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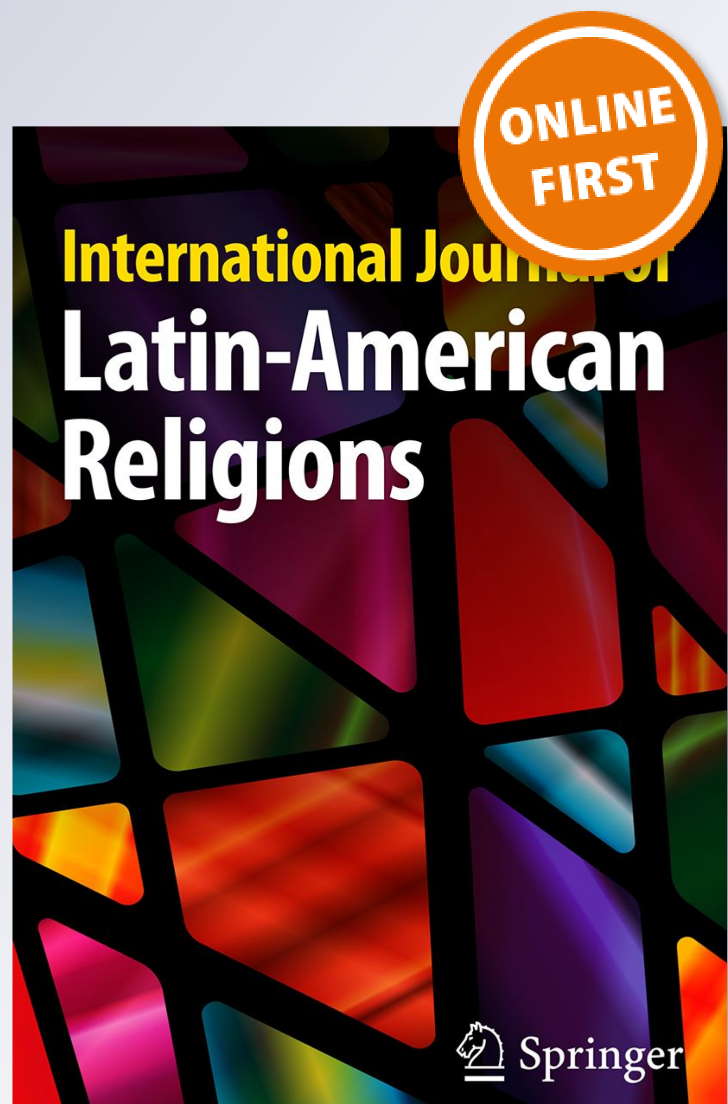

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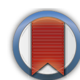

Asian Religiosity in Latin American Literature

Ignacio López-Calvo [1]

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Abstract Theosophy and Eastern religions and creeds, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Confucianism, and Taoism, have influenced Latin American literature since the *Modernistas*. Canonical authors such as Neruda, Borges, Cortázar, Paz, and Sarduy have addressed these Eastern believes in different ways. While for the *Modernista* they were a escapist tool and Neruda openly rejects them, other authors, such as Tablada and Paz, resort to them to try to understand their own countries, or to find the keys of eroticism (the case of Paz and Sarduy). In turn, for Borges, Eastern religions are a metaphor for infinite time, fantasy, and utopia and for Sarduy, a path to personal enlightenment.

Keywords Eastern religions · Latin American literature · Buddhism · Shinto · Confucianism · Taoism · Hinduism · Theosophy · Chinese religions · Orientalism · Vicente Fatone · Alejandro Korn · Pablo Neruda · Octavio Paz · Jorge Luis Borges · Julio Cortázar · César Aira · Juan José Tablada · Augusto Higa · Enrique Gómez Carrillo · Bernardo Carvalho · Severo Sarduy · Zoé Valdés · Antonio Chuffat Latour. Regino Pedroso · Mayra Montero · Leonardo Padura Fuentes · Rubén Darío · Leopoldo Lugones · Amado Nervo · Gabriela Mistral · Ricardo Rojas · Arturo Capdevila · Ricardo Guiraldes

Introduction

Given the wealth of authors and works, the topic of the presence of Eastern religions in Latin American literature would be more appropriate for a book than for an essay. In any case, in the next pages, I review what has already been studied and suggest the analysis of other Latin American works whose dialog with Eastern religions has not been studied in so much depth, yet, indicating, whenever possible, the reasons for their attraction to or rejection of these creeds.

