Cuban identity was indeed required, to show its fluidity, multiple developments, and complexities. It goes without saying that Chinese culture was adding another layer of complexity to the racial situation in Cuba and narratives needed to retell the process, avoiding previous exotic descriptions and finding contact zones to be able to establish analogies for those in between.

In this light, Cristina García published her 2003 novel *Monkey Hunting* and, in 2006, Daína Chaviano wrote *La isla de los amores infinitos*. Both novels, departing





from any kind of previous sinophobia, explore the unsettling experience of exile with its ambivalences and contradictions, all in the search for a better understanding of national identity. The writers, in the search for their own identities, became aware of the false sense of harmony offered by any final, hybrid product. In this way, they create characters that come to terms with the losses and gains of exile, and the painful but creative process of subsequent transculturation.

García's *Monkey Hunting* goes through the process and effects of identity formation. It is a journey in the life of Chen Pan, a Chinese man who is tricked into indentured servitude in Cuba during the coolie trade and, after becoming a cimarrón (run-away slave), settles down as a successful businessman in Chinatown, owning The Lucky Find antiques shop. Once established as a businessman in Chinatown, Chen Pan "purchases" Lucrecia, a raped woman of African descent, and her child. Although Chen Pan offers Lucrecia her freedom, she decides to stay with him and from their union they have three children. The story parallels many real situations in Cuba at the time the story takes place.⁴

However, as much as he tries to become Cuban, Chen Pan will always feel like a misfit, and the sense of not belonging will accompany him to the end of his days. And, although a set of experiences with the homeland should determine one's sense of identity, Chen Pan starts questioning whether he was genuinely Chinese





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anymore (83), as he builds a new life in Cuba. Whilst his friends call him “chino aplatanado o chino “transplantado” (6) – which in Spanish Caribbean creole means somebody who has gone native or has been uprooted – he still was the “dirty chino” in the white Cuban’s eyes.

Exile endangers Chen Pan’s own identity as he suffers a painful reversal of his most cognitive and emotional order of familiarity. On a day-to-day basis, he has to negotiate ways around experiences and memories of homeland and expand realities in the host country. This displacement leads to questioning his personal identity, as “who was he now without a country?” (21). Later on, he says: “How do I know that I am the same person I was yesterday, or an hour ago, or a moment ago?” (85). In this way, Chen Pan nostalgically raises Locke’s (1690, 2015) and Hume’s (1739, 2010) philosophical theories of personal identity and belonging which understand self as the sum of life experiences, memory and history, and one can consider himself in different places. “How should he ever return to his village?” (24), since he was not a hired worker. In reality, he was not much different from the Africans and thus, he had little leeway in deciding the course of his life. This situation of in between-ness made Chen Pan imagine homeland as a dream, reinforcing the idea of “no return.”

Although Chen Pan was made to change his name upon arrival and was treated as an animal, he gradually absorbs and assimilates the new culture and learns





to accept life in his new environment: this is a step in his own process of transculturation. Hume (1739, 2010) argued that personal identity is constituted through habits, and the habit of contracting habits is a part of human nature. Chen Pan's question of where can he go also raises the sense of no belonging – understanding belonging as a social construct based on fixed and known elements – at the same time as acknowledges his gradual changes and assumes the common migrant's idea of “no return”, as the trip back to China becomes just a dream. But Chen Pan's migration is in fact the very possibility of his becoming. In this way, Cristina's novel stimulates the idea that the sense of self is unstable and mainly a flux of experience. At this juncture, the negative connotation of exile becomes instead a productive search for Cuban-ness and a source of the author's creation.

Chen Pan's assimilation, and identity crisis, moved into cultural dislocation. He loses the capacity to express himself in the Chinese native tongue; he cuts his ponytail and takes on a new Spanish name. At this point, Chen Pan has already stopped dreaming of returning to his Chinese village, despite all depreciation and prejudices from the other Chinese and non-Chinese in Cuba. Thus, began the transculturation process, and Chen Pan moves towards deculturation. However, he will reverse this situation later on in life by undertaking a process of neo-culturation when he, aware of being “between two waters”, goes back to his roots, dressing up



again as Chinese, using his Chinese name and, although speaking in Spanish, thinking in Chinese (200). In this process he starts embracing his hybridity. Culture cannot be totalizing. In this way, he was creating a new culture. Years later, in Sagua la Grande with his son and grandson, we witness Chinese people meeting in the square to speak their own languages and read their newspapers aloud. By keeping the Chinese language alive, they were enhancing cultural identity and increasing resilience.



