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Subverting *Mestizaje* Discourse: Chinese Cubans and Chinese Puerto Ricans in Literature

Thesis for Master's in Comparative Literature

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Abstract

Recent academic interest on the influence nineteenth-century Chinese emigration to the Spanish Caribbean had on the region's culture has revealed a new layer of the historical complexity of the region often omitted from prevailing narratives. The increasing literary representation of Chinese Cubans and Puerto Rican Cubans has posed a new challenge to meta-accounts of national identity, even those that have taken hybridity as one of its main driving forces. The characters in the novels studied here by Zoë Valdés, Daína Chaviano, Leonardo Padura, Eduardo Lalo, Manolo Núñez Negrón y Rafael Acevedo represent the fluid borders between countries, nations, and cultural identities as they travel back and forth from China to Cuba to Puerto Rico and intermarry with African and Spanish descendants. Scenes of unhomeliness function to bring forth the region's traumatic political history and remind the reader of the pertinence of Chinese contributions to Cuban and Puerto Rican culture and politics.

About the Author

Jeanette M. Martínez Figueroa was born in Ft. Lauderdale, FL on January 5, 1990 to a Puerto Rican mother and Cuban father. She moved to Puerto Rico in 2002 and completed high school in Bilingüe Padre Rufo. She has a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras with a focus in International Studies and Comparative Politics. Her interest in literature and politics led her to pursue a Master's degree in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico Rio Piedras. She attended various conferences to present research on romance in Chinese and European literature, the short story in modern Chinese and American literature, and the presence of Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean. The present study is the culmination of two years of research on the representation of Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Cuban and Puerto Rican literature as an instance of hybridity that challenges the prevailing discourse on national identity in Latin America and the Caribbean. The passion she has towards racial justice and immigrants' rights influenced her decision to attend Northeastern University School of Law.

Subverting *Mestizaje* Discourse:
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Chinese Immigration to Cuba and Puerto Rico

I. The Immigrant and the Nation-State

Immigration is a long-standing divisive political, social, economic, and cultural issue, but debates surrounding the topic have become heightened with the changes brought about by multiculturalism and globalization. Today, it is a focal point for questions of identity, equality, and social justice at both a national and a global level. In the early twentieth century, the movement of large amounts of people contributed to the economic development and cultures of modern nation-states, particularly in the American continent. Since then, as Reece Jones argues, "by the turn of the twentieth century, anti-immigration sentiment was growing in many settler-colonial states as residents gained wealth and privilege and began to fear the changes new migrants would bring" (83). This fear of change and of sharing wealth contributes to the way in which immigrant communities are portrayed in political discourse and cultural products. Although it is state policy which dictates who is a citizen of a country, with all the rights and protections such a recognition entails, culture also influences the way in which these decisions are made. Culture, a complex and malleable organism that intercepts race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, and other identity markers, is often the basis of arguments in defense of the "nation". The issue of immigration, more than any other, brings to light the inherent conflict between the "state" and the "nation". Although the terms are commonly equated and modern countries are referred to as nation-states, any critical historical analysis reveals the term to be problematic. The Caribbean, its geography and symbolic textures, is an extreme case of this polemic gaze.

The state is "a centralized bureaucracy in a territory in which sovereignty is defined by a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence" (Weber). It is an organized political entity that has

exclusive claims to land and resources, governs the people who inhabit the land, and exacts laws to the use and distribution of resources (Jones). The ability to monitor and control the movement of its population within its borders, through birth certificates, identification cards, passports, and censuses, has been a long-standing characteristic of a state's ability to govern. It is complemented by the power to deny non-citizens entry into the country and equal protection under the law. On the other hand, the nation is more difficult to define because its emergence in the nineteenth century is linked to the centralization of state power and it combines notions of the state with social and cultural markers such as religion, language, race or ethnicity, and values. The nation is an ongoing project of imagining a political and civil society composed of those considered members of a presumed shared cultural community. State and nation complement each other in that both are fundamentally about controlling and excluding; the first through physical means and, the second, through culture and other ideological means. The nation-state implies a single homogeneous culture within the defined borders of a state whose inhabitants are all the same, but such a concept is increasingly difficult to maintain and defend, if it was ever real. Foreigners have long been perceived as a threat to established communities and nation-states can legitimately exclude foreigners, today called immigrants, from equal protection under the law. "The distinction between inside and outside, between native and foreigner, pervades the political discourse in countries around the world because it is part of the foundation of the state as an institution" (Jones 167). Immigrants are a threat to an imagined national homogeneity, but even more so to the accumulated wealth and power of a certain group within the nation.

In Latin America, the idea of *mestizaje* has dominated cultural and political discourses on national identity since the nineteenth century, when it arose in the wake of ideas from scientific racialism. Juan de Castro states in *Mestizo Nations* that "the discourse of *mestizaje* [is]

constituted by texts celebrating miscegenation or cultural mixture as the basis for conceiving a homogeneous national identity out of a heterogeneous population" (9). This sort of discourse often obfuscates those elements of the past that are discomfiting and those communities that do not seamlessly integrate into a homogeneous national identity. Contemporary texts, such as those studied here, increasingly challenge this discourse's use of heterogeneity to produce a common past and a homogeneous future. As de Castro argues, "the importance of the analysis of the discourse of *mestizaje* is rooted in the need to uncover the social and cultural oppositions hidden by its veneer of homogeneity" (10). The discourse of *mestizaje* has allowed Latin American countries to, paradoxically, use heterogeneity to imagine commonality, but in doing so it denies agency and obscures the historical and cultural reality of immigrant communities, such as the Chinese. Nevertheless, the idea of the nation establishes a hierarchy between the national and the foreign, so long as a group is categorized as foreign, they are excluded from the project of national identity.

The cultural spaces of a nation-state are often dominated by a single group, to the exclusion of others, resulting in the bulk of representations of immigrant communities either being simplified or coming from the perspective of those outside of the community. Language is central in the discourse of *mestizaje* as a way of creating false national unity; one language shared by a heterogeneous country could make a homogeneous nation, but the imposition of Spanish reveals a preference for the elite's *criollo* culture over African and indigenous cultures. Therefore, Chinese immigrants' accents in Spanish are emphasized as a lack or fault in some cases, as a legacy in others, but always as an excess of difference, in multiple instances in the novels. Beneath the veneer of homogeneity, Latin American national identities are riddled with fault lines and contradictions. Literature, then, becomes a medium through which other voices

and agencies can be known, as a force of transformation and becoming. As a contribution to this debate, this dissertation has as its focus the analysis of the Cuban novels *La eternidad del instante* (2004), *La isla de los amores infinitos* (2011), and *La cola de la serpiente* (2015) and the Puerto Rican novels *Simone* (2012), *Barra china* (2012), and *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* (2012).

II. Brief History of the Chinese in the Spanish Caribbean

The Caribbean has long been the entry corridor for the American continent, as such it has received an influx of immigrants throughout its history. Although the numbers may pale in comparison to those arriving to the continent, proportional to the size of the islands and its population, the hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers brought to the Caribbean impacted the cultural formation of the region. Cuba received the largest number, so in this study I will refer mainly to these immigrants, who subsequently immigrated to Puerto Rico. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese were brought into Spanish Caribbean colonies as contract laborers to "work alongside black slaves on white-owned and -operated plantations. There they occupied an in-between space between black and white, slave and free" (Hu-deHart 81). From the outset, Chinese immigrants were positioned in a racial borderland, neither white nor black, and in a scaled economic position. Most laborers brought to the Caribbean were men, which contributed to racial miscegenation as Chinese men married, mostly, black or mixed-race Cuban women. As the slave trade waned due to the success of abolitionist movements, the number of Chinese contract laborers brought to the Spanish Caribbean increased. The Chinese contract labor system only lasted twenty-five years, but it functioned as a transitional form of labor from slave to wage labor (Hu-deHart 84). Although the Chinese were ostensibly under eight-year contracts which

included being paid a small wage, white plantation owners subjected them to the same treatment as black slaves, including corporeal punishments and withholding of wages.

Amongst the Spanish Caribbean, Cuba received the largest number of these immigrants; an estimated 142,000 Chinese coolies by 1874, when trade officially ended, in a country of 1.4 million, making the Chinese an approximate 10% of the Cuban population; "In proportion to population, therefore, the Chinese diaspora in Cuba was the largest in the Western Hemisphere" (Lopez-Calvo 13; Hu-deHart 81-85). While the contract and other regulations, such as the 1859 "Government Regulations for the Handling and Treatment of Asian and Indian Colonists", were meant to provide legal protection and recourse for coolies to complain against abuses, excesses, and violation of the contract, the reality was that the daily life and work of the coolies were left to the discretion of their *patronos*. "The laws...were flagrantly disregarded, the contract a mere piece of paper...life on the plantations for the Chinese contract laborers were not materially different from that of slaves" (Hu-deHart 87). The line between freedom and slavery became even more blurred with the passing in Cuba of the 1860 "Regulations for the Introduction of Chinese Workers to the Island of Cuba", which stipulated that, upon completion of their eight-year contract, the Chinese had two months to leave Cuba, at their own expense, or re-contract with the same or a new master. Few workers could save enough for the return fare, so the law became a means for perpetual servitude. The difference between the Chinese laborers and black slaves remained in that the former were keenly aware that they were *free* men under contract and, contrary to the European stereotype of Chinese as "servile, lazy, and natural-born slaves due to the climate of their land" (López-Calvo 7), they protested and filed complaints numerous times. Furthermore, an official investigation launched by the Chinese government into the violations of Chinese laborers' contracts resulted in the ending of the trade in 1874; African

slaves did not have such recourse. This further emphasizes the in-between position of the Chinese in the Caribbean.

Upon obtaining their freedom, the Chinese opened small businesses and established a Chinese quarter in the capital of Havana. During the first part of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1936), about 30,000 more Chinese immigrated to Cuba, fleeing the political and economic instability in their homeland. This wave of immigrants had relatives or friends in Cuba, who had arrived as coolies. Thousands more Chinese arrived as merchants and craftsmen from California, due to the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration and those already living in the country the right to obtain citizenship. Historical records reflect the growing identification as Cuban amongst the Chinese by their participation in the Cuban War of Independence; "Chinese participation in the Cuban wars for independence spanning 1868 to 1898, their successful formation of cross-racial alliances, and the professed dedication of the Cuban republic to an ideal of a racial democracy, created the conditions for incorporation into the national citizenry" (López 5). Yet, their support of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 did not increase their acceptance under the new regime. As Kathleen López and Evelyn Hu-deHart explain, a negative view of the Chinese existed in Latin America and the Caribbean; "they were described as clannish, corrupt, diseased, and unassimilable and were accused of competing unfairly with native Cuban workers" (López 5). It is possible that the success of Chinese businesses contributed to this stereotype, but it is undeniable that the Chinese assimilated in some ways, especially since the lack of Chinese women led to their marrying Afro-Cuban women. At the time of the Revolution, the Chinese in Cuba were mainly shop owners and merchants, thus classifying them as petit bourgeoisie, which made them anathema to the Communist regime. "The Chinese ethnic, commercial, and 'bourgeois' stance became an obstacle

for Fidel Castro's nationalistic and homogenizing project, which was conceived along class lines" (López-Calvo 15); discourse of mestizaje ignored the still-existent racism and racial divisions in Cuban society as well as the historical context that had contributed to the Chinese's economic class. The sheer number of Chinese on the Island, the vibrancy of Havana's Chinatown, and the marriage of many Chinese to Cubans leads one to hypothesize that Chinese customs seeped into Cuban culture. Nevertheless, the contributions of the Chinese to Cuban history and culture are still excluded from prevailing discourses on the country's national identity.

The study begins with an outline of the historical context of the Chinese in Cuba and an analysis of the Cuban representation of Chinese in literature as the bonding link to Chinese migration to Puerto Rico. As José Lee Borges explains in *Los chinos en Puerto Rico*, the Chinese arrive in Puerto Rico in three waves. From 1865 to 1880 over 350¹ Chinese prisoners were brought to San Juan, Puerto Rico, after being found guilty of homicide while rebelling against the Cuban *hacendados* (landlords), who had contracted them as free men in China and treated them like slaves, or worse, upon their arrival on the island. After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, many Chinese lost their businesses under the new regime and fled Cuba for Puerto Rico. The novel *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* by Rafael Acevedo presents the history of Chinese Puerto Ricans from this wave through the Fong family. The third wave of Chinese immigrants to Puerto Rico began in 1990 and accelerated in the 21st century because of the economic instability brought about in many countries by globalization. Some of these immigrants arrive legally, while others are victims of the international network of human trafficking. The Chinese characters in *Simone* by Eduardo Lalo and *Barra china* by Manolo Nuñez Negrón belong to this recent, and

¹ Dates and numbers regarding the arrival of Chinese prisoners to Puerto Rico are cited from *Los chinos en Puerto Rico* by José Lee Borges.

ongoing, wave of immigration. For many immigrants hoping to reach the United States, Puerto Rico is a stepping stone and the existing Chinese community on the Island means that immigrants are received by an existing network of extended family or friends.

Currently, the Chinese population in Puerto Rico is estimated at 17,000, including legal and illegal immigrants. The Chinese community in Puerto Rico is smaller than the Cuban one, but their presence is notable in many spheres; as small business owners, priests, doctors, and academics. They have contributed to the construction of the country's main highways, to its economic development through various businesses, and been active members in the community. However, much like in Cuba, the presence of the Chinese in Puerto Rican history and culture is not well-known or included in the national imagining of Puerto Rican identity. The increasing importance of China in the global economy and international politics probably contributed to growing interest in the Chinese community in Puerto Rico and, so, it is imperative to point out that the Puerto Rican novels studied here were published in the same year. Before them, less than a handful of short stories published between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included or mentioned the Chinese and always in stereotypical fashion to serve as contrast to an idealized Puerto Rican identity².

Throughout the complex national history of Puerto Rico and Cuba, there have been various theoretical attempts to define the social and cultural identity of the Islands' inhabitants. Few of these formulations have recognized the impact of racial and ethnic minorities, instead focusing on a narrative of African, Spanish, and indigenous miscegenation³ to the exclusion of smaller immigrant communities, such as the Chinese. The presumption that the Chinese

² "El cuento de un hombre feliz" by Manuel Corchado y Juarbe; "El calabozo del chino" by Cayetano Coll y Toste.

