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# From Interethnic Alliances to the “Magical Negro”: Afro-Asian Interactions in Asian Latin American Literature

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**Abstract:** This essay studies Afro-Asian sociocultural interactions in cultural production by or about Asian Latin Americans, with an emphasis on Cuba and Brazil. Among the recurrent characters are the black slave, the *china mulata*, or the black ally who expresses sympathy or even marries the Asian character. This reflects a common history of bondage shared by black slaves, Chinese coolies, and Japanese indentured workers, as well as a common history of marronage. These conflicts and alliances between Asians and blacks contest the official discourse of *mestizaje* (Spanish-indigenous dichotomies in Mexico and Andean countries, for example, or black and white binaries in Brazil and the Caribbean) that, under the guise of incorporating the other, favored whiteness while attempting to silence, ignore, or ultimately erase their worldviews and cultures.

**Keywords:** Afro-Asian interactions; Asian Latin American literature and characters; Sanfancón; *china mulata*; “magical negro”; *chinos mambises*; Brazil; Cuba; transculturation; discourse of *mestizaje*

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Among the recurrent characters in literature by or about Asians in Latin America is the black slave, the *china mulata*, or the black ally, who expresses sympathy, solidarity, or even marries the Asian character. While in some cases, the narratives realistically reflect real-life Afro-Asian alliances throughout Latin American history, with both Asian and African descended characters displaying their own agency against racism and coloniality, in other cases, as will be seen, black characters fall into the “magical negro” category that portrays them as abnegated and supportive allies who merely help the Asian protagonist reach his or her life goals. In this last case, African characters do not display their full autonomy or agency: Abnegation in support of the other displaces the discourse or rationale for self-liberation. Their characterization, rather than reflecting real-life social interaction and historical dynamics between blacks and Asians, leans toward the imagined, multicultural distortion of such interethnic alliances and transculturation processes.

Literary representations of interactions between Asians and blacks reflects a common history of bondage shared by black slaves, Chinese coolies, and Japanese indentured workers, as well as a common history of marronage.<sup>1</sup> These conflicts and alliances between Asians and blacks contest the official discourse of *mestizaje* (Spanish-indigenous dichotomies in Mexico and Andean countries, for example, or black and white binaries in Brazil and the Caribbean) that, under the guise of incorporating the other, favored whiteness, while attempting to silence, ignore, or ultimately erase their

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<sup>1</sup> Because other Asian migrations to Latin America, such as that of East Indians and Koreans, is more recent, they do not have a similar articulation in Latin American literature or an equally significant number of Latin American authors of Korean descent. Similarly, the first Asian migration to the Americas, that of Filipinos, was not massive enough to have left the same imprint as those of the Chinese and Japanese communities.

worldviews and cultures. In Brazil, the Japanese presence (the world's largest community of Nikkei) and heritage contest the myth of the country's three founding races (indigenous, black, and white); their history of oppression also contests the myth of the country's "racial democracy." Asian and African descended characters in Latin American literature, in their interactions with each other and in their articulation of agency, offer alternative knowledges to that of a Western modernity that used their bodies as mere labor tools. Simultaneously, these African and Asian characters reflect the contributions made by the two ethnic groups to nation-making processes and to the ensuing enunciations of national identity in Latin America.

In Cuba, approximately 6000 *chinos mambises*, along with black fighters, fought in three wars of independence (1868–1878, 1879–1880, and 1895–1898) from Spain, after the President of the Republic in Arms, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, issued a decree in 1869 abolishing slavery and indentured servitude. This collaboration adds another nuance to their shared history. Although most freed slaves and coolies were often relegated to auxiliary positions during the war years (digging trenches, cooking food, delivering messages), many also fought in battle—a few Chinese even became officers in the Cuban insurgent army, at times leading battalions made up of their co-ethnics. During the post-war period, both ethnic groups would stress their participation in the liberation of Cuba as evidence of their unquestionable patriotism and their belonging within the national project. Following independence, this strategy was effective in improving their racialized image in the national imaginary and their integration into mainstream society. However, subsequent circumstances, such as the implementation of the American Exclusion Act after 1898, along with other racist views held in the United States, or the advent of the Great Depression during the 1930s, would remind both the Chinese and the blacks that the road to full citizenship was not always progressive or inevitable, but rather contingent on economic, national, and geopolitical events. Economic jealousy or a harsh economic crisis, for example, may suddenly turn an ethnic group, like the Chinese, into "unfair competition" for national merchants.