Presencia china en Sagua la Grande (Chinese Presence in Sagua la Grande)

<https://es.paperblog.com/presencia-china-en-sagua-la-grande-1345351/>



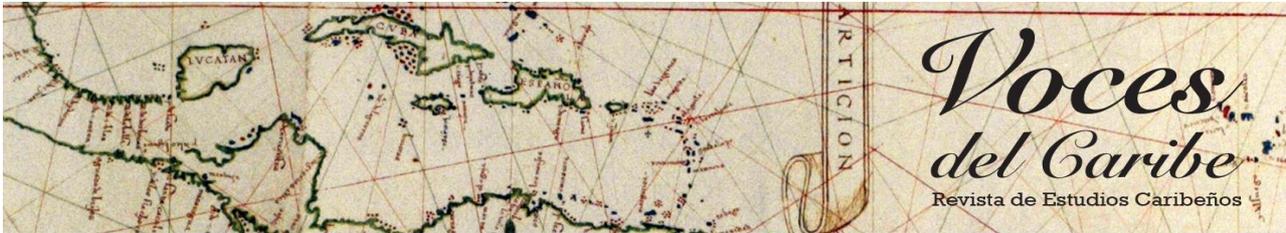


Exile can create a sense of discontinuity, but at the same time it can be a creative force of new modes of expression. In any case, as Chen Pan points out, “they probably did it to be annoying but since nobody could understand them they keep right on the reading as if nothing else happened” (89).

Lucrecia, instead, undergoes a process of Sinicism, adopting several Chinese cultural elements in such a strong way that, towards the end of her life, she decides to be buried in the Chinese cemetery. Some priests had wanted to convert her, but she did not know from what (128). She questioned why she should give up on any of the elements that cultural hybridity had to offer when she gets the most out of it by mixing them up. As she says: “She was part of Chinatown now. How could she think of baking chicken without plenty of ginger? Or deciding something important without offering persimmons to the Buddha?” (137). In this way, Lucrecia represents cultural hybridity in its very essence. Being Chen Pan’s significant other, she dismantles not only racial but also gender stereotypes and adopts Chinese customs from cooking to deciphering Chinese language puzzles:

In her opinion it was better to mix a little of this and that, like when she prepared an *ajiaco* stew. She lit a candle here, made an offering there, said prayers to the Gods of Heaven and the ones here on Earth. She didn’t believe





in just one thing. Why would she eat only ham croquettes? Or enjoy the scent of roses alone? Lucrecia liked to go to church on Easter to admire the *flores de Pascuas*, but did she need to go every Sunday? (129)

A bit later Lucrecia also questioned her origins, but she knew who she was now, a character who embraced the full sense of hybridity for what it was: “Lucrecia questioned the origin of her birth, but she did not question who she had become. Her name was Lucrecia Chen. She was thirty-six years old and the wife of Chen Pan, mother of his children. She was Chinese in her liver, Chinese in her heart (138)”

However, whilst some other characters such as Lorenzo – Chen Pan’s son who returned to Havana after being a foreigner in China and who had two transpacific families, as some of the Cuban Chinese mentioned in López work (2013) – have also retained and embraced hybridity, others failed to adapt to another culture and felt like outsiders everywhere they went. This sense of “no belonging” led them to the point of committing suicide: “Lorenzo’s skin was a home of all sorts, with its accommodations to three continents. Or perhaps home was in the blood of his grandsons as it traveled through their flesh (192).