³ About this topic see José Luis González's collection of essays, *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos* 11ma Edición (2007).

remained isolated, both culturally and genetically, entails the erasure of their contributions to both countries' histories and culture. In their books, José Lee Borges, Kathleen Lopez, and Ignacio Lopez-Calvo force readers to reexamine these presumptions. The lack of studies on the literary representation of the Chinese community demands, then, a comparative analysis of both Islands as some of the protagonists of the chosen Puerto Rican novels are Chinese immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Cuba. Such a reading can lead to a better understanding of the representation on this community across the many seas and subverts the seemingly inclusive nationalist narrative, where the immigrant can be the manifestation of the unsettling Other. Or, as I have often asked myself, could this be why national discourses in Puerto Rico and Cuba tend to obscure the cultural impact of the Chinese and of other immigrant communities?

Cuba and Puerto Rico, like many Latin American countries, propose a discourse of *mestizaje* that celebrates "miscegenation or cultural mixture as the basis for conceiving a homogeneous national identity out of a heterogeneous population" (Castro 9). This discourse has been found to exclude the recognition of certain racial, ethnic, or cultural groups, such as the Chinese immigrants to the America. Therefore, the literary representation of Chinese immigrants and their descendants can pose a challenge to this meta-account of national identity. Categories of race and ethnicity are fluid, often responding to visual and cultural indicators based on preconceived notions of identification or categorization, like the shade of an individual's skin, the shape of their eyes, or their accent. But the characters in these novels show the fluid borders between countries, nations, and cultural identities as they travel back and forth from China to Cuba to Puerto Rico or the United States and intermarry with African and Spanish descendants along the way. Scenes of unhomeliness function to bring forth the collective memory of the Chinese and their contributions to present and future Cuban and Puerto Rican identities.

III. Representation, Literature, and the Borderlands

Literature has a complex relationship with society; it reflects the social norms and cultural practices of a community in a certain moment in time, whether it is to exalt or as a critique. Stories allow readers to step into the life of another, to create a sense of empathy towards characters and, by extension, people in the real world. As an outsider looking in, the reader also becomes aware of dissonances in the novel; moments in which the flaws of society, politics, and culture emerge. These moments can make reading an uncomfortable experience even as it unlocks the possibility for expanding the reader's perspective and illuminating forgotten fragments of history.

The theories guiding this study include the representation of Chinese immigrants and culture in the West developed by Edward Said, Lisa Lowe, and Ignacio Lopez-Calvo. To include the historical context of the Chinese presence in Cuba within the thesis, Kathleen Lopez's book *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History (Envisioning Cuba)* and Lee Borges's *Los chinos en Puerto Rico* are central. Said's argument in his seminal work, *Orientalism*: "the construction of identity involves the construction of opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us" (332) has influenced many studies on the representation of Asians in literature. It is the theoretical framework that allows Lisa Lowe to develop her understanding of Orientalism as a worldview which "seeks to consolidate the coherence of the West as a subject precisely through the representation of 'oriental' objects as homogeneous, fixed and stable" (67). A critical view of history illuminates the contagion between the two cultures and recent novels have drawn attention to the repression, or reinterpretation, of history in the construction of national identities

in Latin America and the Caribbean. The dearth of studies on the coolie trade in the Hispanic Caribbean is an example of this erasure, so a comparative reading can allow interdisciplinary researchers to mark how Chinese culture has influenced Caribbean culture, as novelists trace the presence of the Chinese in Cuba and Puerto Rico throughout history and in music, art, and cuisine.

The theories developed by Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldua on hybridity, unhomeliness, and the borderlands are also central to the analysis of the role of memory in these texts, for example Bhabha's call for the critic "to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (18). I propose to analyze whether these characters communicate a sense of unhomeliness coming from the "traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" ("Bhabha" 15). It is clear from the outset that the outside world intrudes upon homes in China and Cuba or Puerto Rico. As these novels portray, one of its effects is that as Chinese men leave to work in plantations in America, Chinese women become heads of households in a traditionally patriarchal society. The Barrio Chino in Havana is affected by the changes of the twentieth century, as families are broken apart and brought together in successive migrations that respond to economic and political upheaval. San Juan, Havana and Miami (the principal cities of the novels) are borderlands; places where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldua 1). Borderlands are not just physical locations or spaces, they can also be cultural; like the mixture of Chinese, African, and Spanish language and religiosity. Dwelling is related to time and space, as Esther Preen argues, unhomeliness is also a sense of "dwelling-in-dischronotopicality". Chinese

diaspora is not just physically removed from their homeland, they are also displaced in time by becoming separated from a cultural construction of time-space; "We all live within time-space constructions that make us who we are and that govern our lives" (Pereen 68). So, in the novels, there are many references to diaspora communities being "frozen in time", in a certain moment that deeply affected them or in which they were finally completely cut off from their homeland. Diaspora communities attempt to recreate the cultural time-space to guide their lives in a performative manner, but what marks them out, and differs from a Chinese man living in China, is that diasporas are interpellated by more than one chronotope at a time; the home chronotope and the host chronotope. A multiplicity of times are signified upon and signifying from more than one perspective: diaspora communities dwell in borderlands and crossing into that realm or representing it through narrative is, thus, uncanny, a ripple in space and time.

Throughout *Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture*, Ignacio López-Calvo argues that discourse "concerned with mestizaje ignore, and thus continue to erase in proper Orientalist fashion, the presence of Chinese immigrants on the island" (134). He recognizes the importance of literary production in exposing "the unrealistic claims of homogenizing nationalistic projects and the simplism of the binary logic (such as black-white or Creole-indigenous) through which many nationalist discourses in Latin America and the Caribbean have been constructed" (152) and in rescuing from oblivion "essential aspects of oral and written history of the [division] of labor [and] of internal colonialism and genocide" (152). It is from this angle that the following study delves into the representation of Chinese Cubans and Chinese Puerto Ricans in contemporary literature. Academic interest in Chinese migration to Latin America and the Caribbean has grown in the past decade and this seems to be matched by an artistic interest in their cultural contributions. In her book *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues that

the novel "... regulates the formations of citizenship and nation, genders the domains of 'public' and 'private' activities, prescribes the spatialization of race relations, and, most of, determines possible contours and lands for the narration of 'history' "(98). The novel, as a cultural product, helps form our beliefs: "We perceive the version of reality that it communicates...Culture is made by those in power..." (Anzaldúa 88). Therefore, "the analysis of the (mis)representation and erasure of the Chinese presence in Cuban [and Puerto Rican] cultural production inevitably disrupts the official black-and-white discourse of the nation by underscoring alternative notions of ethnic difference" (López-Calvo 19). The imaging of the Chinese in literature causes a shock in which the present and the past collide, bringing into view the long history of colonial ideology and racism still rampant in Latin America and the Caribbean. The decision to include or exclude a certain community, whether conscious or unconscious, responds to racial stereotypes inherited from European colonialism and, when it comes to the Chinese, it is often related to what Edward Said called orientalism: the myriad ideas of the East that constructed Asians as the great *Other* of the West.

Insufficient academic and literary attention has been placed on the presence of the Chinese in Puerto Rican culture and society. Lee Borges has identified the lack of critical attention in the Puerto Rican academy to this complex phenomenon: "... Puerto Rican historiography has tended to pay more attention to certain groups of immigrants, while others have gone unnoticed" (45); a judgment that can be extended to literature. His research presents another side to what is commonly known about the Chinese community on the Island: the existence of a whole generation of children of immigrants born here, or raised here from very young, who live in a space "between" cultures and identities. These second-generation immigrants have been educated and shaped by Puerto Rican society, but not fully accepted by it.

The contributions of the community to Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean in general, are not taught; their work on the construction of the Central Highway is an example of this (Lee Borges 250-261). Lee Borges identifies stories published in newspapers or collections⁴ in which the Puerto Rican imaging of the Chinese in the 19th century is quite clear. These stories present the Chinese as a submissive, uncultured, and barbaric people (388-392). The Chinese culture is presented as something exotic and out of the ordinary (Lee Borges 395) and, at times, is used to articulate a defense of Puerto Rican nationalism via contrast: Puerto Ricans must avoid being like the Chinese; weak and obedient. Acknowledging that literature actively participates in the postulation of national identity, then the exclusion or inclusion of the Chinese can represent a desire, subconscious or not, to create a homogeneous Puerto Rican culture. It is possible that, as José Luis González describes in "Literatura e identidad nacional en Puerto Rico", the absence of certain communities responds to the current of cultural nationalism and its racial and ethnic imaginings. Beginning in the 20th century, the sense of crisis and the trauma produced by the United States invasions created a situation in which it was "conducive to the encapsulation of an identity based on a [fictitious] utopia of social and racial harmony present in the hacienda" (Rodríguez Castro 496). If subsequent immigrants were included, it would force the people to admit the darker complexities of the country's history, instead of maintaining an imagined cultural and ethnic unity.

⁴ Guarionex, *La Correspondencia de Puerto Rico*, 30 de Julio de 1905, pp. 3-4; Manuel Corchado y Juarbe, "El hombre feliz", *Obras completas*. San Juan, PR: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1975, p. 345; Cayetano Coll y Toste, "El calabozo chino", *Leyendas y tradiciones puertorriqueñas*. Rio Piedras, PR: Editorial Cultural, 1975, pp. 143-145.

Through a textual analysis of the literary representation of the Chinese, this study delineates how Chinese Cubans and Chinese Puerto Ricans challenge *mestizaje* discourse. By not fitting into the binary white-black and free-slave perspectives that dominated national discourse under colonial rule and afterwards, but still subject to discrimination or suspicion, the Chinese force readers to confront dissonant aspects of the homogenizing *mestizaje* discourse. Chinese Cubans and Chinese Puerto Ricans are uncanny because their presence has so long been ignored, forgotten, or hidden and the acknowledgement of their existence among Cubans and Puerto Ricans brings up a history of violence and oppression, of suffering and forced adaptation, that disrupts accepted historical beliefs. It is not taught in textbooks how the Chinese came to Cuba and Puerto Rico, but they are here. The novels make explicit, in different ways, how the complex history of their arrival, survival, and cultural negotiation is also an important part of Caribbean history and national identity.

Untangling the Roots of Cuban Culture

Recent academic interest on the influence nineteenth-century Chinese emigration to the Spanish Caribbean had on the region's culture has revealed a layer of the historical complexity of the region often omitted from prevailing narratives. Cuba, like many Latin American countries, utilizes a discourse of *mestizaje* that celebrates "miscegenation or cultural mixture as the basis for conceiving a homogeneous national identity out of a heterogeneous population" (Castro 9). This discourse has been found to exclude the recognition of certain racial, ethnic, or cultural groups, such as the Asian immigrants to the Americas. The Chinese community in Cuba is significant because it was at one point the largest enclave of Chinese immigrants in the Western hemisphere. Successive migrations formed a transnational community between the Chinese in Cuba and their families back home as well as in other parts of the Americas. The fact that so few Chinese women migrated to Cuba meant that the Chinese men took Cuban wives and often had children with them, who received a mixed cultural heritage. By fighting in the Cuban wars of independence and supporting the 1959 revolution, the Chinese also proved themselves to be Cuban patriots. Nevertheless, these historical facts are omitted from prevailing narratives on *lo cubano* or *cubanidad*. The literary representation of Chinese Cubans in many ways poses a challenge to this meta-account of national identity.

For clarity, "Chinese Cubans" in this study will refer to Chinese migrants in Cuba, ethnic Chinese born in Cuba, and mixed descendants. The categories of race and ethnicity are fluid, often responding to visual indicators based on preconceived notions of identification or categorization, like the shade of an individual's skin or the shape of their eyes. The characters in Daína Chaviano's *La isla de los amores infinitos*, Zoe Valdés's *La eternidad del instante*, and Leonardo Padura's *La cola de la serpiente* demonstrate the fluid borders between countries, nations, and cultural identities as they travel back and forth from China to Cuba to the United

States and intermarry with African and Spanish descendants. Cuba's Barrio Chino as described in Padura's novel is a borderland, but it is also a fragment of the past existing in the present. The phantom house in Chaviano's novel is similar; the past haunting the present, a space neither here nor there: the unhomely. The effect of removal from a culturally known time-space is made most dramatic in Valdés novel with the loss of Li Ying's memory right before he gets on a boat to America. The texts bring to light a forgotten history of cultural and racial miscegenation and, thus, create a sense of unhomeliness that functions to bring forth the collective memory of the Chinese and their contributions to Cuban identity.

La isla de los amores infinitos moves backwards and forwards in time, beginning with the story of Cecilia in the present; a young Cuban journalist living in Miami investigating reports of a phantom house. The novel opens with Cecilia at a Cuban bar where she meets an old woman, Amalia, who tells her story beginning with her ancestors; African, Spanish, and Chinese immigrants. At the end of the novel both stories, that of the phantom house and that of Amalia's family, are connected in such a way that it reveals the intricate and complex national and racial history of Cuba and its diaspora. *La eternidad del instante* is also set in two places; the first half tells the story of the Ying family in China and a young man's search for his father, who migrated to Cuba seeking fortune. The second half takes place in the present in Cuba, where an old man recounts his travels from China, through Europe, and then the Caribbean to his granddaughter. These novels exemplify the argument that, "in diaspora, the homeland is not only *distant*; it is also *past* or *passed*, left behind in space and time" (Peeren 73). The third novel, *La cola de la serpiente*, delves into the mysterious culture of Habana's Barrio Chino from the perspective of a Cuban police detective, whose idea of what a Chinese man "is" reveals his ignorance of the complex history of the community. The mystery of the homicide of an elderly Chinese

immigrant forces him to try and understand the history of the Chinese in Cuba and its hybrid culture. Memory and remembrance play a central role in these texts as main characters seek to communicate their stories, enmeshed with a community and country's history.