Whereas Chinese Cubans may always resort to reminding mainstream Cuban society about the *chinos mambises* during the wars of independence or about Chinese participation in the Cuban Revolution, the Chinese community in Peru, by contrast, has a more difficult time finding similar arguments, since approximately 1500 coolies, angry at the terrible oppression and mortality rate they suffered in plantations and guano pits, sided with the Chilean army that was sieging Lima during the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). Even though many other coolies supported the Peruvian resistance, after the war, hundreds of Chinese were massacred in retaliation for what was considered a betrayal against Peru. Other Asian groups, such as the Japanese in Mexico, who often participated actively with different factions during the Mexican Revolution, have not resorted to this historical fact as evidence of their full belonging in the *mexicanidad*.<sup>2</sup>

As it is known, Chinese coolies were initially brought to Cuba and Japan as a result of labor shortages (code words for what often was a refusal to pay appropriate wages to local agricultural workers) after the gradual abolition of African slavery and the subsequent failure to attract European laborers, who were deemed more desirable in the "whitening" of the nation. After Chinese coolies finished their eight-year contracts and, in many cases, their ensuing forced recontracting, they tended to move to urban areas, mostly to become merchants or work in niche ethnic professions. The new "labor shortage" was temporarily filled by recruiting Japanese agricultural workers who were brought to replace the Chinese in the Peruvian plantations and guano pits, or to replace disgruntled Europeans in Brazilian coffee plantations.

The experience of Chinese coolies in Peru and, especially, in Cuba, was quite different from that of Chinese immigrants in Mexico. The reason is that the latter were free laborers and, in Mexico, the interaction with blacks was uncommon. In fact, to prevent interethnic alliances that could

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<sup>2</sup> Although, as Jerry García (García 2014) explains, four Japanese nationals also volunteered, without success, to poison Pancho Villa on behalf of General Pershing's punitive expedition.

potentially bring racial wars, like the one in Saint-Domingue (today's Haiti) that gave rise to the first black republic in the world, Cuban and Peruvian planters would house the coolies in different buildings (no objection from either ethnic group) and would promote hostility between the two groups by pitting black overseers armed with whips against Chinese workers. On some occasions, coolies would kill these overseers, either to escape the plantation or in revenge for corporal punishment and other abuses that, in theory, their contracts forbade. In addition, black slaves were often used to defend the plantation, its owner, and his foremen from coolie rebellions. Moreover, Chinese coolies would often complain about their perceived preferential treatment for blacks and would bemoan the fact that while black slaves' only oppressors were white overseers and plantation owners, they were abused by both black and white overseers.

However, Latin American literature also records multiple cases of cross-ethnic alliances, solidarity, and cooperation between blacks and Asians. For instance, former coolies would sometimes purchase the freedom of black enslaved women with whom they would form common-law unions or whom they would marry. Their descendants, like the Cuban intellectuals, Antonio Chuffat Latour and Regino Pedroso, were therefore of mixed Asian and African blood. Chinese and blacks also worked together in work gangs or *cuadrillas*. López (2013), in her introduction to *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History*, mentions, for example, a former coolie named Pastor Pelayo who kept a gang of black workers.

Along these lines, claims of Asian communities' isolation in Latin America were often challenged because marriages between male Asian immigrants and black or mulatto women were not uncommon. In fact, in Cuba, the sexualized and eroticized figure of the *china mulata* became iconic. There, one can find additional proof of the solidarity between Chinese coolies and blacks in the religious realm: Afro-Cuban creeds blended with Chinese folk religion. The most noted outcome of this fusion is the syncretic Chinese *orisha* or saint Sanfancón (associated with the *orisha* Changó in Santería and with Santa Bárbara in Catholicism), often recognized by Afro-Cubans as a most powerful *orisha*. The figure of Sanfancón evidences the fact that Chinese indentured workers were open to the influence of Catholic saints as well as that of Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakuá.