For Pipo, Lorenzo’s son, the situation became unsustainable. Pipo migrated to the United States with Domingo, his son, soon after the Cuban Revolution, leaving his revolutionary wife behind in Cuba. Pipo was not able to fit in well in the United



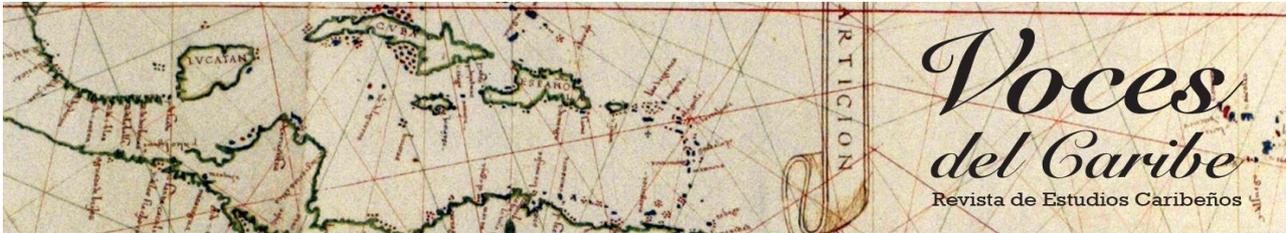


States, and this situation together with his son's lack of understanding, led him to his suicide. Although this is the first suicide in the novel, the thought had previously been in Chen Pan's mind. After the death of his father, Domingo enlisted for the war in Vietnam, becoming a transnational Chinese Afro-Cuban and, once (re)deterritorialized, he was reminded of the ambivalence of his own identity. On the battlefield, he was constantly scared of being taken for a Vietnamese and, no matter where he was, his nationality was always questioned. As much as he replied he was from Cuba, a Cuban, people were always reluctant to believe him: "In Cuba nobody asked me where I was from. If you lived in Guantanamo you were usually from there, several generations back. Everybody knew who you were (107). So, when asked by the nurse where he was from, he had to (re)examine his own identity:

Hey where are you from? The nurse asked him when the music finally stopped. Domingo wanted to answer her, that his blood was a mix of this and that –like the ajiaco prepared by his grandmother whom he never met – so, how was he supposed to choose who he wanted to be? I am from Cuba. (156, italics mine)

Domingo is clearly an in-between. He (re)constructed his own identity based on his place of origin only to be later reminded of the uncertainty of his characterized





hybridity. The nurse went on: “normally I don’t date black people, but I would make an exception with you” (156). Whilst he thought he would have been mistaken as a Vietnamese, the nurse thought he was black. At that moment, Domingo was confronted by a Lacanian thought, which claims that we are who we are only in relation to the Other and we become conscious of ourselves with the help of that Other (1966). Domingo cannot help but accepting his external imposed identity. Ultimately, Chen Pan’s great grandson reminds us of his grandfather who before him realized that personal identity may not be in accordance with the self created by the Other. Inevitably, such conversation also places Domingo in Bhabha’s “Third Space” (55), a space of ambivalence and in-betweenness, or interstices, where cultural values are redefined and negotiated.

Daína Chaviano’s *La isla de los amores infinitos* spans a period of 150 years through which four different stories and three different family trees –African, European and Chinese – converge in a final “contact zone” (Pratt 1991). The collage of rhizomatic stories coming together clearly notes the distinct traces from which Cuban identity emerges. Chaviano’s novel built a final collage by reorganizing all different pieces of each story, which by the end, merge to reaffirm the three origins upon which Cuban-ness is based. The set of racially mixed lives is torn between





cohabitation, reconciliation, confrontation, and a presentation of sets of prejudices and forbidden loves; from African-Creole unions to African-Creole-Chinese ones.

In *La isla de los amores infinitos*, cultural difference, heterogeneity, and diversity is a real territory of post-location with strong signification and values. This cultural diversity implies the recognition of a pre-given cultural context. Chaviano's multiculturalism breaks the concept of totalizing cultures and articulates and hybridizes one fully conscious of its unbalances. Chaviano's mixed origins are present in the narrative and her own exile, which is portrayed by Cecilia, a Cuban woman with Spanish ancestors who was born in Cuba and is now living in Miami. Cecilia is always distinguishable from those born in the host country and although holding negative feelings towards Cuba, she is extremely attached to it. In fact, research suggests that diaspora communities may develop an overly critical perspective on politics in the home country and thus, tend to relate themselves with the nation but not with the government. In fact, Cecilia is a permanent foreigner in time and place who once rejected all Cuban cultural referents: music, *charadas*, deities, dances and *comparsas*, cuisine and smells. However, she re-evaluates them now that she is in physical and emotional exile. Performing arts figures such as Beny Moré, Rita Montaner, Ernesto Lecuona, and Bola de Nieve, etc., are all part of the narrative. Indeed, they serve to place the reader within a socio-political context as