Maximiliano Megía (Mo Ying), in *La eternidad del instante*, has difficulty disconnecting the past from the present and ordering his many memories and experiences in chronological order so he can effectively communicate them to his granddaughter: "Maximiliano no conseguía reordenar los años, confundido en un para atrás y para delante que lo ofuscaba todavía más y lo sacaba de sus casillas" (Valdés 221). Images in the present, like a dove, call forth similar moments from the past and he struggles to remain lucid. He knows, however, the importance of ensuring that his story, and that of his family, is not forgotten. In contrast, Cecilia, from *La isla de los amores infinitos*, left Cuba seeking to forget her past and her country, the site of so many traumatic memories: "Se había marchado de su tierra huyéndole a muchas cosas, a tantas que ya no valía la pena recordarlas" (Chaviano 20). Ghosts of that past, of her family, follow her to Miami in the form of a phantom house both to protect her and to ensure that they, and the story of their ancestry, are not forgotten. It is Cecilia's investigation into the phantom house and Amalia's stories that illuminate the unsavory elements of history often omitted from textbooks; prostitution as the only option for poor widowed women to provide for their children, racism and discrimination against the Chinese and mixed race children, and the atrocities committed against Indians, Africans, and Chinese alike. It is women, in both novels, who are tasked with the responsibility of receiving and transmitting these histories.

The character Amalia, the uncanny voice of memory, from *La isla de los amores infinitos* is the one charged with telling the forgotten history of her family, meant to metaphorically represent the racial history of Cuba in the miscegenation of Chinese, African, and Spanish

cultures, to Cecilia, who is gifted with the Sight. She, in turn, can pass it to her children. It is a story that is unfamiliar to Cecilia, despite having grown up and attended school in Cuba: "... la mujer empezaba a narrarle una historia que no guardaba relación con nada que hubiera leído o escuchado" (Chaviano 25). This implies that the story of the Chinese, and the freed slaves they married along with other marginalized characters (prostitutes), are left out of popular narratives on Cuban history and identity. *La isla de los amores infinitos* recognizes the Chinese presence in Cuba by recounting the interracial story of a family, from the moment that slavery is abolished in Cuba to the late nineties in Miami. There are three strands that make up the family; African, Chinese, and Spanish and each one brings with it their own religious beliefs and cultural customs. By including the Chinese as an essential part of the characters' racial and cultural heritage, Chaviano reconstructs another Cuban ethnic and national identity. From the first scene, where the protagonist Cecilia is sitting in a bar with friends, the fluidity of mixed heritage amongst Cubans is noted:

Debía resultarles bastante insólito ver a un joven con perfil de lord Byron tocar los tambores como si el demonio se hubiera apoderado de él, junto a una mulata achinada que agitaba sus trenzas al compás de las claves; y aquel negro de voz prodigiosa...cantando altibajos que transitaban desde el barítono operático hasta la nasalidad del son. (Chaviano 22).

Cecilia's reflection comes out of her observation of American tourists in the Cuban bar being left stunned by the music when it began to play. It is through music that cultural miscegenation is first highlighted and the link between music and memory is noted because the sound of it causes Cecilia pain. Whenever she thinks of Cuba, old bolero songs come to mind and music and memory also play an important role in *La eternidad del instante*.

Cecilia believes she knows who she is, what she feels, what is best for her, and what her abilities are; just as she feels she knows what Cuba and immigrating to Miami means to her, but through the development of the plot her binary vision of history is shaken. Her search for the phantom house; its sightings and its possible origins are a metaphor for racial and cultural memory. Especially those memories which lie beneath the homogeneous surface, oppressed or forgotten in time, and the uncovering of these memories, interrupts an accepted notion of selfhood. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* argues for the site of the house, the home, as containing an essential connection to individual and collective memory in the construction of the self. The house concentrates and accumulates memories of those who have lived there and all an individual's memories of past houses. "At times, we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability—a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to "suspend" its flight." (Bachelard 86). Through her investigation of the ghost house and her conversations with Amalia, Cecilia discovers her own hidden familial history and, at the same time, that of Cuba. The ghost house is her legacy; it is the ancestral family home in Cuba that followed her to Miami to look over her and to remind her of the past. It is a site filled with the uncanny, as political and economic upheaval led her family to be separated as some left Cuba for Miami while others remained. Here the uncanny is that which Bhabha describes as the moment when the "private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy" (19). When her friend Freddy reminds her that one loves the places they have loved and suffered in, which includes Cuba, she argues: "No quiero recordar nada. Quiero olvidar. Quiero pensar que soy otra persona" (Chaviano 284). All the sad and painful memories of Cecilia's past return in the phantom house to remind her that there was also happiness in Cuba,

thus she is forced to admit she both hates and loves her homeland. Before this, the way she chose to remember Cuba was as a country where she could not be free to pursue her dreams, where her parents passed away when she was still a child, where many of the amenities and food staples of the past, such as hot chocolate, are unavailable. Cecilia struggles to come to terms with the contradictions that riddle Cuba, but the novel's conclusion reveals that, in solving the mystery of the house and discovering her psychic ability, she is finally able to accept who she is and the place she comes from: "Si, su ciudad también era parte de ella, como el soplo de su respiración, como la naturaleza de sus visiones..." (Chaviano 379); "Su corazón estaba a mitad de camino entre La Habana y Miami" (Chaviano 380).

Through Amalia's story and comments from other characters, such as her grand-aunt and her friend Freddy, Cecilia learns that an immigrant's relationship to their country of origin is complicated, like any relationship, and that a sense of feeling at home and not at home does not correspond to a place but to her own sense of loss and confusion. Cecilia both loves and hates her homeland: "Se dio cuenta que empezaba a añorar gestos y decires...toda esa fraseología de barrios marginales que ahora se moria por escuchar en una ciudad donde abundaban los *hi, sweetie* o los *excuse me* mezclados con un castellano que, por provenir de tantos sitios, no pertenece a ninguno" (Chaviano 21); "Recordó su antigua ciudad, su país perdido. Lo odiaba, Oh Dios, cuánto lo odiaba...No importaba que esa angustia se pareciera al amor" (Chaviano 284). As Esther Preen argues: "In diaspora, the homeland is not only distant; it is also past or passed, left behind in space and in time" (Preen 72). The homeland is not left behind unchanged, but is a construct symbolically kept in place by out of place subjects. When Cecilia watches the recordings of the papal visit to Cuba in Miami, she realizes that time and space have allowed her to view her homeland with a different perspective. She also comes to accept that in Miami she

feels more Cuban than when she lived in Havana because the Cuban diaspora has transplanted, protected, and developed their culture in this new country. The presence of Cuban culture becomes more apparent to Cecilia in a strange land, where it does not belong and is unexpected, than it did when she was living in Cuba. A final moment of unhomeliness is the image of Cuban exile culture in Cuba, through the replica of the Ermita de La Caridad de Miami, the most worshipped sanctuary by Cuban exiles, in Santiago de Cuba.

The phantom house, the house of familial memory, which has followed Cecilia from Cuba to Miami, first makes its presence known by appearing in different locations in Miami on the anniversaries of tragic moments in Cuban history, such as the triumph of the Revolution and the defeat of Cuban exiles at Bay of Pigs. However, once Cecilia begins investigating the house it appears on a different date; the anniversary of her parents' wedding, and this makes clear her personal connection to the house. Her great aunt warns of this possible connection: "¿Sabes lo que creo?... Esa casa puede ser un recordatorio... Todo este tiempo, la casa puede haber estado anunciando 'vengo de este sitio o presento tal cosa'; ahora está diciendo 'estoy aquí por tal persona'" (Chaviano 301). Finally, Cecilia connects the dates and places of the appearance of the phantom house (time and space) with her arrival in Miami with the purpose of leaving behind and forgetting Cuba: "La casa estaba relacionada con Cecilia. La estaba buscando a ella" (Chaviano 319). The question remains of why Cecilia and not her great aunt if they belong to the same family? Unlike Cecilia, Lolo chooses to remember Cuba, her family history, and honor the dead, while Cecilia only seeks to escape the past. It is made explicit throughout the novel that the women in Cecilia's family, like those in Amalia's, have psychic powers. Traditionally, women have transmitted religious beliefs and customs to successive generations and, often, were attributed magical abilities tied to the religious syncretism of old Spanish, African, and

indigenous belief-systems. By attributing women in her story these visionary abilities, Chaviano is also highlighting Homi Bhabha's own observation on the position of women in the public and private spheres: "the unhomely moment relate the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (15). Amalia's own story of motherhood is particularly emphatic on this point; she loses her first child when caught up in a riot under Fulgencio Batista's regime and her third child when Cuban revolution soldiers break into her house to arrest her husband for conspiring against the communist regime.

The figure of the woman dramatizes the problematic ambivalence between "public" and "private"; the woman brings forth buried fragments of history. For example, Kui-fa (Rosa) is essentially a single mother when Siu Mend (Manuel) goes to Cuba to work in the family merchant business. Siu Mend is, himself, the son of a Chinese man who immigrated to Cuba to make his fortune and passed away there, thus leaving Siu Mend in the care of Kui-fa's uncle. The circumstances of both their lives are shaped by the historical and political context of China; the political instability that resulted in the incursion of Western powers and the willingness of the Chinese men to immigrate in search of financial stability and security for their families. It is the political upheaval brought about by the Chinese Revolution of 1911 causes them to lose their family business and farm, when raiding soldiers loot and burn it, so they flee to Cuba. Her daughter-in-law, Amalia, is also left on her own to raise her daughter when Pablo is arrested and imprisoned for years for his participation in political activities against the Cuban Communist regime. The ghost house appearing on the anniversaries of critical political events in Cuba is a direct metaphor of how the world affects the home. In *La eternidad del instante*, Mei Ying must raise her three children by herself when Li Ying immigrates to Cuba. Her circumstances are more strenuous because Li Ying's amnesia means that he does not send them any remittances to

aid his family, so Mei Ying must find ways to make money to support herself and her children. The instability brought about by war directly impacts the personal lives of the female characters. Economic and political uncertainty shapes the decisions others make over their lives, who they marry and whether they can live out their lives in peace and happiness. For the women in these novels, the safety of their children and providing for their future is imperative and there is a constant fear that the uncontrollable changes in the outside world will take their loved ones away.

Memory also plays a crucial role in the narratives; there is an insistence that the characters must remember and honor their past. In *La eternidad del instante*, the importance of remembering the original family name is emphasized in multiple moments: "Tu nombre es Mo Ying. Nunca lo olvides. Aunque tengas que renunciar algún día tu identidad" (Valdés 135). Lola Ying is the only one who succeeds in getting her grandfather, Maximiliano, to speak after decades of silence and he tells her about his journey from China to Cuba, about his family in China, and instructs her in traditional Chinese beliefs and philosophies. When she connects with him and begins to learn her family history, she also accepts his surname, the true family name: "El eco devolvía dos palabras: Lola Ying. No olvidaría su nuevo nombre" (Valdés 164). She is fascinated with her Chinese heritage, which her family has kept hidden from her by barring her access to the basement and back part of her paternal grandmother's house, where the hundred-year-old Mo Ying lives. Her paternal grandmother's justification brings forward various racist slurs towards the Chinese, including that they bring bad luck, but Lola immediately feels connected to her grandfather and wishes to forge a closer relationship. Maximiliano sees in his granddaughter a link to his past because she reminds him of his mother and sisters; he tells her his story so that it may live on. Of course, in *La isla de los amores infinitos*, memory is given a

more immediate place as the metaphor of the phantom house that contains the interwoven histories of European, African, and Chinese immigrants. The memories of Chinese Cuban characters in these novels explore the fluidity of cultural identities.

Leonardo Padura's portrayal of Chinese Cubans in Havana's Barrio Chino is distinct; it is the story of those who emigrated and stayed told through the eyes of a creole detective. Mario Conde must learn and understand the history and traditions of the Chinese community on the island to solve a homicide, but he is constantly disconcerted by his inability to penetrate the mind of Juan, his guide, and his Chinese compatriots. At the start of the story he ruminates on "¿que cosa era un chino?" (23) and his attempts to find an answer reveals his shallow and prejudiced view. The fact the Chinese are treated as a monolithic object, "cosa"; "un chino", sets the tone for the problems he will encounter trying to find the murderer. He is unable to believe that the quiet and passive Chinese Cubans belong to the same race that built the Great Wall, carried out the Great Cultural Revolution, and undertook the Great March (23). This difficulty in empathic understanding behind the facade of prejudices and means of survival within a different culture is symbolized in Juan Chion and other Chinese immigrants' smiles, which Mario often notes is a mask they employ to hide their true thoughts and feelings from outsiders: "...la sonrisa de Juan Chion sustituyó el apretón de manos que aquel chino jamás ofrecía" (Padura 27); "Solo entonces Juan Chion dejó de sonreír, pero fue apenas un instante" (Padura 28); "Juan Chion acentó su sonrisa" (Padura 35). Chion, the father of the coworker of Mario Conde who asked him to take on the case, greets the detective with a smile that only falters when the topic of his daughter is brought up. The smile is constantly in place, but it is undecipherable and the detective suspects that it hides the mistrust and pain that the Chinese community feel towards outsiders after the abuses and discrimination they have faced. "Tenían un modo de mirar oblicuo, pesado y

adolorido, capaz de remover la sensibilidad del teniente investigador..." (Padura 32); "...lo desesperaba aquella sonrisa capaz de atrincherar a toda una cultura de cuatro mil años" (Padura 67). During his interviews with the neighbors of the murdered Pedro Cuang, Conde tells Chion that they all refused to divulge any information they might have about the events as they smiled politely; "Pero tus paisanos son del carajo: nunca se sabe cuándo no saben o cuándo no quieren saber..." (Padura 34), but he suspects that they know more than they are willing to say. This characterization of the interactions between the apparently Spanish descendant Conde and the Chinese immigrants is problematic in that, at face value, it feeds into the stereotype of the Chinese as tricksters or liars and clannish. It continues the narrative of the "inscrutability" of the coolie, but does not immediately call into question whether Cubans like Conde have attempted to grasp the source of such reticence. Nevertheless, as the plot develops and more of the background of the Chinese characters involved in the murder is revealed, Mario Conde realizes that the Chinese community is close-knit and loyal to one another in face of the common atrocities one can suffer at the hands of another. They were brought from China to work in the sugarcane plantations under false pretenses, ending up in virtual slavery for decades, and once they obtain their freedom they are met with racism, persecution and ostracism, within the invisible walls of another China Town, as they will be known in the Americas.