In what follows, I will offer a brief summary of the most significant examples of literary Afro-Asian interactions in cultural production by or about Latin Americans of Asian descent, whether representing real-life Afro-Asian solidarity and alliances, or resorting to the imagined "magical negro" category.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Realistic Representations of Historical Afro-Asian Solidarity and Alliances

Although less frequently than in Brazil or Cuba, Peruvian literature offers some reflections of these sociocultural, cross-ethnic exchanges. In Japanese Peruvian literature, one finds Peruvian Nikkei Félix Toshihiko Arakaki's (1941–) short story "Un cuento muy largo de contar" (A Very Long Story to Tell, 2002), where a Nikkei character named Juan Takeshi Chiritori, known as El Loco, feels that he is African at heart because he lived in Chíncha, a Peruvian city with a large black population. Takeshi recalls that even fellow Nikkei children would insult him with racial slurs directed at blacks. Yet, now in Paris, he is surprised to see that African immigrants will not accept him as one of their own.

Another example is the novel, *Viaje a Ítaca*, by Siu Kam Wen, a Chinese-born Peruvian author. It recalls several episodes of Peruvian Sinophobia, one of which includes Afro-Peruvians. As he explains, in revenge for the coolies' support of Chilean troops during the 1881 War of the Pacific, "Lima now occupied, and the country in disorder, the Indian and black populations of Cañete rise in arms to settle and old score with coolies in the valley. They are out to vindicate a black woman's beating

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed analysis of these works, see my books *The Affinity of the Eye: Writing Nikkei in Peru* (2013), *Dragons in the Land of the Condor: Writing Tusán in Peru* (López-Calvo 2014), *Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture* (López-Calvo 2008), and *Japanese-Brazilian Saudades: Diasporic Identities and Cultural Production*. UP of Colorado (López-Calvo forthcoming).

at the hands of an Oriental during carnival. According to Juan de Arona's conservative estimate, about one thousand coolies are killed in one day."<sup>4</sup>

Besides topics and characters, there are also Peruvian authors who are themselves of mixed Chinese and African blood. Although the poetry of the recently deceased Afro-Chinese poet, Enrique Verástegui, does not usually address issues of ethnicity or race, it does treat Peruvianness, national identity, and social justice in *Angelus Novus* (New Angel, 1989 and 1990), *Monte de Goce* (Mount of Pleasure), or *Libro del pecado* (The Book of Sin), Taki Onkoy or *Libro de la redención* (The Book of Redemption), *Albus* (White) or *Libro de la gnosis* (The Book of 1Gnosis), and *Ética* (Ethics). Another Afro-Chinese Peruvian author is Mario Choy, who published short stories in the 1980s, such as "Butaca del paraíso" (Seat in Paradise, 1981) and the bilingual "May God Grant You Happiness"/"Dios quiera que seas dichosa" (1987).

Moving on to Japanese Brazilian literature, in the novel, *Saga. A História de Quatro Gerações de uma Família Japonesa no Brasil* (Saga. The History of Four Generations of a Japanese Family in Brazil, (Inoue 2006)), Ryoki Inoue openly portrays Nikkei racist and xenophobic sentiments toward blacks and other Brazilians. Yet, well into the novel, the mestizo, Nikkei Ryumi, embodies miscegenation and transculturation when he introduces his Afro-Brazilian girlfriend, Maria Rita, who has embraced Japanese culture, to his family. Their interracial union symbolizes not only solidarity between Nikkei and Afro-Brazilians, but also, reflecting real-life Nikkei choices, the full integration of younger generations of Nikkei into mainstream Brazilian society. These progressive passages, however, make the reader wonder whether Ryumi's family accepts her only because she is so familiar with Japanese culture, thanks to having been adopted by Japanese parents.