well as to liberate the main character's emotions. In Miami, Cecilia misses gestures and forms of speech previously disregarded and she feels attracted to a variety of Cuban cultural artifacts like never before, as she feels "painful heartbeats provoked by bolero" (10). However, she swore she would never go back to her own country when she left Havana. Cecilia claims she has lost her sense of belonging and therefore, is unable to assume her difference as a member of a social minority, feeling confused, isolated, uncertain of her own beliefs. She is alone, "as in a desert" (178). As she says, "Miami mixes up 'sweeties' and 'excuses me' with a sort of Castilian that coming from so many places does not belong to any" (10) and this sense of cultural misfit pursues her through the entire story as much as it does to Kiu Fa, another of the main female characters in exile. Cecilia is part of the Cuban diaspora; one of the Cuban exiles who tend to feel as she does: "a foreigner of her time and world, a perception that had increased over the last few years" (61).

In her constant search for identity, the author establishes several parallels between China and Cuba. In Chaviano's Chinese section of the story, Siu Mend is about to travel to Cuba as a merchant, searching for a better life and aware that the coolie trade has ended. Years ago, Siu Mend's grandfather, Yuang, did travel as a coolie and is now living in Cuba. He is the one who informs Siu Mend about the changes in the island regarding the Chinese community. Yuang's advice to his





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grandson includes information about the similarities between the weather in Canton Guan Tang and Cuba. Siu Men's curiosity of the "exotic other" –being here the exotic the Cuban and the Cubans– makes him buy a map which he revises together with his wife Kiu Fa: "at home he unfolded the map on the floor and he followed with his finger the line from Tropic of Cancer which crossed his province, went through the Pacific Ocean crossing the Americas and reaching the Cuban capital" (20). By doing so, Siu Mend realized something else, "it was not coincidence the weather in both cities was similar, Canton and Habana were in the same latitude and that straight and clean journey over the map came up as a good sign to him" (20).

However, years later, Siu Mend finds himself trapped in Havana. When he finally returns to China, he cannot stop thinking about migrating again to the Caribbean island, as if he had no other option. On this second occasion, Siu Mend takes his family with him and together they sail all the way back to Cuba. Unfortunately, Kui Fa is never able to share her husband's excitement towards their new country. In fact, she suffers from a cultural shock upon arrival, which prevents her from feeling part of the island:

Nobody could have prepared her for what she saw. It was midday shining on the horizon. A narrow and white wall, similar to the Chinese Great Wall on a





small scale, protected the city from the battering of the waves. The sun embellished the buildings with rainbow colors and she saw the docks. At the port everybody seemed jumbled, disjointed and alien. What a crowd of weird people. As if the tenth level of Hell had released all its inhabitants...

Everybody looked at them, even the Chinese people, probably because they weren't wearing appropriate clothes for the humid heat of the city, full of women who were showing their legs without any shame and wore dresses that revealed their bodies. (95)

And it was just when they were approaching Chinatown when Kiu Fa felt closer to China, as she could understand some of the writing in the streets. This feeling of loss and misfit will accompany Kiu Fa during all her life in Cuba; it will end up in silent suicide, after which she believed she would be able to speak and listen to her own native language again and to have another life together with her loved ones: "She returns to them and she will listen to her own language and she will eat moon cakes all day long" (217). For Kiu Fa, language shaped her identity, it was the essence of who she was, and she never overcame the anguish of not being herself.

Indeed, once Siu Mend dies, Kiu Fa loses any will for life and she is not able to mix up those elements present within the Cuban hybrid culture: "Since Siu Mend's death she had lost the will to cook. Even less now that she could not give free rein to





those inspirational moments in which she used to add toasted ajonjolí seeds or a bit of sweet sauce which made the difference between a common dish and a God's dish" (217).