As Mario Conde delves in the community in Barrio Chino his stereotypical characterization of the Chinese is completely uprooted and he must come to accept that beneath the Chinese smile is an ocean of traumatic memories, unshakeable loyalties, and a strong sense of honor. Chinese are not "ants", as Juan Chion comments to him in response to an apparently common saying about the Chinese that the police detective mentions on more than one occasion; "...¿no dicen que los chinos son como las hormigas?" (Padura 32). As if aware of

Mario Conde's prejudices, Juan Chion often will rebuke him with ironic remarks such as:

"Porque to los chinos tienen los ojos as", pelo no to los chinos son iguales...Ah, y métete una cosa en la cabeza, Conde, los chinos no son holmiguitas" (Padura 54-55), a poignant reminder that the Chinese community is made up of diverse individuals and their actions cannot be fit into a single frame of "this is a Chinese man". It is particularly revealing for him to learn about the mixture of cultures present in the Chinese and African belief systems: "...cada vez entendía menos, se sentía más estúpido e inculto, al mismo tiempo que sospechaba si alguna de aquellas risas iban dirigidas a burlarse de su inocencia, su credulidad y su ignorancia" (Padura 63). The death of Juan Chion's cousin at the hands of a Greek merchant is notoriously cruel:

"...todos los chinos embarcados en aquella travesía habían sido hacinados en las cámaras frías del barco...el capitán dio la orden de poner al máximo el enfriamiento de las cámaras. Los cadáveres congelados de los treinta y dos chinos fueron lanzados como piedras de hielo por la borda...luego de ser despojados del dinero que siempre lograban ocultar." (Padura 51).

The event reminds the reader of the abusive treatment of Chinese coolies during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The coolie trade in the Spanish Caribbean was especially cruel because it coincided with the continual existence of black slavery, so the Chinese, who worked alongside slaves, were treated the same. In other words, the racism of white European landowners extended from Africans to Chinese; inferior people whose "nature" suited them only for backbreaking work under terrible conditions. Bhabha states that the stereotype is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated..." (95). Conde constantly searches for ways in

which members of the Cuban Chinese community reinforce his idea of "lo que es un chino", but instead he finds that there is no unilateral characterization of the Chinese.

The idea he had of the Cuban Chinese as passive and silent sufferers is rattled by the history he uncovers during his investigation. When, years after the event, Juan Chion and Francisco murdered the Greek merchant in vengeance for their family member's deaths, it shows that the Chinese are unwilling to passively accept their fate. The secret of this murder tied Juan and Francisco together, who were already bound by the debt that Juan owed Francisco for helping him immigrate to Cuba from China. When Mario Conde learns of this from Patricia Chion, and the other ways in which the fates and lives of Juan Chion and Francisco are tied, he better understands Juan's reticence in helping him with the investigation. This murder destroys Conde's perception of the Chinese as patient in the face of abuses. The Chinese resolve their own problems because Cuban authorities, who once did nothing to stop the abuses of Chinese coolies, are complicit with the existing discrimination against the community and do not provide protection and justice. Honor and filial piety (complete loyalty and obedience to those to whom one owes a life debt, like a parent or godparent) are central tenants in traditional Chinese society. Even after living in Cuba for decades, Juan Chion has not renounced this cultural understanding of societal ties and customs, so he does everything he can to protect Francisco and his son. Mario Conde's initial lack of understanding of Chinese culture caused him to take longer to unravel this relationship, but it also means that by doing his job he is hurting someone he respects and wished to protect.

One of the things that Padura does in his novel (only mentioned in passing in Valdés and Chaviano's texts) is to emphasize the Chinese accent whenever Chion or Francisco speak. Whenever a first-generation Cuban Chinese character speaks, his dialogue is marked by the

replacing of r's with l's, which Juan Chion says is because in Chinese there is no "r" sound. At one point, the detective Mario Conde asks him: "...llevas más de cincuenta años viviendo en Cuba, dime una cosa, ¿porqué ustedes no hablan bien el español, eh?" (Padura 35). The elderly Chinese immigrant responds in perfect Spanish: "Porque no me da la gana de hablar como ustedes, Mario Conde" (Padura 35). A distinction is made here with the use of "ustedes"; Mario Conde is the first to say it to mark a binary opposition between how "Cubans" (we) speak and "Chinese" (they) speak, as a form of exclusion. Juan Chion responds in kind but his returning of the word "ustedes" is a mockery and a defiance; he does not want to be "Cuban", although the use of the second person, *ustedes*, points out a place of enunciation and belonging in the same dialogue circuit, a position marked with subalternity but also with dissent. The retaining of the Chinese accent in Spanish is a way for him to feel closer to his culture and to resist fully assimilating into a culture that has been unable to integrate that *nosotros*. As mentioned before, Juan Chion's refusal to shake hands, always bowing or smiling as a form of greeting, can also be a form of cultural resistance. These actions, along with his continual adherence to traditional Chinese ideas on honor and filial piety set him apart from the larger Cuban community, but his marriage to a mulata and his mixed-race daughter also hint to some assimilation. At some point in his life, he had to decide that he would remain in Cuba, setting aside any hope of returning to his homeland. Or, if Cuba is his homeland now.

La cola de la serpiente is set mainly in Havana's Chinatown, which was once the biggest Chinese community in the Western hemisphere. At the time of the novel, 1989, the Barrio Chino has fallen into disrepair and is mostly abandoned, as most of the Chinese population exiled themselves from Cuba after the Revolution when the state began closing small businesses. Those that remained had children with Cuban women, since most Chinese immigrants were males, and

these children, like Patricia Chion, consider themselves more Cuban than Chinese. Only old men who saw the first days of the community, and are not seeing its last, remain in the Barrio. Mario Conde believes that the Chinese community chooses to live isolated and admits:

Pero, en realidad, su mayor problema era que todo le parecía extraordinario en la vida de aquellos chinos que vivían en el mismo centro de la ciudad desde hacía más de siglos y seguían siendo gentes lejanas y distintas, de quienes se conocían con toda certeza apenas dos o tres tópicos inútiles en aquel momento... (Padura 38).

Is the sense of the Chinese as foreign, as Other, despite their long presence on the Island due to the community's unwillingness to make connections with Cubans and Cuban culture? Or, is it a result of a colonial view and discourse of Asians that Cubans assimilated with its complexities and contradictions? It can be argued that the latter is the primary reason, since the Chinese immigrants married Cuban women, raised Cuban children, learned Spanish (even if they chose to retain an accent), adapted creole belief systems, and fought in Cuban wars. Despite all this, Cubans continue to see them as different, at least in the criollo version of Cuban identity.

A theme that is present in all three novels is the worship of San Fan Con by Chinese Cubans. This worship is an example of religious syncretism between Chinese beliefs, a mix of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, with Catholic beliefs and the African Orishas. "The invention of Sanfancón was used at the time and is still being used today by the Sino-Cuban community as a strategic alternative...that allow for the opening of alternative spaces in which the construction of identities other than those prescribed by the State takes place" (López-Calvo 93-94). The figure, according to Kathleen López, developed from the Chinese god of war, Guan Gong and he was seen as a protector of immigrants in Cuba, but was associated with Changó in santería and Santa Bárbara in Catholicism (105). Mo Ying, in *La eternidad del instante*, after

years living in Cuba blends African, European, and Asian religious beliefs: "Al fondo del recinto un humilde altar budista...y en la otra esquina un caldero con una herradura y toda suerte de hierros: una ofrenda a Elegguá, el dios niño africano que abre los caminos..." (148). Sanfancon first appears in this novel as a woman who guides Mo Ying in his travels: "...me llamo Trebisonda San Fan Cong, mucho gusto. En una vida anterior fui una ceiba, nací y crecí en una isla lejana, del Caribe..." (Valdés 169), but she is mentioned many times after, as are other saints and deities. When Maximiliano's daughter is sick he prays to African orishas, Catholic saints, and Asian bodhisattvas: "...oró a todas las deidades, desde el Buda Shukiamuni, cuyo nombre era Siddhartha, el primero que existió hace dos mil quinientos años en la India hasta san Juan de Letrán, el icono que las abuelas cubanas colocan debajo del colchón de los nietos" (Valdés 310). In *La isla de los amores infinitos*, Siu Mend adopts the worship of Sanfancon from his grandfather: "...ahora rezaba cada mañana frente a la imagen de San-Fan-Con, aquel santo inexistente en China que era un figura onnipresente en la isla" (Chaviano 225), and passes it on to his son, Pablo. One of the first leads that Mario Conde explores in *La cola de la serpiente* when trying to unravel the mystery of Pedro Cuang's murder is to visit a temple that honors San Fan Con to discover if the symbol carved into the murdered man's chest is part of the worship of the Chinese Cuban saint; "Francisco explicó que Cuang Con era el dueño de la fortuna: cada varilla indicaba un camino en la vida y la que llevaba un círculo con una cruz formada por dos flechas era el peor camino: el del infierno..." (Padura 64). At the temple, he is shocked to learn of the mixed origins of the saint, how his worship is tied to that of a Catholic saint and African god: ¿Por qué san Fan Con?... Eso fue aquí. Vino Cuang Con, un glan capitán, un héroe mitológico, pelo se cubanizó en san Fan Con, y como es cololao y ahola santo, los neglos dicen que es Changó...eso que Cuang Con no sólo es san Fan Con, sino también es

Changó, Santa Bárbara bendita, con su manto rojo y la espada en la mano...era demasiado para él, se dijo (Padura 63).

The syncretic mixture of beliefs includes other spiritualities. Francisco explains that there is also a segment of Chinese worshipers of san Fan Con that practice "brujería de negros", just like there are Afro-Cubans who practice "brujería de chinos". This is made clearer when Conde visits an *ngangulero* (someone who practices Cuban *santería* or *brujería*) and learns more about the practice of casting a curse on someone and the idea that using the skull of a Chinese man made the strongest curses because the Chinese were particularly vengeful. The fact that, years after the event, Juan Chion and Francisco are still angry enough to murder the Greek merchant who killed their family members in cold blood and tossed them away like garbage, are an example of this supposed Chinese penchant for vengeance. This penchant for vengeance is at odds with the Orientalist idea of the Chinese's subservient nature. While visiting the *santero*, Conde also sees that African gods, such as Zarabanda and Oggún, have been fused with Catholic saints, such as Saint Peter; "El Conde sintió cómo se perdía en un mundo...había sido colocado ante una mezcla de culturas con la cual había convivido siempre... pero de cuyos arcanos y prácticas había estado infinitamente alejado" (Padura 99). Through his investigation, Conde comes to see fragments of history and culture that had been hidden from him before, even though they were in plain sight. This ad hoc mixture of religious belief systems demonstrate that the Chinese community did not live enclosed and isolated from the rest of the Cuban community, but, rather, that there was a constant process of cultural exchange between the Chinese, Africans, and Spanish Creoles.

The story of the Spanish ancestors in Chaviano's novel begins with a scene of religious syncretism, when Ángela is taken to an Obispa, a *santera*, as a child to be freed of from being

aojada, the evil eye (48-50). Later, as she walks through the forests of the Cuban mountains, she meets the Greek god Pan and a mermaid, both of whom explain that they came to the Island with the first European settlers. Mercedes, the daughter of freed *mulato* slaves, sneaks out of her bedroom to watch her mother's initiation into prostitution via a Santería ritual, but, unprotected, she is possessed by the *orisha* of sexual desire. It is only when she meets Jose, the son of Angela and Juanco, that she feels something other than lust and, in another scene of Santería, she is exorcised of the demon-spirit by a *santera* visited by Angela while seeking protection for her son, José. Religious syncretism is also presented through the matrilineal inheritance of the ability to see gods and demigods, such as Pan and the Martinico, from the Spanish ancestral line and to see ghosts from the African ancestral line. This inheritance begins with Ángela and Kamaria (Caridad); the first who can see the Martinico, a demigod dwarf who haunts the females in the family and reacts to their emotions. The latter sees ghosts, as when she sees her husband long after his death. Only women tied to Ángela's family through blood or marriage can see the Martinico; Mercedes gains the ability after she marries José, thus bringing together two lines, and Cecilia sees it after she first meets Miguel at the end of the novel.

Through the interwoven stories of three families, Chaviano presents the tapestry of Cuban political history and cultural heritage. Valdés opts for choosing to tell the story solely from the perspective of Chinese immigrants, first in their natal land moving forwards in time, and then going backwards to trace Maximiliano Meng's (Mo Ying) journey searching for his father in Cuba. Yet, it is the women that carry, inherit, and pass to their children the stories of their people and are central to the narrative. Here the echoes of unhomeliness are strongest because the figure of the woman, as Bhabha states: "[dramatizes] the ambivalent structure of the civil State as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres"

(14). The historical events of the outside world (politics, economics, and everything that belongs to the public sphere) influence the structure of the home when the male head of the family moves away, leaving a woman in charge. Perhaps, as the story is told from the perspective of a male Cuban police officer, Padura's novel is not as torn between the realistic and the unrealistic as Valdés and Chaviano. The histories of marginality are made more powerful when told through women, who are more subjected to the antimonies of law and order. In Valdés and Chaviano's texts, each thread of the story begins with a woman and, often, a story of violence, survival, and miscegenation emerges from the perspective of doubly oppressed characters; as women and as mixed-heritage minorities. Furthermore, breaking with the Chinese and Latin American patriarchal tradition, it is the female characters who are the strongest; keeping their families alive and providing creative ways to protect and provide for them in the face of subsequent crises and tragedies.

Kui-fa, in *La isla de los amores infinitos*, is a beautiful young Chinese woman at the beginning of the novel married to a male cousin, Siu Mend, but in many instances, she challenges the Orientalist view of Chinese women as exotic and submissive sexual objects. When the family estate in China is attacked by rebels, instead of panicking she acts independently and rationally by seizing as many jewels as she can and hiding them in her clothes before running into the fields with her husband and son. Once the attack is over, she does not reveal the existence of the jewels to her husband, but instead hides them inside her vaginal canal until they arrive in Cuba and her husband needs an initial economic investment to open a laundry business. Amalia's maternal grandmother, Kamaria (Caridad), and mother, María de las Mercedes (Mercedes), also demonstrate strong personalities that challenge the patriarchal social structure of Latin American culture. Mercedes is the daughter of two former half-African and

half-Spanish slaves who are freed when slavery is abolished on the Island. Her parents moved to Havana and opened a bar and a specialty store. The success of the business draws the ire of a competitor, who kills Florencio, Mercedes's father. Shortly afterwards, Caridad drops oil over a flame when she sees Florencio's ghost, losing her home in the subsequent fire and becoming a prostitute to provide for herself and her young daughter. When Amalia's father does not allow her to see Pablo because he is Chinese, she points out that her mother is of African descent, her father has friends who are Chinese, and Pablo's family are small business owners like them, so there is no racial or class difference between her and Pablo. Her father's refusal to let her marry Pablo is not only racist but also a denial of his own wife's heritage. In the same scene, Angela interjects that her son has no right to refuse his daughter's wishes because he married a mulata who was forced to be a prostitute. The scene implicitly acknowledges and challenges the double standard women are subjected to under a patriarchal culture. Also, the racist implications in mestizaje come to light, which emphasizes Spanish heritage as superior to African or Chinese.