Like in Japanese Brazilian literature, black-Asian interactions are prominent in Chinese Cuban cultural production. This prominence reflects the fact that those relationships were more intense in Cuba and Brazil than in other Latin American countries with significant Asian migration, but with much smaller black communities. Moreover, as Lok Siu points out, "one important difference between Asians in Latin America and those in the United States (with the exception of Hawaii) is the historical high rate of interracial unions and family formation (McKeown 2001; Lesser 1999). Anti-miscegenation laws did not exist in Panama (and Latin America more generally), as they did in certain parts of the United States at one time" (Siu 2007, p. 91). The literary representation of Afro-Asian sociocultural mixing in these Cuban counter-narratives also challenges the stereotypes of Chinese insularity and clannish behavior. Cuban cultural production thus replicates historical black-Chinese alliances against criollo oppression as well as the animosity felt between the two groups. For instance, in the 1877 report of coolie depositions, *The Cuba Commission Report. A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba* (Helly 1993), we read: "four Negroes in league with certain recently arrived Chinese killed the new administrator. By an outlay of money on the part of our employer, the participation of the Negroes was not mentioned, and the crime was imputed to us" deposed Wu Yeh-ch'êng (p. 88). Yet the Chinese complain in the report, as they often did, about the preferential treatment received by blacks. In it, they condemn the beatings and killings suffered at the hands of black overseers: "I saw a man named A-chi so severely struck on the neck by the Negro overseer that he died in three days" (p. 105). In their depositions, they protest the efforts of different nations to end black slavery while simultaneously ignoring coolie semi-slavery in Cuba. Evelyn Hu-DeHart points out potential reasons for enslaved blacks' animosity towards coolies in Cuba: "Even if slaves could see that the daily treatment meted out to them and to the coolies were not substantially different, they also observed the somewhat greater facility with which coolies were able to free themselves from the plantations and open up small businesses nearby" (Hu-DeHart 2007, p. 89).

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<sup>4</sup> "Con Lima ocupada y el país en desorden, la población india y negra de Cañete se alza para saldar una vieja cuenta con los culíes chinos que viven y laboran en el valle. El pretexto es el altercado entre uno de los orientales y una morena durante el carnaval. Según el cálculo conservador de Juan de Arona, unos mil culíes son muertos en un día de desmanes desaforados" (Siu 2004, p. 99).

In Miguel Barnet and Esteban Montejo's testimonial, *Biography of a Runaway Slave (Biografía de un cimarrón; Barnet and Montejo 1994)*, Montejo, the former runaway slave being interviewed, reminisces about how common it was for blacks to participate in the activities organized during Chinese festivities in the town of Sagua la Grande. He also contrasts blacks' and Chinese's reaction to slavery. His belief is that the Chinese committed suicide too often because they would think too much and thus explains the similarities in their beliefs about the afterlife: Whereas blacks held that once their spirit had left their bodies, it returned to Africa while still alive, "the Chinese didn't fly and didn't even want to go back to their homeland" (p. 43). Later, however, he remembers that the Chinese eventually were convinced that, after death, they would come back to life in Canton (p. 117).

A recurring Chinese Cuban character is the exoticized *china mulata*, which appears, among other Cuban works, in Mayra Montero (1998) *Como un mensajero tuyo (The Messenger, (Montero 1999))*, Zoé Valdés's *Te di la vida entera (I Gave You All I Had, Valdés 1996)*, Leonardo Padura Fuentes's *La cola de la serpiente (Padura Fuentes 2001)*, and Antonio José Ponte's short story "A petición de Ochún" ("At the Request of Ochún;" 1964), included in his collection *Tales from the Cuban Empire (Cuentos de todas partes del imperio; Ponte 2000)*. The legendary beauty of the Chinese mulatta is embodied in this last short story by Luminaria Wong, whose phenotype is immediately sexualized: "Luminaria Wong, unlike Ignacio, was not completely Chinese. In other words, she was a *china mulata*. The color of her skin could not be determined and it would change as the color of other women's pupils change. That skin was at its best after dark, for sure" (p. 48).<sup>5</sup>

A more developed *china mulata* is Aida Petirena Cheng, the protagonist in Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo*, where her mixed blood is not only libidized, but also rejected and regarded with suspicion. That she has been the object of racialization is evident in her own self-descriptions: "I was a mulatta who had her father's Chinese eyes and a nose that came from the Lucumi part. I was a combination, as mixed as Neapolitan fever" (p. 59);<sup>6</sup> "All I did was take him inside me, but it was his will, he sank into this Chinese flesh because he wanted to, this flesh that turned mulatta when we made love" (p. 176).<sup>7</sup> The character of Aida Petirena Cheng, Enrico Caruso's lover, rewrites Cuban history by challenging the black and white binary, and reinscribing Afro-Asian racial, cultural, and religious mixtures as another important manner to narrate the nation. She is protected by Yuan Pei Fu, a powerful practitioner and *babalawo* (spiritual guide, priest) of Chinese witchcraft, and the santero, José de Calazán "Cheché" Bangoché, believing that "what the black nganga can't do, the Chinese nganga always can" (p. 21).<sup>8</sup>