Kiu Fa had spent all her time in Cuba without being able to articulate hardly a word in Spanish, and she even keeps mispronouncing certain words. When we cannot express ourselves or our emotions and feelings in another language, the sense of frustration is overwhelming. Linguistic competence is a key element within the process of transculturation and, without achieving it, one does not belong to the group. As Bourdieu points out, "The efficacy of an utterance, the power of conviction which is granted to it, depends on the pronunciation and secondary the vocabulary of the person who utters it" (79).

In other words, speech is the way to become a visible part of society. It is only by dominating the discourse that one is included socially and politically. In fact, as Foucault reminds us, the lack of linguistic competence showed by Kiu Fa disallowed her from participating in any decision-making. Moreover, language is a powerful tool for building social and racial stereotypes. And, indeed, the Chinese did not have any real weight in the formation of Cuban national identity, as they were kept aside from the discourse. What is more, they were racially rejected and mostly defined by stereotypes.





After living for many years in Cuba, Manuel and Rosa –Siu Mend and Kiu Fa’s Spanish names – still display their mispronunciation as well as their difficulty to articulate discourse.⁵ Therefore, they were not given the space they deserved. When speaking to Amaia in the “Chinese Carnival”, watching the *comparsas* in the parade, we can observe that the encounter takes place in a so called “contact zone,” as different cultures mingle and learn about each other. Yet, we observe that there is a misunderstanding and a gap among them. We also understand the strong ethnic hostility and sense of mistrust between ethnics. On occasion, we even see the undertone of shame and alienation shared by the Chinese community. In fact, the contact is minimal. It is slowly and silently that the Chinese culture penetrates, without being totally understood. When Amalia says that she is there to see the Comparsa of the Dragon, Manuel and Rosa do not seem to know what she means. Then when Amalia explains that she is referring to the Orange Dragon moved by people, Rosa replies: “no seldlagon, selleon y non sel compalsa sel dansa” (110) [it is not a dragon, it is a lion; and it is not a *comparsa* it is a dance; translation mine].





La danza del león (The Lion Dance), La Habana

<http://chinosdecuba.blogspot.com/>

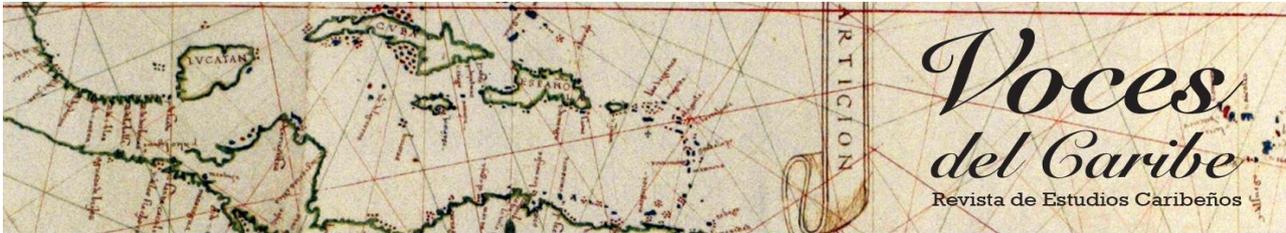




La danza del león (The Lion Dance), La Habana
<https://www.alamy.es/imagenes/dragones-street.html>

Chaviano is here applying “eye-dialect” (Krapp 1926), phonetically transcribed speech of a community, to present a double way of misunderstanding and point out that, although the interaction should bring both cultures closer with a better





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understanding of each other, there is a gap between them. Moreover, this literary device reveals the [character](#)'s marginal social status.

However, since his arrival, the attitude of little Pang Li, Manuel and Rosa's son, was different to the one shown by his parents, which made his assimilation process less difficult and painful. Pang Li, later Pablo Wong, was nothing but happy with all the colors, voices and disorder. He was soon speaking that "wicked" language helped by his great grandfather Yuang, known as Julio Wong, a respectable *mambí* who never returned to China.⁶ Pang Li calls his parents Manuel and Rosa, goes to visit "chino Julián", the ice cream vendor, and has an altar at home for three deities, including San Fan Con.⁷





Altar to the god of war, Guan Gong. He is known as San Fan Con in Cuba. Association Casa Abuelo Lung Kong Cun Sol in Havana's Chinatown
<http://cuba.miami.edu/people/a-chinese-cuban-secret-society-in-havana/>

Chaviano goes beyond historical contact and imaginary constructed evidences, portraying the way in which cultural differences subvert any idea of totalized culture embedded in intertextuality. As Bhabha argues: “Cultural diversity may even emerge as a system of the articulation and exchange of cultural signs” (155).