A shorter version of this essay was previously published under the title "Oriental religions in Latin American literature." *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*. Ed. Henri Gooren. Springer Publishing House, 2015. Web.

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Buddhism in Argentina

Several critics have dealt with this approach to Latin American literature in their studies about Orientalism. Julia Kushigian, for instance, addresses it in her seminal 1991 *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: in Dialogue with Borges*, *Paz and Sarduy*, as does Araceli Tinajero in her 2004 *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano*, or Axel Gasquet in his 2007 *Oriente al sur*, *el orientalismo argentino de Esteban Echeverría a Roberto Arlt*.

Axel Gasquet, in his *El llamado de Oriente*. *Historia cultural del orientalismo argentino (1900–1950)*, explores the influence of Eastern religions in Argentine philosophers. One of them is Vicente Fatone (1903–1962), who often drew from Hindu, Buddhist, and other Asian philosophies. Tellingly, his book *El budismo* "*nihilista*" was translated into English in India. According to Gasquet, "Fatone's purpose is not to promote the 'import' of Nipponese moral qualities, but rather to point out the common moral terrain shared by the Japanese world and the Western ethical substratum based on Christian values. In his view, Christianism has qualities akin to those of bushido or Zen Buddhism" (n.p.). Likewise, in his 2008 working paper "El orientalismo argentino (1900-1940). De la revista Nosotros al Grupo Sur," Gasquet mentions that the Argentine philosopher Alejandro Korn belonged to a Buddhist circle in La Plata (12).

Theosophy in Latin America

Moving on from philosophy to literature, Juan José Sebreli, in his book *El asedio a la modernidad*, points at the Latin American authors' interest in Theosophy, as one of their points of connection with Eastern religions. During the first half of the twentieth century, it became fashionable to explore this esoteric, philosophical, and religious movement, which aimed at developing philosophy and science and seeking knowledge of being, nature, and divinity, through different religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and esoteric beliefs associated with Gnosticism and Rosacrucism. The leaders of modern Theosophy were Helena Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Wan Judge, who founded the Theosophic Society in New York in 1875. Among the most renowned Latin American authors influenced by this movement are José Martí, Rubén Darío, Leopoldo Lugones, Amado Nervo, and Gabriela Mistral. During the 1920s and 1930s, Theosophy ended up informing Darío's book *Prosas profanas*; Nervo's *En voz baja* and *Serenidad*; Ricardo Rojas's *El Cristo invisible*, Arturo Capdevila's *Advenimiento*, Ricardo Guiraldes's *El sendero* and *Poemas místicos*; and Lugones's *Prometeo*, *Las montañas de oro*, and *Las fuerzas ocultas* (Sebreli n.p.).

Buddhism and Shinto in Mexico

Araceli Tinajero has studied Latin American *Modernistas*' fascination with Eastern religions. For example, she notes the influence of Buddhism and Shinto in the Mexican Juan José Tablada's *Hiroshigué: el pinto de la nieve y de la lluvia, de la noche y de la luna* (1914), which includes references to *torii* (the traditional Japanese gateway often

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found in Shinto shrines), *satori* (inner enlightenment), meditation, emptiness, and the artist's communion with nature, among other issues: "For Tablada, Shinto and Zen concepts, which exist in an intimate relationship between being/nature and the universe, were quite attractive because, as was noted, these have parallels with the way the textual voice perceives (or 'appropriates') Oriental nature as described in Hiroshigue's paintings" (114). Following Zen and Shinto concepts about nature and art, Tablada suggests that nature is the only element that can speak for itself and articulate the surrounding worldview. This contact with Eastern cultures and religions, adds Tinajero, leads the author to question his own Mexican identity, as expressed in his poem "Exégesis." Similarly, the concept of nirvana appears in his poem "Japón" (Japan), where the poetic voice alludes to the sacred nature of Mount Fuji and tries, as Tinajero explains, to "reach the highest state of enlightenment and definitive liberation within Buddhism: *nirvana*" (129). Likewise, Tinajero notices the influence of Zen Buddhism and Shinto even in the title of the Cuban Julián del Casal's poem "Kakemono."