In *Como un mensajero tuyo*, however, marriages between Chinese men and black women are portrayed less positively than in novels, like Cuban American Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting (García 2003b)*. Thus, the mulatta, Domitila, tells her daughter, Aida, that she and the Chinese immigrant, Noro Cheng Po, reluctantly married because neither could aspire to better nuptials. In her own words, a Chinese man "was the worst man a woman could marry but all a girl like her could hope for, since she was poor and had nappy hair" (pp. 13–14).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, according to Aida, Noro Cheng Po fantasized "about those silent *paisanas*, dreamt about going to Canton to find a wife of his own race, to make up for all the years he'd had to settle for a dark-skinned woman, a choice

<sup>5</sup> "Luminaria Wong, a diferencia de Ignacio, no era completamente china. Para usar una manera rápida de describir tanta belleza, Lumi era una mulata china. Tenía un color de piel que no acababa de resolverse y que cambiaba como cambia en las demás mujeres el color de las pupilas. Lo mejor de aquella piel se ganaba, seguramente, en la oscuridad" (p. 45).

<sup>6</sup> "Yo era una mulata clara, con los ojos achinados por la parte de mi padre, y la nariz sospechosa de la parte de los lucumíes. Estaba tan mezclada como la fiebre napolitana" (p. 80).

<sup>7</sup> "No hice más que recibirlo en mí, pero él se empecinó, se hundió por su gusto en esta carne china, una carne que en la intimidad se mulateaba" (p. 213).

<sup>8</sup> "Lo que no puede la nganga negra, siempre lo ha podido la nganga china" (p. 38).

<sup>9</sup> "Era lo peor con lo que se podía casar una mujer, pero lo único a lo que podía aspirar una muchacha como ella, pobrecita y con el pelo duro" (García 2003a, p. 31).

which was all he could hope for in Cuba” (p. 169).<sup>10</sup> In another novel, Zoé Valdés’s *I Gave You All I Had* (Valdés 1999), the *china mulata*, Cuca Martínez, again becomes the object of male gazes: “She had a way of sashaying down the street and, much in keeping with her Irish passion and Oriental patience, by thus swaying to the left and swaying to the right, she could bring even the most flaccid penis to attention” (p. 36).<sup>11</sup> Curiously, however, Cuca, who pulls all her teeth out after her boyfriend leaves her, ends up allegorically representing the progressive decay of Old Havana since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, thereby becoming a vehicle to criticize Fidel Castro’s regime.

Finally, *chinas mulatas* are again objectivized for their “exotic” sex appeal in Padura Fuentes’s detective story, *La cola de la serpiente*, in which the protagonist, lieutenant Mario Conde, unfairly describes Patricia Chion as a nymphomaniac, a prostitute, and a man-eater, while fantasizing about her *vagina dentata*: “Pushing open the thick pubic bush, Conde explored the furrow before him while climbing up toward a deep, mossy and ravenous well, through which his hand entered, and then his arm, and finally the rest of his body, as if sucked in by a relentless whirlpool” (p. 189).<sup>12</sup>

There are also several Cuban authors of mixed Chinese-African blood. One of them was Regino Pedroso, who was born to a black mother and a Chinese father. In the “auto-bio-prólogo” (auto-bio-prologue) to his poetry collection, *Nosotros*, he declares his pride in his racialized “black-yellow (no other race color)”<sup>13</sup> pigmentation and therefore his “Ethiopic-Asian” makeup. Aware that “bourgeois ideology” considers both races inferior and justifies their historical exploitation, Pedroso asserts his agency by claiming to belong to “the human race.”