Mei Ying, in *La eternidad del instante*, is not raised in the traditional Chinese way. She received a full education as well as her father's devotion and love for the arts, specially music and painting. In addition, although her marriage is arranged, her father seeks her approval of the proposed groom, Li Ying. After her husband is dismissed from the opera and his family is forced to sell their theater, she and her mother-in-law use their artistry to provide for the family: "Mei Ying también dibujaba mientras su suegra hilaba. Ambas proporcionaban algún dinero y el poco bienestar del que aún podía disfrutar la familia..." (Valdés; 62). She also takes it upon herself to educate her son in the Taoist and Buddhist way when she teaches him the values of compassion and patience: "Son las montañas calladas; y tenías razón, son sagrados los cinco picos que sostienen el cielo. Pero significan mucho más que eso. La esencia del alma china vive

concentrada en la profundidad y la belleza del paisaje" (Valdés 56). She goes as far as to distance herself of the practice of fasting in Buddhism: "No veo gran cosa en que un sabio deje de comer. Debes vivir en tu época, aceptar la naturaleza y sobre todo respetarla...deshacerte de lo material no significa que el sabio se vuelva indiferente a los sentimientos..." (Valdés 119). The scenes between Mei Ying and Mo Ying are also an example of the former subverting the traditional image of the Chinese male sage. Mei Ying demonstrates strength and dedication to her family, even more so when she is left alone to raise her children after Mo Ying leaves for Cuba: "¿Para qué desearía yo hablar? ¿Qué interés representaría para ustedes soportar mis quejas?" (Valdés 114). Through her female characters, Valdés counters the stereotype of Chinese as taciturn and silent as modes of submission and at the same time presents another cultural context by exposing the philosophical roots of such practices.

Art is another site of cultural overlap present in both novels. Maximiliano Meng's parents were wealthy artists until their refusal and inability to adapt to the Chinese movement in the early nineteenth century to rid the country of ancient cultural traditions to become "modern". The first part of Zoe Valdes's *La eternidad del instante* takes place in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the country is in turmoil because of the political upheaval after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Through the Ying family's status as intellectuals and artists, poets and singers, the reader is reminded that China was once a great country known for its artistic and technological innovation: "El mundo árabe recibió de China el papel, la brújula marina, la pólvora de cañón..." (Valdes 75)⁵. It is fleeing these political and cultural changes that leads Li Ying to join the coolies travelling to Cuba. In this way, Valdés draws attention to two things:

⁵ These inventions are transmitted to Europe via the Silk Road and, paradoxically, provided these countries with the essential ingredient to guns and canons, which would be used to subjugate China and its people. Chinese artists and writers who sought to save China from being divided amongst competing Western countries decided that the path forward was to abandon traditional culture and adopt modern Western ideas.

first, the fact that the Chinese were in a position like the Africans and Native Americans when first faced with European economic interests; and, second, the parallels between the reasons for Chinese immigration to the Caribbean and Cuban immigration to the United States in the twentieth century. When Li Ying is discovered unconscious on the boat that will eventually take him to America, he awakens and sings, in a language recognized only by the cook, and his beautiful singing voice stirs the emotions of all aboard, no matter their nationality (Valdés 143). Art is a way to bridge cultural difference.

A final consideration is the need to further study the reasons behind the sudden interest in the Chinese presence in the Caribbean, with gestures such as the Cuban government deciding to revitalize its Chinatown after its inhabitants have nearly disappeared and no longer present a threat to the official Black-Creole *mestizo* national identity. López-Calvo ventures to suggest, and I agree, that it is related to the increasingly powerful economic and political influence of the People's Republic of China (151). It cannot go unremarked that authors of these novels do not identify as Chinese Cuban, although one may have Chinese ancestry. A crisis of representation emerges in the ambivalence shown toward the figuration of China in these texts, where Chinese culture is treated "as a foreign subjectivity imported from a mysterious, faraway land, only to be vindicated a few pages later as something that...is an intrinsic part of Cuban national identity..." (López-Calvo 147). Nevertheless, re-visiting and re-inscribing the Chinese presence in Cuban history and culture through literature creates an awareness and acceptance of the community's long presence on the Island, along with revealing the instability of personal and collective identities. These novels expose "how literature haunts history's more public face, forcing it to reflect on itself in the displacing, even distorting image of Art" (The World and the Home 152). The erasure of Chinese influence in Cuba and Puerto Rico's history may be since, while

"Chinese migrants were recruited for their docile, cheap labor, [they were] not viewed as desirable permanent political subjects and nation builders or citizens" (Hu-DeHart & López 14). The presence and recognition of this fourth race in Latin America and the Caribbean challenges the mestizo discourse of only three races meeting to make a new one and is, in this way, a subversive element to homogenizing ideals of nationhood. The narratives successfully present the Chinese as an essential part of Cuban identity and not just as passive contributors, but as active participants in the formation of political and cultural customs. Valdés metaphorizes the connection between China and Cuba for Chinese Cubans with the image of the ceiba that Maximiliano sees first in China and then in Cuba: "...su mente quedó en blanco antes la majestuosidad de la ceiba, el árbol sagrado de Cuba que atraviesa el mundo con sus raíces y renace en China" (130); "Allá, al fondo del paseo, divisó un árbol, la reaparición de la ceiba" (156). Leonardo Padura's novel gives the reader the voice of an outsider, a Cuban, reflecting upon the Chinese community of the Barrio Chino. Mario Conde speaks about the Chinese as an otherness, but one that is within the perimeters of La Havana, and while he finds himself entranced by it he also perceives that his investigation could open old wounds shared by the whole city, wounds of love and prejudice, justice and resentment.

The imaging of the Chinese in Cuban literature causes a shock in which the present and the past collide, bringing into view the long history of colonial ideology and racism still existing in Latin America and the Caribbean. The novels illustrate that "looking/hearing/reading as sites of subjectification in colonial discourse are evidence of the importance of the visual and auditory imaginary for the histories of societies" (Bhabha 109). The decision to include or exclude a certain community, whether conscious or unconscious, responds to racial stereotypes inherited from European colonialism and reproduced by our own creole societies. When it comes to the

Chinese, Said's orientalism comes to mind: the myriad ideas of the East that constructed Asians as the great *Other* of the West. Characters such as Maximiliano and Pablo make it clear that, not only were the Chinese capable of integrating into Creole and African cultures, but were active participants in the cultural and racial miscegenation that make up the Cuban identity. Cuban Chinese suffered, much like the Native Americans and Africans, under colonial rule and fought with their compatriots for freedom, demonstrating the falsity of "Asian submissiveness". The literary representation of Chinese Cubans disturbs dominant concepts of Cuban identity, but, as seen in Chaviano's novel, the recognition of the past permits those in the present to lay to rest ghosts and find peace.

Chinese Immigrants in the Region of Contagion

Discourse on the heterogeneous elements in Puerto Rican national identity exalts a utopic image of the harmonic intermixing of Spanish, African, and indigenous cultures on the Island during the time it was a Spanish colony⁶. The inclusion of African slaves, brought against their will and permanently disconnected from their country of origin, and taínos, most of which were killed or enslaved in the initial conquest, makes the Puerto Rican *mestizaje* discourse appear inclusive. It argues that every element of Puerto Rican life; food, music, clothes, language, and race, comes from the miscegenation of the three races. In truth, Puerto Rican nationalism has been found to emphasize Spanish culture over other contributors to the national identity, thus obfuscating the presence of other immigrant communities. The historical analysis of the Chinese presence in Puerto Rico provided by José Lee Borges, in his unparalleled contribution to the topic, forces readers to reexamine the prevailing premises on what and who is Puerto Rican. Literature's cultural importance places it in the position to question established institutions, so in this chapter the image of the Chinese in Puerto Rico will be analyzed as represented in *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* by Rafael Acevedo (2012), *Simone* by Eduardo Lalo (2012), and *Barra china* by Manolo Nuñez Negrón (2012). How are the Chinese characters depicted in comparison to Puerto Rican characters, or other immigrants? What is their position in society and how are they treated by Puerto Ricans, as portrayed in these novels? My analysis aims for a better understanding of how the Chinese are signified in literature in Puerto Rican culture. Do these novels problematize the debate on national identity by challenging it? Or are the Chinese

⁶ Jose Luis Gonzalez's well-known essay "El país de los cuatro pisos" (1980) is a crucial part of this nationalist debate. There he presents the popular narrative of African, taíno, and Spanish racial and cultural miscegenation that has been quoted by many to defend against the perceived threat of North American culture seeping into the island.

portrayed as an unassimilable, and unseen, *Other* in opposition to the Western culture Puerto Rico strives to emulate?

Homi K. Bhabha maintains in *The Location of Culture* that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities - *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* - are in a profound process of redefinition" (7). Over two decades later, society continues to struggle with this process and it is necessary to undertake a redefinition of Puerto Rican identity in contemporary times. If "the cultural institution of the novel legitimates forms and subjects of history and subjugates or erases others" (Lowe 98) and is the "privileged site for the unification of the citizen within the "imagined community" of the nation" (98), then the exclusion of certain races, ethnicities, or cultures erases them from the nation. The characters in the novels studied here must constantly undergo processes of negotiation within themselves and with their environment to feel at home. Li Chao in *Simone*, Yuga Wang in *Barra china*, and the Fongs in *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* occupy a borderland; "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 3). It is a place that Bhabha calls an interstice: "it is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (2). Some might say that the Chinese are an "invisible community" for the Western archive because they occupy a place in history that is excluded from the prevailing narratives of those in power: the national literary canon. Invisibility is not "exclusively an ocular function relative to the senses, it is also a place in history, a position that is occupied in a structure under discourses of domination and these, although they have obvious economic, technological, and military manifestations, are first forms that writing acquires" (Lalo, *Los paisés*

invisibles 28). Nevertheless, Lee Borges questions the notion of the Chinese as an invisible community in Puerto Rico, since the size of the population and the popularity of their businesses, means that, physically, they cannot be blurred. Invisibility, though, can also refer to the historical and literary silence that has been kept for so long on the presence of the Chinese in Puerto Rico. Therefore, recent literary and academic publications which include them shine light on the complexity of *mestizaje* discourses in our culture and history.

The Chinese Puerto Rican community is composed of at least three different waves of immigrants, along with mixed-raced children born on the island. Lisa Lowe states that the cultural exchange between immigrants and the nation to which they arrive is one of the most important experiences in the constitution of identity (98-99). Li Chao, from *Simone*, is Chinese (through birth and heritage), Puerto Rican (she immigrated so young that the knowledge of her homeland is secondhand), female (Chinese and Puerto Rican cultures continue to be patriarchal), and presumably lesbian or bisexual⁷, so her identity crosses and negotiates various borders within her. She dwells in the borderlands and constantly challenges the limits or extension of her subjectivity⁸. In Negron's novel, Yuga Wang is also a Chinese immigrant, but he arrives as an adult seeking better economic opportunities and finds, instead, that he has been duped and his inability to speak Spanish and illegal immigrant status limits his options. Both Li Chao and Yuga Wang must resort to underhanded methods of survival because of their lack of citizenship; they cannot go to the authorities to denounce the desperate situations they are in. The third wave of Chinese immigrants to Puerto Rico came seeking better economic opportunities than those afforded to them in China as farmers or factory workers. They are a symptom of the ailments of

⁷ Many readers might feel that this character's apparently fluid sexuality is presented in a problematic way, but such an analysis is outside the scope of this study.

⁸ Recent critical approaches could call this ambiguity a queer quality, an in/between/ness that refuses to position itself in a fixed identity.

globalization, the broken promises of equal economic development in countries who adopted free market policies. These characters also bring to light the borderlands of the illegal immigrant, who lives hidden from official view and is referred to negatively in civil and political discourse.

Despite the Chinese presence in Puerto Rico for over a century, the academic study of the economic, political, and cultural influences of these immigrants and their inclusion in the national literature is limited. Lee Borges identifies only a handful of stories about the Chinese, published in newspapers and collections, in the nineteenth century. In them, the Chinese are presented as a submissive, uncultured and barbarous people; "its culture is presented as something exotic and out of the ordinary" (Lee Borges 395). At times, it is used to articulate a nationalist defense of Puerto Rico: Puerto Ricans should avoid being weak and obedient like the Chinese. Furthermore, in Western culture the written/printed word occupies a place of power; what is not written is forgotten, deleted, hidden. Literature actively participates in the naming of national identity; the exclusion or inclusion of the Chinese may respond to a desire to create a culturally homogeneous imagery of the Puerto Rican nation. It is possible, as José Luis González describes in "Literature and National Identity in Puerto Rico", that the absence of these characters responds to the current of a cultural nationalism and its imaginary racial, ethnic and cultural imaginings. The crisis and trauma through which Puerto Rican society went through after the American invasion of 1898 made it "propitious to encapsulate an identity based on the utopia of a social and racial harmony of the hacienda" (Rodríguez Castro, 496). Including immigrants of other nationalities was to complicate the Island's national identity and darken the imagined harmonious cultural and ethnic union of its previous inhabitants, its conquerors, and the slaves transported against their will. But in the new millennium, as Rodríguez Castro has also pointed out, the cultural nationalist dogma has fallen out of favour either by new intellectual

criteria and by the reorganization of society and new immigrant waves. Still, the Chinese factor is an unexplored domain.