In his process of negotiation, Pablo Wong, as a child of foreign parents, sums up the various parts of the difference, which places him in an inevitable in-betweenness position that is both liberating and limiting. He is Cuban, yet he finds nothing but difficulties when he tries to have a relationship with Amalia. Despite the





mixed origins of Amalia's mother, the couple clearly portrays a strong ethnocentrism, which shows through the Sinophobia they both share, powered by discourse. In this case, Cuban Sinophobia comes to the surface when they are talking about their daughter's loved one. During that conversation, we can easily read Ortiz's concept of Cubanness and the division between Afro-Creoles ascents and Chinese ones, with the latter being rejected. In fact, Sinophobia was strongly infused in Cuba. In this way, Amalia's parents first reject the idea of a marriage with Pablo based on their "white" color, to which Amalia responds:

— You are white, and mum is mulata, yet you married her. This leaves me out of that homogeneous category you are talking about. And if a white can marry a mulata, I cannot see why a mulata who pretends to be white cannot marry the son of a Chinese family (153, translation mine).

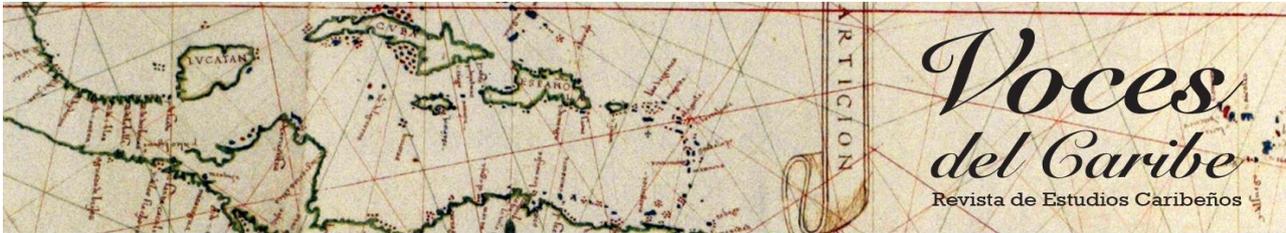
Then, the parents state their social position:

— Amalita, that boy is below us...

— Really, very below? So, let's see.... To which category do we belong that make us so different to him?

— Our business....





— Your business is a records shop and his father’s business are a launderette, which by the way, he is selling to buy a restaurant. So, tell me, where is the difference?

— Amalia...those people...those people are Chinese, finally said her father (153, translation mine).

It is not until Amalia and Pablo’s marriage when the three origins converge and Miguel –Amalia’s and Pablo’s grandson– is born. Miguel symbolizes the merging that has taken place; the product of a culture of diversity and hybridity. Miguel is the transnational Chinese Afro-Cuban in Miami who shares with Cecilia experiences of the homeland and common ancestry, determining their sense of identity.

However, hybridity is not only an integral part of Miguel’s identity, but also his area of research. This is the wink that the writer makes to the relevance of Diaspora Studies and the numerous specialized publications on the subject – e.g., *Diaspora: Journal of Transnational Studies*, published by the University of Toronto Press and dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of the history, culture, social structure, politics, and economics of both traditional diasporas and those transnational dispersions which in the past decades have chosen to identify themselves as ‘diasporas’.





Miguel is writing a book about the influences of Chinese culture in Cuba and, as a Chinese descendant, he is trying to recover his own past and identity: “Nobody mentions Chinese, he insisted, although in manuals of history and sociology it is highlighted that they are the third missing link of our culture” (239). Cecilia, who is trying herself to redefine her own identity after she has been “thrown to the abyss” (220), senses that Amelia’s tragedy is also part of her own life, part of Cuban life and thus, part of Cuban identity.