Antonio Chuffat Latour, also a Chinese mulatto Cuban author, compares and contrasts the accomplishments of blacks and Chinese in his *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba* (*Historical Notes about the Chinese in Cuba*; Chuffat Latour 1927), in which he attempts, at the expense of Afro-Cubans, to empower the Chinese community by praising its contributions to Cuban freedom and recognizing its true belonging to the national project. Even though his mother was black and he fought for the rights of Afro-Cubans during his lifetime, in this book, Chuffat Latour contrasts the refinement of the Chinese and their efforts to assimilate to Cuban mainstream society as they “civilized themselves” (p. 16)<sup>14</sup> in contrast to the perceived failures of blacks: “While the other race pitifully wasted time in silly things and stupidity, without any aspirations or pretensions to anything.”<sup>15</sup> He then attributes Chinese socioeconomic success to their whiteness, education, and alleged intellectual superiority to blacks: “The intellectualism acquired by the Chinese is the main reason that they have surpassed other races in every social order. A Chinese considers himself white, period. His level of intelligence is superior.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, while Chuffat Latour praises Chinese participation during the wars of

<sup>10</sup> “Aquellas paisanas silenciosas, con viajar a Cantón para buscar una esposa de su propia raza, y desquitarse con ella de todos los años que había tenido que conformarse con una mujer de piel oscura, que era lo único a lo que podía aspirar en Cuba” (p. 206).

<sup>11</sup> “Es que ella caminaba con un meneo, muy propio de su paciencia china y de su pasión dublinense contenida, que era un p’aquí, p’allá, de allá p’acá, que ponía duro al más blando” (p. 62).

<sup>12</sup> “Tras la maraña del vello el Conde recorría el surco que ascendía hacia un pozo profundo y musgoso, devorador, por el que entraba su mano, su brazo, y todo su cuerpo después, succionado por un remolino implacable” (p. 189).

<sup>13</sup> “Negro-amarilla. (Sin otra mezcla)” (Pedroso 1984, p. 9).

<sup>14</sup> “Civilizarse” (p. 16).

<sup>15</sup> “Mientras que la otra raza perdía lastimosamente el tiempo en sandeces y boberías, sin aspiraciones ni pretensiones a nada” (p. 16).

<sup>16</sup> “La intelectualidad adquirida por los chinos es el factor principal que ha superado a otras razas en todo el orden social. El chino se considera blanco y basta. La superioridad de inteligencia” (p. 16). Incidentally, we have a similar perspective, this time based on inherited cultural and traditional values, in a recent study by the Chinese Cuban author, Napoleón Seuc, entitled *La colonia china de Cuba 1930–1960* (1998). After pointing out the economic success of the East Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea) and particularly of overseas Chinese in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Taiwan, he states: “The dissimilitude in economic growth among different peoples and ethnicities in this century makes us think that there are factors of a cultural, traditional and hereditary nature, but not of a genetic one, that provide a margin of advantage for certain races—in the free and competitive world market of modern economy, in the free-trade doctrine of open (not protectionist) societies—over other races and peoples of the Earth.” (“La disimilitud en el crecimiento económico de este siglo de pueblos y etnias diferentes nos inclina a pensar que hay factores tradicionales, hereditarios, pero de origen cultural, no genético, que dan cierto margen de ventaja a ciertas razas—en el libre y competitivo

independence, he argues that, above all, blacks were a nuisance to the insurgent army (p. 63). As stated, Cuban cultural production also re-creates religions syncretism through the combination of Catholicism, Chinese folk beliefs, and Afro-Cuban religions, as well as through the interracial marriages between these two ethnic groups. The creation of the syncretic Chinese Cuban orisha or saint Sanfancón, based on the figure of Kwang Kung worshiped in China, is the most obvious example of Afro-Asian religious syncretism in Cuban literature. In Padura Fuentes's novella *La cola de la serpiente*, which takes place in Havana's Chinatown, Sanfancón takes on an evil nature that is uncommon in Cuban texts. When lieutenant Mario Conde asks the Chinese private, Juan Chion (Li Chion Tai), to help him solve the mystery of another Chinese man's assassination, Chion suspects the influence of Sanfancón, though he claims that "Sanfancón does not kill in this manner, but uses a knife."<sup>17</sup> This, however, does not surprise Conde who, as a child, had heard his grandfather say that "if someone was worse than Sanfancón, it was because he was really bad."<sup>18</sup> In a Chinese society building, Juan Chion, along with his *compadre*, Francisco Chiu, shows Conde the altar devoted to Sanfancón and explains his Cubanized history: "—That took place here. He came as Cuang Con, but the name was Cubanized to San Fan Con and, since he wears red like the saint, blacks say that he is Shango. Go figure boss."<sup>19</sup> Francisco Chiu then describes him as the product of Chinese-African religious syncretism: "Chinese who practice black witchcraft and of blacks who practice Chinese witchcraft."<sup>20</sup> These religious beliefs are eventually derided when Conde mocks them in the story's denouement.