Chinese Puerto Ricans, both those who have begun a process of assimilation into Puerto Rican culture and society and those who are born here to immigrant parents or grandparents, inhabit an "in-between space" at the boundaries of multiple cultures and ways of signifying. "The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (Bhabha 2). *Barra china* by Manolo Núñez Negrón tells the story of an illegal Chinese immigrant in the 21st century who arrives in Puerto Rico via a cargo boat after spending weeks locked inside a trailer without food or water. It is unclear whether Yuga Wang agreed to repay the cost of being brought to Puerto Rico through the large international network of human trafficking, by working for the gang leader, but his inability to speak Spanish means he will be easily exploited. He works at a Chinese restaurant for a small wage, which he mostly saves in the hopes of one day buying his freedom, a reenactment of how the first Chinese indentured laborers were brought to the Caribbean. At the end of the novel Yuga Wang kills the gang leader to whom he is indebted to protect the Dominican woman he has been sleeping with and who began trafficking drugs through the restaurant without the gang leader's knowledge. After obtaining his freedom, he buys the restaurant he had been working in for so many years and lives on the second floor. He decides to stay in Puerto Rico because, after all he has been through and his time away, China no longer feels like home. Eduardo Lalo's *Simone* is narrated from the point of view of a Puerto Rican writer who is seduced by Li Chao, a Chinese immigrant brought when she was a small girl. It was Li Chao's initiative that they meet by leaving coded messages in his

mailbox, on his car, or in his voicemail. Their romantic relationship soon will be disturbed by Li Chao's own sense of ambivalence. Literature and art tie the protagonist and Li Chao, but she steadfastly resists being in a single space; either as Chinese or Puerto Rican, straight or lesbian. She is neither here nor there but is searching for a way out, that the reader suspects will never be attained. *Flor de ciruelo y el viento*, by Rafael Acevedo, takes a unique approach to exploring the significance of Chinese immigration to Puerto Rico. The novel has a prologue and epilogue which tells the history of how Emilio Fong I arrived in Cuba through the coolie trade and, like many Chinese, his son moved to Puerto Rico after the Cuban Revolution. His children and grandchildren own a Chinese restaurant on the Island and one day, while helping Cecilia Fong clean out the storage room, the narrator of the prologue finds an old scroll written by Emilio Fong I. It is written mostly in Chinese but with translations in Spanish. Thus, Emilio Fong I's and Li Chao's knowledge of Spanish allow them to identify escape routes from their marginalized existence via literary production, but Yuga Wang is trapped because of his limited fluency and his status as a trafficked worker. Language plays a crucial role in the aspirations of these immigrants and fluency in Spanish affects their prospects and ability to negotiate the cultural, economic, and political terrain of their new country.

The preface of *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* narrates the saga of the Fong family, which has lived in the Caribbean for four generations, and a romantic legend from China. Emilio Fong I is described as "un hombre chino que llegó a Cuba como esclavo" (Acevedo 5), who helped build the first highway from Havana to Santiago de Cuba (Acevedo 9). It is assumed that the origin of his Hispanic name, Emilio, was an imposition "a partir de la firma del contrato que lo llevó a La Habana" (Acevedo 14). Chinese coolies were often given new names and Lee Borges and Lopez-Calvo states they were renamed for two reasons: "First, it was very difficult to call them by their

Chinese name; and second, it was a form of denominating them as a possession or property" (Lee Borges 241). The loss of the original Chinese name "reflected the capacity of the slave owner to take and give the slave an identity" (Lee Borges 240). As indentured laborers, the Chinese were dispossessed of everything that linked them to their culture and it is only by an individual and collective effort that coolies preserved that identity. When Emilio Fong I arrived in Cuba in 1867, he spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, and Portuguese and learned Spanish in a few months, which gave him the opportunity to move from a worker to an interpreter for ambassadors. The narrator suspects that someone as well-educated as Emilio Fong I would not have left China solely for economic reasons: "Difícil de creer que un joven de su inteligencia y astucia se comprometería de manera voluntaria a trabajar por ocho años en una isla desconocida...A menos que estuviera huyendo de la ley o que el hambre fuese insostenible" (Acevedo 15). It is implied that the manuscript and the erotic poems and images found in the warehouse may have had something to do with the Chinese man's willingness to sign a labor contract and immigrate to Cuba⁹. Emilio Fong II arrived in Puerto Rico in 1959 and, from there, the rest of the family history is not made explicit, but it can be assumed that he buys a commercial property and establishes a restaurant with a section for ice cream called Fong's Cream¹⁰. This is where the narrator meets Cecilia Fong, as a child, and becomes fascinated with China and Chinese culture.

The Fong Manuscript makes up most of the text and the narrator becomes absorbed in the promising overlap of historical evidence and romantic tale encapsulated in the story, so he decides to translate the manuscript. It supposedly tells the Chinese legend of "Flor de ciruelo y el viento". A young woman, Flor de Ciruelo, is married to Li Yu, a poet who is in love with her, but

⁹ At the time in China, cultural changes wrought by the political revolution resulted in the rejection of classical Chinese literary styles.

¹⁰ Parodic irony is one of the aspects that distinguish Acevedo's novel from the others. Farce and erudition, lyrical passages and banal and popular scenes and dialogue interplays in the novel, a study that exceeds my essay.

on their wedding night she refuses to sleep with him unless it is in a traditional position. After the sixth night of this, Li Yu goes to visit a prostitute and never returns home. Flor de Ciruelo waits for two months for her husband to return and, when there is no sign of him, she sets out to find him. From here, the legend switches between the telling of Flor de Ciruelo's search for her husband, Reloj (Li Yu's brother) search for his brother, and Li Yu's search for his home. Li Yu disappeared because he lost his memory and was sent to a supposedly legendary country where women, dressed as men, ruled. He escapes and sets out to recover his memory and find his home, but the journey is filled with setbacks and obstacles characteristic of an epic poem like the *Odyssey*. In the end, Flor de Ciruelo, Reloj, and Li Yu all meet on a battlefield, but the brothers, unwittingly, are on opposite sides and, although they recognize each other as they begin to battle, they are killed by their own soldiers before they can hug (Acevedo 140-141). The exercise of writing the manuscript is meant as a way for Emilio Fong to preserve his memory of the legend and, through it, his Chinese identity. But the influence of the emigration of the Caribbean is clear throughout the tale. For example, there is a description of a game similar to baseball: "...el guerrero de la loma lanzó la esfera con todas sus fuerzas. El garrotero realizó una finta ya la dejó pasar. ¡Da! dijo el sabio vestido de negro. El samurai la retuvo con su grueso guante de piel de yak" (Acevedo 82-83). Later in the same chapter there is a mention of ñames (yams), common in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, thus providing a cultural element that unites these supposedly contrasting cultures.

Yuga Wang in *Barra china* and Li Chao in *Simone*, like other minor characters, owe their employers "la obligación de trabajar para él, a cambio de un techo y un sueldo irrisorio, por un tiempo indefinido que podía durar toda una existencia" (Lalo, *Simone* 97) because, as is sentenced in *Barra china*, "son deudas que nunca se saldan" (Nuñez Negrón 74). As with black

slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, today human trafficking is one of the largest and most lucrative criminal businesses. Yuga Wang is a victim of this trade, although he voluntarily agreed to be brought from China to America, the terms of the agreement change upon his arrival. He was immediately forced to work in a Chinese food restaurant with no options or opportunities due to linguistic barriers and a fear of being caught and deported. It is never explicitly stated that Li Chao was trafficked, since she came with her mother and was brought by extended family members, but it might be that her family incurred debt to bring her and her mother with the agreement to work to pay off this debt. Once this was done, Li Chao was still caught within a complicated familial and cultural relationship with those who brought her over; she seems hesitant to renounce her ties to China via her family and the restaurant, but also despises the lack of education and assimilation by the others. Emilio Fong I, in *Flor de ciruelo y el viento*, migrated to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century as a coolie, or indentured laborer. Unlike Li and Yuga, Emilio loses his Chinese name, but the advantage of his education allows him to get a better job upon completing the years of his contract. Even so, *Flor de ciruelo's* narrator implies that an educated man would accept the living conditions of a coolie only if he were fleeing the law in China. Nevertheless, Emilio Fong I is free, once he completes his contract, and can improve his economic and social status. Eventually, he immigrates to Puerto Rico, where he opens a small ice cream shop. As an illegal immigrant, Yuga Wang lives in the margins of society with no legal recourse to escape from his status as an indentured servant. Li Chao, having arrived so young, becomes fluent in Spanish by going to school and attending university, but she is constantly aware of Puerto Rican's view of her as an outsider, as not Puerto Rican. The novel closes with her announcement with Carmen Lindo, a Puerto Rican whom she reunites with at the end of the novel and moves to the United States, perhaps as a way out from

her unending debt to her extended family and the perceived cultural limits placed upon her on the Island. Or to escape the web of passion between her and the narrator. Contrary to other Chinese women characters Simone, a self-given name, persists in her ambiguity claiming her in/between/ness as her own homeliness. These stories are just a glimpse into the multiple ways in which Chinese immigrants, and all immigrants, must negotiate their place in society and culture under a variety of differing factors that may limit the possibilities for integration or participation; legal or illegal status and knowledge of the language and culture. Even of themselves.

Lee Borges's research presents an alternate narrative to what is commonly known about the Chinese community on the Island: the existence of a whole generation of children of immigrants born here, or raised here from very young, who live in a space "between" cultures and identities. Li Chao, of *Simone*, belongs to this borderland generation. She, like other child immigrants, has been educated within the Puerto Rican culture and history, but is not recognized by them and continues to be perceived and treated as foreign, even after living in the country for most of her life. The contributions that the community has given throughout the history of Puerto Rico, such as their labor in building the Central Highway and other infrastructure projects (Lee Borges 250-261), are not taught. Cecilia Fong, great-granddaughter of immigrant Emilio Fong I, is another example of the cultural hybridity that arises in the children of immigrants raised in two cultures, that of their parents and that of the country where they were born and/or raised. At the beginning of the story, Cecilia's relationship with Puerto Ricans seems to be limited to the request of ice cream: "Su voz era muy grave y su vocabulario muy reducido, práctico: ¿*Qué quieres?*" (Acevedo 6). The narrator imagines that she intones Spanish in a different way, but it is evident in later conversations that she is fluent grammatically and lexically. Her family

immigrated to Puerto Rico before she was born and it can be assumed that she was educated in Puerto Rican schools¹¹.

Li Chao, from *Simone*, dwells in the space between cultures and struggles by carving out a space to inhabit that is accepted, both by her Chinese community and Puerto Ricans. Her mastery of Spanish is greater than Chinese because it was the language in which she received a formal education. She can read and write Spanish fluently and, unlike the other Chinese immigrants she knows, she has been exposed to Puerto Rican culture and seems fascinated by Western literature and history. Despite her ability to cross between the borders of both cultures, or perhaps because of it, she is isolated from both worlds. The Chinese with whom she lives and works treat her differently, like she is not fully Chinese or are offended by her willingness to associate with Puerto Ricans and participate in Puerto Rican society and culture, while Puerto Ricans only see an Asian foreigner the rare times they decide to acknowledge her presence amongst them. Bhabha explains that cultural differences are not binary, but there is a process of negotiation between minority groups and the dominant culture where interstices emerge, overlap and displace domains of difference. Li Chao is in an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens the possibility of a cultural hybridization" (Bhabha 5). These hybridizations are present in the descendants of immigrants around the world and they question the dominant historical narratives and the hierarchical structures retold through cultural products and maintained through economic and/or political means. Li Chao and Cecilia Fong question the composition of Puerto Rican culture, showing its heterogeneity. In addition, they recall the history of racism and violence against Africans and Asians that characterized the colonization of the Caribbean.

¹¹ It is not uncommon for the children and grandchildren of immigrants to have a better command of the language of the country in which they are born or raised than the maternal language.

Cultural negotiation is different in Yuga Wang of *Barra china*, who arrives in Puerto Rico without knowing a word of Spanish and who learns the language with the help of Yi Chen. However, he only knows enough to be able to survive over the years that he works at the Chinese restaurant, Huatong. The only person with whom he can converse with on an equal footing and relate to on a personal level, because of their similar experiences and social positions, is Yi Chen. Franz Fanon analyzes the relationship of the colonized man to the language of the colonizer in *Black Skin, White Masks* and argues that "a man who possesses a language indirectly has the world expressed and implied in this language" (2). The ability of the immigrant to become fluent in the dominant language of the country in which he resides allows access to higher levels of society, to leave the somewhat enclosed world and limited prospects of immigrants. Yuga does not achieve this and, because of his lack of citizenship or legal immigrant status, he cannot seek help outside the mafia world, even becoming a criminal himself. Yet Li Chao, in *Simone*, argues that mastery of language does not make Puerto Ricans stop seeing her as an "Other", as Chinese first and, due to this, as permanently estranged.

Li Chao's decision to attend university flows from a desire to expand the borders of her world and to find another place for herself in Puerto Rican society. The gesture has the result of permanently situating her between two cultures that do not know where to place her. Puerto Ricans see her as a foreigner, as "only a Chinese woman", but she is ridiculed or set apart from the other Chinese because of having incorporated too much of Puerto Rican culture. The children and descendants of immigrants, like Li Chao and Cecilia Fong (from *Flor de ciruelo*), must negotiate their place between two cultures without ever feeling completely comfortable in either one. These characters occupy a frontier land, "a vague and indeterminate place given by the emotional residue of a boundary that is not natural" (Anzaldúa 3-4). This paradox is best

illustrated when the unnamed protagonist of *Simone* observes a Chinese girl interacting with her father: "Antes han hablado en chino, pero al poner los labios en la taza, la niña exclama ¡Fo!" como cualquier puertorriqueña" (Lalo, *Simone* 30). Although raised by her Chinese family and knowing her maternal tongue, the little girl is influenced by the social and linguistic practices of Puerto Rican culture, causing them to blend. Frantz Fanon states "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (97). Li Chao feels this weight as she tries to navigate the difficult terrain of the borderland. Her belief was that she could leave behind the Chinese community, where she always felt as an outsider, if she was able to speak Spanish fluently and learned Western culture and history. Only to be disappointed to learn that possessing fluency and knowledge are not enough to erode cultural and psychological borders.