The idea of fluidity is obvious throughout Chaviano’s text; one can read in every family story that “the future is not only one” (221) and “destiny is in constant flow and movement” (221). The aspects of fluidity and motion locate identity in a continuous flow of people, goods, ideas, foregrounds, migrations, and thoughts. Therefore, in the novel, identity is again in a constant process of negotiation, shifting over time, dismantling any fixed and determined definitions.

Whilst many nationalistic discourses of Cuba had been based on Western negation of the Chinese community, *La isla de los amores infinitos* and *Monkey Hunting* rediscover the Oriental within *cubanidad* or Cubanness. Both novels include the recreation of Cuban culture and reflect the collective sense of *cubanidad* embedded in language, food, etc. In the novels, spiritual and popular Chinese



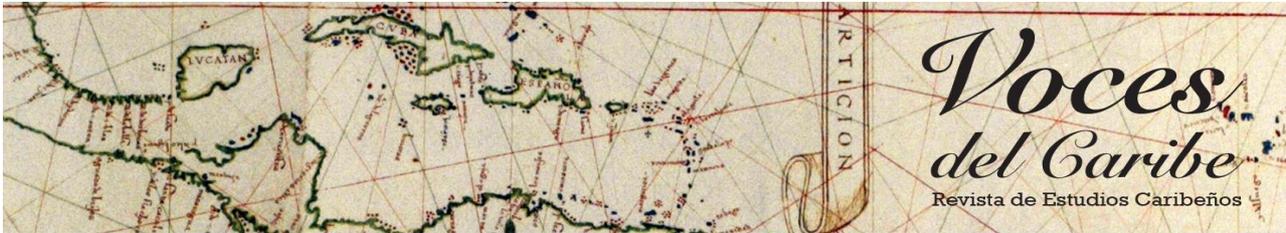


influences intermesh with Cuban Afro-Creole elements to create a distinct Cuban culture.

On the other hand, both authors embrace Kristeva's reflections on foreignness and foreigners, accepting the theory of the foreigner as the one who lives within ourselves, as the only way to live at peace with the strangers around us. According to Kristeva, "The uncanny strangeness... sets the difference within us... and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being with others" (192). "By recognizing our uncanny strangeness", Kristeva continues, "we shall never suffer from it" (192). Indeed, if we are able to tolerate the otherness in ourselves by recognizing the foreigner within us, we will be able to understand the foreigners and therefore, they will no longer be a problem. In the same way, these novels, by presenting a collage of different lives and stories, move beyond any reductionist dualities, resolving cultural difference as a process of identification and recognition.

Moreover, the novels stand up for a concept of fluidity, as identity is not a fixed concept and is constantly transforming over time, which will reaffirm the hybrid nature of Cuban culture. Both works recreate the hidden voices of these colonial subjects in their negotiation with what Bhabha has termed the "Third Space", a "Contact Zone" or in-between position that generates a subversive agency. Writers have returned the voice to Chinese immigrants and their descendants, as they





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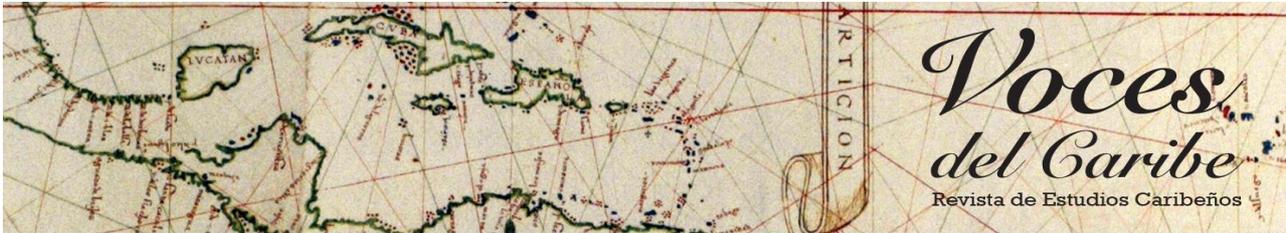
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understand the role they have in reconfiguring the meaning of Cuban identity. *La isla de los amores infinitos* and *Monkey Hunting* may well serve to rethink concepts of “mestizaje” and transculturation, moving towards the idea of a hybrid national identity. Indeed, understanding hybrid cultures will help with a better understanding of the elements involved in learning about one’s self.