An equally skeptical representation of the esoteric worlds of African and Chinese witchcraft appears in Arnaldo Correa's *Cold Havana Ground* (Correa 2003). Chinese Cuban witchcraft becomes a key cultural trait of this ethnic group, although two different characters describe both Chinese and Afro-Cuban witchcraft as primitive and dangerous, and as mere "instruments for criminals and other antisocial characters" (p. 200). In the epilogue, the author even discourages his readers from practicing these types of witchcraft on their own. As is common in Cuban cultural production, Chinese witchcraft is described in *Cold Havana Ground* as the most powerful one by followers of three African-rooted religions: Santería (Regla de Osha), Palo Monte (Regla Mayombe), and the Abakuá Secret Society, an initiatory male fraternity. A character named Jacinto also explains that the corpse of a Chinese man could be used as an infallible magic shield: "No one can undo a Chinese curse, not even the person who placed it. The old *Paleros* would say that the dead body of a Chinaman protects against anything; it's infallible" (p. 133). A gravedigger adds that if the *paleros* (Palo Monte priests) cannot manage to steal a racially pure Chinese corpse, they make do with some dirt obtained from the four corners of the Chinese cemetery in Havana. Later, a *Santera* (Santeria priest) finds out that the spirit of a Chinese man has possessed her brother, Lorenzo Bantú, a *nasakó* (Abakuá priest). After managing to exorcize it from her brother's body, she scolds Lorenzo for naively believing that his own magic "could prevail over the spirit of a Chinaman!" (p. 220).<sup>21</sup> Then, Lorenzo wonders why he is not able to manipulate the powers of

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mercado mundial de la economía moderna, en el librecambismo de las sociedades abiertas no proteccionistas—sobre otras razas y pueblos de la tierra" p. 172]). Later, Seuc reveals some of the survival tactics used by the Chinese in Cuba: "They managed to have influential friends—a judge, chief of police or rural guard in the countryside—to whom they resorted in times of need." ("Ellos se las agenciaban para conseguirse un amigo influyente—un juez correccional, jefe de la policía o de la guardia rural en los campos—a quienes acudían en momentos de necesidad" pp. 162–63]).

<sup>17</sup> "San Fan Con no mata así, él usa cuchillo" (p. 155). By way of contrast, Leandro Chiu, the guide of the Kung Long Society, states that in the Chinese pantheon there is no room for curses and bad actions. One can never ask Sanfancón to hurt someone.

<sup>18</sup> "Alguien que era más malo que San Fan Con, es porque era malísimo" (p. 155).

<sup>19</sup> "—Eso fue aquí. Vino Cuang Con pelo se cubanizó en San Fan Con, y como es santo cololao, los neglos dicen que es Changó, mila tú, capitán" (p. 160).

<sup>20</sup> "—Yo no cleo en eso, capitán, pelo hay gente que sí, ¿tú sabes? Eso es cosa de paisanos que hacen blujelías de neglos y neglos que hacen blugelías con cosas de chinos" (p. 160).

<sup>21</sup> These explanations about the power that a Chinese skull can provide are corroborated by a character named Alcides Varona in Leonardo Padura Fuentes's novella *La cola de la Serpiente*: "Look, if you want to make a Jewish nganga, to do evil, you must look for a deceased person who was really bad during his life ... because the spirit continues to be as bad as the person when alive on earth. And sometimes it is even worse ... That's why the best bones are those of crazy people, and even better than those of crazy people are those of Chinese, who are the most ill-tempered and vengeful folks

the Chinese spirit to his own advantage; eventually, he realizes that what the spirit of the Chinese man is demanding is a Catholic cross (it is not explained for what purpose) in exchange for doing what Lorenzo is requesting. Another novel that portrays tensions between Chinese and blacks is Ramón Meza's *Carmela* (Meza 1978), where the protagonist, a Chinese named Cipriano Assam, threatens to stab Tocineta, a jealous black domestic servant who mocks him and sings disparaging songs about the Chinese. In the end, it is Tocineta who kills him.