When Li Chao refuses to live with her Chinese family she is shunned, especially since she is living unmarried with a Puerto Rican man and appears to have abandoned Chinese customs. There is a certain pathology in this that Fanon also identifies in the black man: "the individual who climbs up into white, civilized society tends to reject his black, uncivilized family at the level of the imagination" (128). It seems that Puerto Rican society has no place for the Chinese, having excluded their presence from cultural imaginings of the nation's history and identity, and this causes Li Chao to, on some level, try to escape from the Chinese community to fit into Puerto Rican society. Like the Martinican Fanon uses as an example, Li Chao's lack of an accent are "evidence of a shift and a split" (9), because there are "mutual supports between language and the community" (21). Chinese is like a second tongue, in which she is not comfortable speaking, but her familiarity with in Spanish marks her out. The character brings

forth the unhomely in at least two ways; she is a manifestation of the negative consequences of the economic changes wrought by globalization, which put pressure in the poorest populations of the world to migrate in search of better opportunities as the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest increased. Secondly, she is an emblem of the global network of ties between Chinese who migrated to the Caribbean (her distant family members that paid for her to be brought to Puerto Rico) and the families they left behind in China. A third sense of unhomeliness is uttered in the inclusion of her narrative as a part of Puerto Rican society manifests in the reader a new idea of national identity. Still, in the text, Li Chao communicates the sense of having no home, of being an outsider, which the narrator-protagonist shares. She remains invisible, or unseen, so long as she cannot express her hybrid identity or be accepted as Chinese Puerto Rican and not just the former or the latter.

It is relevant how she expresses this sense of not belonging, or even resisting to belong, when she begins a relationship with the anonymous protagonist. Although she stays regularly in his house, the narrator notes that she never occupies a permanent space, like filling a drawer with her things or clearing her own space for her artwork (109-111). Her habits are like those of the nomad: "Desde que salió de su pueblo en las afueras de Pekín, no había tenido a que aferrarse excepto a la comunidad de chinos..." (110). But she is neither a readable Puerto Rican nor Chinese. She cannot feel comfortable nor is she perceived as belonging. Additionally, her intellectual and artistic temperament, formed in the collusion of many cultures, is a mark of exclusion that combined with is her race, social class, gender, and sexuality, sets her apart. As it is suggested in many instances, she is found guilty of all the above by her extended Chinese family, whom resent or are suspicious of her intellectualism and assimilation.

Simone's narrator-protagonist insists that Li Chao should write, to share her feelings and perspective of the world. But as the chronicle of Lalo's *Los países invisibles* states: "El que escribe o dibuja hace visible. No se sabe, sin embargo, si el dibujo o el escrito serán 'leídos'..." (Lalo 85). She refuses to write and explain the impossibility of expressing her singularity and unique position between cultures and finding a readership that would appreciate it: "En la escuela y en la calle fue siempre "la china". Durante años casi nadie fuera del restaurante la llamó por su nombre. Nadie se interesaba ni podía entender su historia." (96). Her ability to speak Spanish set her apart from her family members, who never lost their accent. But she is not fluent in written Chinese, her native language, and that, despite her command of Spanish, she does not have words to write in her adopted language. Her soul is bound to Chinese, her acquired mannerisms and culture are Puerto Rican: "El problema no es la lengua sino la imposibilidad que tienen los demás de imaginarme. ¿Es posible escribir cuando la identidad no es compartida por nadie, cuando la inmensa mayoría de la gente no puede ni siquiera concebirte?" (Lalo, *Simone* 98). The narrator-protagonist argues that literature is to write from the outside so others can see what is unseen, but for Li Chao being a writer within his culture is not the same as being Chinese in Puerto Rico, which is another extreme kind of foreignness. That is why she chose to communicate with the narrator-protagonist via quotes left in unusual sites instead of speaking to him directly: "No se puede escribir si uno no tiene palabras...Si las palabras siempre han sido de otros. Por eso prefiero leer, tomar las palabras que los demás escriben y transformarlas" (Lalo, *Simone* 98). The character's place in an invisible world, characterized by its Otherness, forces her to create her own world: "...el planeta cuya población total esta constituida sólo por mí: una china entre más de un billón de chinos, una china en una isla en la que no hay chinos fuera de los restaurantes, una china que lee y hace garabatos." (Lalo, *Simone* 99). Li Chao is thrice out of

place, inhabiting a borderland between identities that touch and overlap but are not recognized by each other. She is the Other, the immigrant, who threatens the structures of power by embodying the consequences of the excesses and abuses of the prevailing economic system. Furthermore, what makes her even more discomfiting is her status as an immigrant who is not totally foreign, who has learned the local language and culture, but still does not fit in. A menace and a wonder to all sides.

Theorists such as Edward Said and Lisa Lowe have developed the concept of Orientalism to bring to light the discriminatory forms in which Western culture has seen and spoken about Asia and Asians. Cultural norms and public policies have maintained a vision of Asian immigrants and Asian culture so alien, the essential Other to the West, that there is no possibility of assimilation. Said argues that such a political and cultural discourse was an essential part of the imperialist project; "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5) that bears out the idea of "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (7). Critique of *mestizaje* discourse in Latin America and the Caribbean has thrived on how it seeks to "whiten", to "Europeanize" the mixed culture and races of the region by emphasizing the contributions of Spanish culture over indigenous, African, or Asian cultures. The Orientalist a binary logic plays into *mestizaje* discourse and it has repercussions for the inclusion/exclusion of Asian immigrants in the national narrative. While Orientalism "seeks to consolidate the coherence of the West as a subject precisely through the representation of 'oriental' objects as homogeneous, fixed and stable" (Lowe 67), a critical view of history illuminates the contagion between the two cultures. The novel is a cultural institution that works to legitimate a national identity and history, so it can be read as a gesture of rebellion in Li Chao

from *Simone* and Emilio Fong I from *Flor de ciruelo y el viento*. Both characters attempt to make their shifting identities concrete through writing, to stabilize the changing compass points of who they are in their new country. Emilio Fong I seems to be seeking a way to reassure himself that his memories of China and its culture are intact by writing the tale he learned in his youth. In a note Li Chao sends to the narrator-protagonist, she says: "Decía Walter Benjamin que en nuestro tiempo la única obra realmente dotada de sentido - de sentido crítico también - debería de ser un collage de citas, fragmentos, ecos de otras obras" (Lalo, *Simone* 53). This is what she creates and her interspersed and interrupted communications to the narrator-protagonist; a form of literature more suited to contemporary times and to her relationship with the world. Li Chao uses citations to establish a relationship with the protagonist and does not let him see her until he has grown to appreciate her knowledge and humor through the notes, so by the time he meets her there is the possibility that he will see beyond her race. Her artwork, however, is different; it is impulsive and composed of the names of past lovers crossed out again and again and written in Chinese characters so small that one must look closely to see the collage of words. Why does she write these names and cross them out as a form of art? One possible answer is because they do not see her as she wants to be seen and this causes her pain, so she draws basic Chinese words, the few words she knows, again and again; a hybrid creation of her first culture with those who brought her closer to her second culture.

The Fong Manuscript, assumed by the narrator to have been written by Emilio Fong I, in *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* is also composed of quotations; "casi el ochenta por ciento de lo escrito, era una suerte de reelaboración de cuentos y leyendas, así como uno que otro relato pornográfico chino" (Acevedo 4). It cannot be called a novel directly because the genre is not common to China at the time, but it has many elements of the novel and it is united by a central

character which reappears in all the stories. The narrator takes on the task of deciphering this manuscript, tracing the origins of the tale and the elements that influence it, as a personal and sociohistorical project. Acevedo's novel is a unique exploration of the immigrant experience because it presents the manuscript as an attempt to retain his original national and cultural identity despite the passage of time and the context of a new national culture. At the same time, either Emilio Fong I or Cecilia Fong (as she claims towards the end of the novel) provided a Spanish translation of parts of the manuscript, as if he or she hoped to publish it or share it in his or her new country. Emilio Fong I's inscription of the old Chinese legend he learned in his youth is composed entirely from memory: "Se trataba de transcripciones fragmentarias que habían sido escritas de memoria o copiadas de una publicación original desaparecida" (Acevedo 5). The impossibility of recreating the original story is made clear from the start. Elements from his countries of immigration contaminates the narrative; he fills in the gaps in his memory with details that could only originate from the Caribbean region. The success of this effort is ambiguous because the legend, as mentioned above, features elements of the Caribbean. Through the perspective of the narrator, there emerges a problematic representation of Cecilia Fong in the novel as a "sensuous *china mulata*" (López-Calvo 74). His description of his attraction to Cecilia expresses a sort of Orientalist imposition of the young Chinese girl: "Ella hablaba español, pero mi imaginación escuchaba una ópera china" (Acevedo 6). And Cecilia's eventual fate, to move to Colombia and marry a drug lord, sexualizes and portrays her as some sort of man-eater; falling within the Orientalist fascination with Chinese women as *exotica*. She is like Simone in her uniqueness: a woman and man eater, a product of the joining of West and East cultures.

All the Puerto Rican novels studied present a complex image of the Chinese presence on the Island that may, at a superficial reading, appear to include cultural stereotypes, such as that of

the submissive Chinese, but these stereotypes are shattered as the plot develops. The characters of Yuga Wang and Yi Chen in *Barra china* demonstrate that the Chinese are not submissive or servile by nature. When they understand that they have been deceived, they are angry and bitter, but choose to strategically bide their time before acting. The novel imposes another logic linked to the processes of adaptation and to the common human aspiration for survival: "Yuga, ecuánime, presiente que para ganar una batalla primero hay que escogerla con cuidado" (Nuñez Negrón 23). The protagonist is planning how to escape his patron from the start, but he waits for when his master's life in the criminal world creates the ideal situation to act. Yi Chen does not hide his anger and frustration with the state of slavery in which they live and takes advantage of any moment to express his hatred for the Old Man when they are alone. His personality is more volatile and he takes advantage of others' lack of knowledge of Chinese to speak to Yuga Wang in their shared language. The resolution of the plot is catalyzed by Yi Chen's murder and the uncaring attitude of the police officers, who perceive it is a "ajuste de cuentas entre asiáticos... no hay necesidad de esmerarse demasiado en desenmarañar un evento que no figurará en las estadísticas oficiales" (Nuñez Negrón 60-61). These lines make it clear that Chinese immigrants, especially illegal immigrants, are invisible in official and even unofficial spaces and they can only turn to each other in times of crisis and tragedy. Yuga Wang would be invisible to the world except for Yi Chen. Both are trapped in the same situation so and because of this they depend on each other for mutual recognition and communication of their hopes and frustrations. The linguistic barrier between immigrants and the inhabitants of the country where they immigrate exacerbates this sense of isolation, along with a generalized indifference. Only Yuga Wang mourns the loss of his compatriot. It is precisely from the loss of Yi Chen that Yuga Wang vows revenge against the Old Man, his patron and master: "no tiene dudas de que jamás pondrá un pie

en esta habitación de la que está saliendo, recompensado y ligero, con un tiesto entre las manos y la promesa de una venganza atornillada en la consciencia" (65). Finally, Yuga Wang murders the Old Man, owner of his endless debt, and manages to obtain his freedom in an act that echoes the rebelliousness of the Chinese contract laborers in Cuba in the nineteenth century. Thus, he proves false the stereotype of the submissive and obedient Chinese worker.

Murder demonstrates an internalization of the new socioeconomic laws under which the illegal immigrant operates: "para que unos avancen, otros tienen que sucumbir" (Nuñez Negrón 89). It is the mercantile and capitalist logic that has prevailed in economic and political discourse in the Caribbean since the arrival of the first colonizer and it is a subconscious law to which Yuga Wang is subjected since his arrival¹². As Mignolo states: "the modern/colonial world-system can be described in conjunction with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and [such] a conceptualization is linked to the making of colonial difference(s)" (229). The logic of survival in the underworld forces Yuga Wang to kill the old man who owned his debt, which causes the other gangsters to reward him by giving him the title to the restaurant Hutong, where he worked. He decides to stay in Puerto Rico, despite being haunted by the murder he was forced to commit, although his actions led him to have a better economic position than he did in China. His continued status as an illegal immigrant also means that this is the best he can aspire to in Puerto Rico, but it comes with continual social marginalization. After the death of Yi Chen, he still struggles to find someone who "sees" him as a peer. This does not seem to bother him and his nostalgia for China disappears over time, so that he eventually feels that he has found "un refugio, una patria, quizás un hogar" (Nuñez Negrón 89). In the end, it could be argued that Yuga

¹² The racial exploitation of Africans and Asians survived in the creole elites following the wars for independence in Latin America and the Caribbean. The connection between modernity and coloniality are elaborated and critiqued by Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo.

Wang has achieved what he came to the country looking for: a better economic situation, but not a home.

Through the character of Yuga Wang several themes are explored, among which is the feeling of nostalgia of the immigrant: "Muy en el fondo, anhela una salida que le devuelva al entorno de chozas y campesinos descalzos del que había huido no hacía mucho" (Nuñez Negrón 19). However, even if he escaped from his current situation as a modern-day slave, it would not return him to the China he knew, to the homeland of his memory. After obtaining his freedom, he stays in Puerto Rico because his experiences have changed him too much to go back. Yuga Wang's nostalgia for the homeland is mitigated by his participation in Chinese gambling games and drinking. An inward and protected home inserted but at the same time unheard of the culture that encircles it. A cross-world of time, spaces and languages.

Contagion works in many ways. Marginality unites the marginalized. Yombina, the Dominican waitress in *Barra china*, establishes a relationship with Yuga Wang after she begins working in Hutong. Their mutual attraction springs from the shared experience as marginalized immigrants in Puerto Rican society, whose worlds are limited to the place of work. Yombina, seeking an escape route from her low economic class, enters the world of drug trafficking and, in this way, she is similar to Cecilia Fong from *Flor de ciruelo y el viento*. Both female characters seek to become different from other members of their communities, to not be stuck in the same marginal social and economic world, and they turn to one of the few options immediately at hand: the world of invisible monetary exchanges. These decisions eventually lead them to risky situations. Yombina confesses to Wang that she has been dealing drugs in the restaurant, now a target of competing drug dealers and Wang's life becomes endangered. With no options left, Wang kills the hated mafia leader and the other members of the gang reward him with his

freedom and the title to Hutong. He shares the business with Yombina and moves into the apartment on the second floor. The ending for Cecilia Fong is similar; she marries a millionaire drug-dealer and moves to Columbia, but her husband draws the ire of rival mafias when he begins dealing with the Russian mafia. Her husband resorts to extreme violence to protect himself from his rivals and the authorities, while Cecilia sales all their belongings and flees to Puerto Rico. The characters in these novels, lacking legal recourse, must resort to the criminal world to obtain their freedom.