Ironically, Chinese recognition in Cuba is taking place practically when the Chinese community is close to disappearing, and presents no threat to official black-creole mestizo national identity. It is now when it seems that the Chinese people have gained acceptance on the island, after decades of negotiation of cultural difference. They have gone from being virtually silenced to celebrated, probably for economic reasons based mainly on tourism. The drastic changes in attitudes in Cuba could be an example of the way in which race relations are historically contingent.

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Notes

1. Katheleen López defines indentured coolie work as a “new system of slavery.” According to López “The coolie traffic in Cuba and Perú so closely resembled Atlantic slavery that it became known as “rata amarilla” (6). The infamous coolie trade was meant to be a contract that Chinese workers signed for 8 years but many of them were trapped for much longer time.
2. In *Obras Completas*, Martí’s references to Chinese are mainly set in California, United States, and in his work he uses a high degree of stereotyped exoticism and mystery to describe them. Having said so, we cannot deny the role he played in giving visibility to marginal communities, Chinese amongst them, in a very crucial time, denouncing the treatment they were subjected to upon arrival in the United States. The Chinese endured racist and humiliating attitudes, faced with sudden deculturation such as the imposition of cutting their queues or by “westernizing” their names, to say the least.
3. Indeed, Severo Sarduy was a precursor introducing the notion of tripartite within Cuban identity –including the Chinese component through postmodernism. However, one could say that Sarduy’s search for Cuban cultural identity was not far from Western Orientalism because despite his vehement condemnation of the concept, his representation falls into the same stereotypes: unreachable sensual and exotic women,





employing of imagery of cruelty and perversity, regarding the Chinese as both exotic and violent, and always an object of desire. However, it the significance of his works is undeniable, among that of others, to rescue from oblivion essential aspects of Cuban identity.

4. In *Chinese Cubans*, 2003, López tracks the life of Pastor Pelayo, an indentured worker who had no hopes of returning to China and once his contract terminated, he bought and freed a domestic slave with whom he had 9 children within their common law union.

5. Domingo, in *Monkey Hunting*, also wonders whether there is a need to erase one's language to learn another one, but his final belief is that one should not lose the first and native language in order to learn a new one.

6. *Mambises* are the white, black, and Chinese soldiers who fought the Spaniards during the Cuban Wars of Independence.

7. Chinese Cubans developed a syncretic form of worship combining Chinese with Afro-Cuban traditions around the Chinese deity San Fan Con. As Kathleen López describes "The Chinese God of war, Guan Gong, already associated with honor, became a protector of immigrants in Cuba. According to legend, Guan Gong's spirit entered the body of Chung, in Cimarrones, Matanzas, to deliver wisdom to his compatriots in an oration that combines Confucian and Catholic wisdom. Thus, Gua



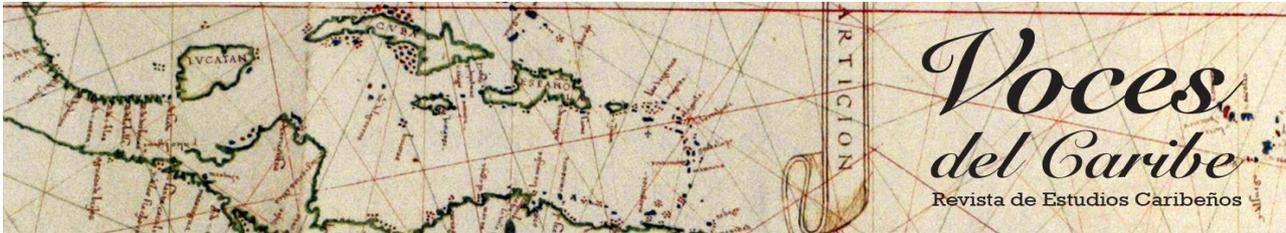


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Gong developed into the Afro-Chinese-Cuban Sanfancón, associated with Changó in santería and Santa Bárbara in Catholicism” (105) For more information, see Chuffat Latour, *Apunte histórico* (87).





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