The last representative work that I will discuss in this section is Cristina García's novel *Monkey Hunting* (García 2003b), where the Chinese-Afro-Cuban-American character, Domingo Chen, remembers, as mentioned in *Cold Havana Ground*, that *paleros* coveted the skulls of suicide victims. The great-grandson of the coolie, Chen Pan, Domingo Chen, embodies the transculturation of Chinese and African cultures, as he prays to the Santería orisha Ochún, uses abakuá words, and loves conga music. He also suffers an identity crisis as a result of the constant racialization of his phenotype throughout his life.

## 2. The Multicultural Representation of the “Magical Negro” Category

Black-Asian interactions are much more prevalent in Japanese Brazilian literature, in which it is common to find supporting black characters who risk all to selflessly help the Asian protagonist as the Caucasian protagonist does in American film and fiction. These mostly imagined, multicultural “Magical Negro” characters are often endowed with mystical powers or special insight. We find such a character in Brazilian Nisei Júlio Miyazawa's (1948–) first novel, *Yawara! A Travessia Nihondin-Brasil* (Yawara! Crossing Nihondin-Brazil, Miyazawa 2006), where a black neighbor named Zefa (Josefa) feeds Akemi, a Japanese character, when she falls ill and even breastfeeds her baby. Connections between Nikkei and Brazilian characters continue throughout the novel. Later, another Afro-Brazilian character, Alberto, helps the Nikkei Mariano, Goro Harikawa, recover from a psychological crisis and becomes his close friend. In other passages, Miyazawa conveys his sympathy for his African-descent countrymen by acknowledging that part of the Japanese neighborhood of Liberdade in São Paulo was populated by Afro-Brazilians in the early 1950s until they began to leave because the newly arrived Japanese made them feel out of place. In his second novel, *Uma Rosa para Yumi* (Miyazawa 2013), the author laments the fact that Nikkei economic success contributed to displacing blacks from Liberdade.

Afro-Brazilian characters also help Japanese immigrants in Brazilian Nikkei Oscar Nakasato's *Nihonjin* (Nakasato 2011): A black healer name Maria, also close to the “magical negro” category, befriends and cures Kimie, a Japanese immigrant, against the wishes of the latter's husband Hideo, who considers blacks lesser people. Maria and Kimie's friendship endures despite Hideo's disapproval.

## 3. Conclusions

Overall, this Latin American production, in its re-creation of social interactions between subalternized Asians and blacks, challenges the official discourse of *mestizaje* imposed by politicians and governments, a discourse that brought about the erasure of Asian communities, among others. Besides whites, blacks, and indigenous people, Brazil, Cuba, Peru, Mexico, and other countries had significant Asian communities that partook in the socioeconomic and political life of their host countries and informed national identities. In many cases, it is precisely their interactions with people of African ancestry that challenges orientalist stereotypes of insularity, mystery, or clannishness. Afro-Asian

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on the face of the earth ... I inherited my nganga from my father and it has the kiyumba skull of a Chinaman who committed suicide out of rage because he didn't want to be a slave, and you don't even imagine the things I've done with that nganga... God forgive me.” (“—Mira, si quieres hacer una nganga judía, para hacer mal, debes buscarte un difunto que en vida haya sido bien malo... porque el espíritu sigue siendo tan malo como el vivo que fue en la tierra. Y a veces es peor... Por eso los mejores huesos son los de los locos, y mejor que los de los locos, los de los chinos, que son los tipos más rabiosos y vengativos que hay en el plano de la tierra... La mía yo la heredé de mi padre y tiene la kiyumba cráneo de un chino que se suicidó de rabia porque no quería ser esclavo, y tú no te imaginas las cosas que yo he hecho con esa nganga... y que Dios me perdone” p. 176).

sociocultural exchanges make certain communities (Chinese Cuban or Japanese Peruvian) different from other Chinese communities (Mexico or Peru) that had a less intensive interaction with blacks because of their smaller number in their host countries. Literature by authors of mixed Asian and black descent, or the representation of black-Asian interfaces, highlight the commonalities of two racialized, overlapping diasporas, of those who often shared a common history of bondage, marronage, and participation as freedom fighters in wars of independence. These cross-cultural narratives contribute to restoring the agency and alternative knowledges of these silenced ethnic groups. They also unveil a shared history of resistance to racialization, oppression, and violence, with moments of inter-ethnic alliance and solidarity alternated with others of confrontation and struggle.

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