The Caribbean is a region of contact and contagion between multiple cultures, making it difficult to maintain stable national and ethnic categories. Benítez-Rojo affirms in *The Repeating Island* that the Caribbean has the virtue of having no limit or center and its most defining feature was the production of ten million African slaves and hundreds of thousands of coolies from India, China, and Malaysia (26-27). The Plantation, "capitalized to indicate not just the presence of plantations but also the type of society that results from their use and abuse" (Benítez-Rojo 9), is at the center of the region's economic, social, cultural, and political history. Rafael Acevedo's novel echoes this vision of the Chinese presence in the Caribbean: "En una escala menor y tangencial, la familia Fong, y la relación adicional de su periplo cubano y puertorriqueño es otra escala de esa metáfora de la contaminación" (31). The Caribbean has been influenced by multiple cultures from around the world, particularly European, African, and Asian cultures, although the latter is only recently receiving scholarly attention. The relatively small size of Puerto Rico's Chinese community, which can be estimated at seventeen thousand, does not mean that their influence on Puerto Rican culture is small. There is an undeniable reality that "... Asian cultural influences that are felt in the Caribbean...manifest themselves through very different codes" (Benitez-Rojo 71). This code is one of cultural exchange producing hybrid subjects who

constantly negotiate the definitions of their identity. Chinese restaurants are a physical example of this constant cultural exchange and hybridity¹³. The Chinese continue to be a cheap supply of labor as when they first arrived, but the country now is a formidable capitalist entrepreneur in the Americas¹⁴. But they have continued to exist at the margins of Caribbean society and culture. Even though Puerto Rico's national history has been one of adopting and adapting colonial discourses to its own image, thus the Asian presence is still treated as foreign, as something from a far away and fantastical land. Most of the Puerto Rican vision of China and its people come through movies based on legends like that retold in "Flor de ciruelo y el viento", but, like the text, contaminated by the Caribbean perspective.

The development of new research and methods of analysis are required to trace and recognize the impact that this wave of migration has had, and continues to have, in the region. The simultaneous appearance of these novels raises the question on whether China's entry as a contemporary world power (which was the subject of much attention after the financial crisis), resulted in increased attention on the Chinese subject in Puerto Rican society.¹⁵ "Invisibility is not solid, it transforms, it can even quickly disappear" (Lalo, *Los países invisibles* 70). Literature is always an anticipation of a contagion, a collision of words and the

¹³ In this space, you can find Buddha statues or Chinese deities along with maps of Puerto Rico on the tables and the menu includes "Chinese" food alongside local specialties like tostones and rice with beans (Lok Siu 78).

¹⁴ The Chinese presence in the Americas is driven by the economic demands of mercantile and capitalist development from the nineteenth century to the present day.

¹⁵ Reseña: "Flor de ciruelo y el viento" de Luis Felipe Díaz: < <http://revistacruce.com/letras/item/1530-flor-de-ciruelo-y-viento-novela-china-tropical-de-rafael-acevedo> >; "El caminante y su sombra: Simone de Eduardo Lalo" de Javier Avilés Bonilla: < <http://www.80grados.net/el-caminante-y-su-sombra-simone-de-eduardo-lalo/> >; "Barra china de Manolo Nuñez Negron" de Luis Felipe Díaz <<http://postmodernidadpuertorriquena.blogspot.com/2012/08/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-ja-x.html>>

world. The narrator of *Flor de ciruelo y el viento* refers to this situation with the following line: "Que esa indiferencia entre el Occidente y China se está disipando en estos, nuestros tiempos, es motivo de preocupación y ansiedad" (Acevedo 7). Contemporary literature allows for a glimpse of how Puerto Ricans view this community, but it also shakes up the foundational historical narrative on the country's culture and identity. The literary representation of immigrants "does not isolate a singular instance of one immigrant formation, but cuts across individualized racial formations and widens the possibility of thinking and practice across racial and national distinctions" (Lowe 35). It forces Puerto Ricans to accept that their ethnic and cultural heritage is more plural, or is becoming more so as the development and intrusions of capitalism around the world makes it an attractive destination for immigrants. The novels analyzed here present us with a vision of the Puerto Rican imagery about the Chinese, but the perspective of the coloniality of power argues that the Asian community must organize, resist and theorize about themselves. The work of academics like Lee Borges ignited analysis of these novels, hoping to illuminate the constant cultural exchange between immigrants and the country to which they arrive, and calling into question any stable definition a culture or nation.

Transgressive Narratives

The long-held silence regarding the Chinese communities in Cuba and Puerto Rico demonstrate the attitude towards these immigrants in the countries' politics and culture. It is important to remember that mestizaje discourse originates from a positivistic argument which "sees in the biological, economic, and cultural whitening of the Caribbean society a series of successive steps toward "progress" (Benítez-Rojo 26), and this discourse was an adaptation of racist and nationalist visions from European countries. The Orientalist attitude towards Asia as essentially alien to European culture, infiltrated Latin American and Caribbean countries that aspired to emulate the metropolis. Distrust and ignorance of a millennial culture enhanced a sustained belief of a homogeneity that saw them only as ignorant foreigners. Therefore, the Chinese were employed as a cheap source of labor under the Orientalist belief that they were naturally servile and docile, but would return to their country when their labor was no longer required. Circumstances made it impossible for many of the Chinese to return home; the withholding of their wages, already very low, the unstable political situation in China, and the assimilation to Caribbean society and culture. Each novel studied here gives a different perspective on this process of immigration and hybridization; how an immigrant adopts the culture of their new country in negotiation with their original cultural identity. The novels share an attempt to integrate the Chinese communities in Cuba and Puerto Rico into the national narrative.

The Cuban novels analyzed link the personal experiences of Chinese immigrants with the broader historical context of the time, thus making palpable the unhomely. There is a recognition of the greater social and cultural influence of the Chinese in Cuba, with examples of the participation of Cubans in Chinese festivals (*La isla de los amores infinitos*) or the various ways

in which they intermarried (*La eternidad del instante*). Of course, the population of Chinese immigration in Cuba was the largest in the Western Hemisphere for a time and this left both visible and invisible marks throughout the Island. The Barrio Chino (Chinatown) in Havana is the most visible and is central in the plot of *La cola de la serpiente*; showing the ways diasporic communities re-enact or re-member the homeland chronotope or tradition of time-space in the various time-spaces of dispersal through the creation of "habitual spaces", where habit and memory indicate the vital temporal dimension (Pereen 73). "El Barrio se parecía a Cantón, pero no era Cantón, y los chinos vivían mal. Sólo les importaba ganar bastante dinero para regresar a China alguna vez, aunque al final nunca regresaran" (Padura 54). The Chinese community in Puerto Rico was always much smaller and composed mainly of second generation immigrants (the children of Chinese who had immigrated to other parts of the Caribbean or America before moving to Puerto Rico). The Puerto Rican novels focus more on contemporary immigration or re-immigration and the marginal spaces the Chinese and their descendants inhabit as an unacknowledged borderland in Puerto Rican culture and society. Through the eyes of characters such as Li Chao and Yuga Wang, hidden and criminal elements of Puerto Rican life are revealed. Invisibility allows the unseen subject to observe and absorb, without being seen; it gives them the power to transgress the boundaries between cultures. When a group of people is not humanized in culture, through television, movies, or literature, it contributes to their marginalization in the real world. What the Puerto Rican novels reveal is how the trauma of colonialism continues to permeate all levels of social subjectivity as the Chinese, and other immigrant communities, are still treated with a colonialist attitude as *Other* and, therefore, expendable or inferior.

In these novels prejudices and stereotypes abound. *La cola de la serpiente*, *Barra china*, and *La isla de los amores infinitos* mention the Chinese affinity for gambling: "La pasión por el juego era casi genética en ellos, tanto que su famosa charada china of chiffá...había permeado y contagiado al resto de la población" (Chaviano 156); "El embrollo se repite tres or cuatro veces por semana: llegan al hotel después de la medianoche con la esperanza vana de reunir el efectivo para pagar lo aduedado... Al filo de la aurora, exhaustos, se apartan con los bolsillos asolados y la billetera hecha trizas" (Núñez Negrón 32). The murdered Chinese Cuban, Pedro Cuang, Conde is investigating in *La cola de la serpiente* is suspected of having formed part of an illegal lottery ring and was accidentally murdered by a compatriot. attempting to force him to reveal where the money from the lottery was hidden. The affinity for gambling amongst the Chinese mentioned in these novels, and the addiction to opium in the others, paints a negative portrait of these immigrants as having a weakness for irrational or addictive acts.

In analyzing the possible stereotypical representations present in the novels, the over-sexualized female Chinese characters, the *chinas mulatas*, prevails. Padura's Conde, is enamored by Patricia Chion and becomes angry and jealous when her father tells him she is seeing another man, so he "stifles his sexual desires for the china mulata by convincing himself that she is a nymphomaniac and a prostitute" (López-Calvo 76)¹⁶. Li Chao, in *Simone*, receives similar treatment by the narrator-protagonist when she leaves him for a woman. He describes the decision as a pragmatic one by Li Chao, thus making her seem like a seductress who uses others for her own benefit. Furthermore, Li Chao's ambiguous sexuality becomes problematic when it is inferred that it is due to a rape; it invalidates the female character's decisions and understanding

¹⁶ Lisa Lowe (1996) and Jose Lee Borges (2015), among others, also critique the eroticization of Chinese women in Western literature.

of her own desires. But it is not only the male writers who are guilty of reproducing the idea of Chinese women as exotic and erotic. In *La eternidad del instante*, the contortionist Won Sin Fon is also sexualized; in her very first scenes she is having sex and this is followed up by her seduction of a woman in a graphically described erotic scene (Valdés 190-193). These depictions of female Chinese characters fall within a Western Orientalist fascination with Chinese women as *exotica*.

The novels also share a common theme of bringing forth what has been hidden or forgotten, either voluntarily or involuntarily, by history and culture. By being central writing about Chinese characters within Cuban and Puerto Rican society, as a part of them, the novels make visible the Chinese presence. And while, physically, the Chinese in the Caribbean are visible, they are invisible in the metanarratives on the country's history and national identity. "Invisibility erases the self-presence of that 'I' in terms of which traditional concepts of political agency and narrative mastery function. What *takes the place*...is the disembodied evil eye, the subaltern instance, that wreaks its revenge by circulating, *without being seen*." (Bhabha 79). When making the previously invisible visible, the novels transgress the borders of what is significant in the national culture; bringing to light fragments of the darker history of national formation. As Lowe reminds her readers; "the debate about aesthetic representation is always also a debate about political representation" (Lowe 4). So, literary representation reminds current citizens of exploitative methods of labor on which the modern world was, and continues, to be built. Even after the recognition of equality and citizenship, there exists a racialized division of classes in the Caribbean: "...in a political system constituted by the historical exclusion and labor of racialized groups, the promise of inclusion through citizenship and rights cannot resolve the material inequalities of racialized exploitation" (Lowe 23). The history of colonialism continues

to play out in many regions of the Caribbean and the stories of Chinese immigrants, of their struggles and exclusion, draw attention to that which many would prefer remained unseen.

A final common feature is the choice of the Chinese immigrants to remain in the Caribbean, whether Cuba or Puerto Rico, despite the hardships they have endured. Or, perhaps, the traumatic experience of immigration, exploitation, and assimilation is recognized as irrevocable. From the twentieth century onwards, after the abolishment of the coolie trade, Chinese immigrants had the choice to return, if they could afford the passage. The majority chose to remain in Cuba, although they reestablished ties with families and communities in China and even set up businesses in both countries. Kui-fa/Rosa and SÍu Mend/Manuel in *La isla de los amores infinitos* exemplify this; SÍu Mend's grandfather was the first in the family to travel to Cuba and his father died there, but he chooses to take Chinese goods to trade. He is gone for many years and when he comes back to China all he thinks about is Cuba, as if part of him remained. In the Caribbean, they will always be foreigner, but neither do they have a place in the homeland. Those that do return to China, like the murdered Chinese man in *La cola de la serpiente*, do not remain. It is a decision that Mario Conde struggles to understand; why did the murdered man return? Presumably for the money from the gamblings. But it could also be argued that, like Maximiliano Megía/Mo Ying in *La eternidad del instante*, Cuba is now the chosen homeland. The borderland is the time-space immigrants and their descendants inhabit, particularly those marked out racially and culturally by a Western colonial tradition of discrimination. Nevertheless, in the Americas there are various communities which inhabit borderlands and these marginalized find comfort in one another, like Yombina and Yuga Wang or Li Chao and her Puerto Rican lovers. Immigration is, therefore, a permanent condition in which there is no "return" but a constant search for belonging and a negotiation of identity. If

national or cultural identity can be negotiated, then it is not a permanent or essentialist condition. This perspective transgresses the homogenizing nationalist discourse which calls for one culture, one language, one race.

For a time, the modern world was made up of boundaries but it is inescapably clear that culture and society cannot be limited within a set space or time. Borderlands are the dwelling places of the contemporary world, but it is also the most natural state of being for humanity; all cultures are a result of constant exchange and contagion with others. The novels analyzed present a cultural and ethnic position that denies the dichotomies on which identity has been built in the American continent. "While a new homogeneous hybridity has in Latin America most often been the result of *mestizaje*, this is not the only possible result of the coexistence of varied cultural, racial, or ethnic groups. The creation of a new multilingual and multicultural individual, population, and nation is an equally valid possibility" (de Castro 123). The study finds that the representation of Chinese communities in Caribbean literature allows for "viewing diaspora as dischronotopicality [which] prompts a view of identity not as involving some "true self" that can be recovered by returning to a homeland presumed to have stayed frozen in time-space, but of identity as a continuous becoming that is predicated on the various construction of time-space encountered and performatively enacted by the subject" (Pereen 74). The terms diaspora, borderland, and hybridity seek to question the homogeneity of "nation" that has played a powerful role in modern and contemporary politics by bringing forth immigrant narratives.

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