Shinto in Guatemala

We find the echo of Shinto in *De Marsella a Tokio: sensaciones de Egipto, la India, la China y el Japón* (1906), where the Guatemalan Enrique Gómez Carrillo places Japan directly under the goddess of the sun and at the center of the world. Tinajero avers that Gómez Carrillo's experience of entering a Shinto temple is equivalent to finding "a sort of *inner kingdom*, even though the difference in this case is that the temple, in reality, acquires precisely the pedagogical character of the museum (public and socializing place)" (58).

Buddhism and Hinduism in Chile

The Latin American authors' interest in Eastern religions survived in the second half of the twentieth century. Catalina Quesada Gómez has examined the relationship that the Chilean Pablo Neruda, the Mexican Octavio Paz, and the Cuban Severo Sarduy had with India and neighboring countries. According to her, all of them project in these countries their life or writerly obsessions. Neruda expressed his rejection of Eastern religions in his poem "Religión en el Este," included in *Memorial de Isla Negra* (1964), which he ends up associating with "heavenly merchandise" in the last line. Overwhelmed by all the suffering, disease, and death around him, the poet rejects the indolence of local gods, which he compares with that of the Christian god:

> Over there in Rangoon it dawned on me
>
> that gods and goddesses were enemies
>
> of wretched humankind just as was God.
>
> ……………………..

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buddhas nude and elegant smiling into the highball

of empty eternity

like Christ on his despicable cross

all of them—every single one—to impose on us

their paradise

…………………….

the whole earth stinking high to the sky

with the stench of heavenly merchandise. (Trans. E.A. Costa)

As Quesada Gómez explains, in an interview published in the issue 1561 of *Marcha*, in Montevideo (7 September 1971), titled "El poeta y el embajador," Neruda, as he did in other texts, expressed his rejection of Buddhism and Hindu eschatology. Perhaps because of his youth, he was not as ready as Paz or Sarduy to assimilate the religious and philosophical teachings of Buddhism or Hinduism. By contrast, Quesada Gómez adds, Paz and Sarduy did appropriate the imaginary and the ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism, even if they did not practice these religions (11). Thus, in his long poem *Blanco*, Paz applies his knowledge of different branches of Indian Buddhism and Hinduism, and, in his collection of essays *Conjunciones y disyunciones* (1969), he delves further into Tantric Buddhism and its attitude toward food "as the other pole of Protestantism" (Kushigian 80). Likewise, as Kushigian observes, in his poetry collection *Ladera este (1962–1968)*, Paz adopts "the blending of opposites commonly found in Tantric and Mahayana Buddhism… whose search for the state of perfection takes the action back to the center from which perfection may be attained through the void, or nirvana" (47).

Buddhism and Hinduism in Cuba

Severo Sarduy, in an interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, acknowledged the inevitable shortcomings that plague westerners when dealing with Eastern cultures:

> But I am not dealing with a transcendental, metaphysical or profound India but, on the contrary, with an emphasis on the superficial and, I would say, even on Indian tackiness. I believe, and I would have liked Octavio Paz to have agreed with me (I believe he does) that our only decodification as westerners, our only possible non-neurotic reading, considering our logocentrism, is the one that exalts that country's superficiality. To do otherwise yields a Christianizing translation, syncretism, true superficiality. (Rodríguez Monegal 318-19; qtd by Julia A. Kushigian)

In his novels *Cobra* (1972), *Maitreya* (1978), and *Colibrí* (1984), Sarduy mocks his own superficial approach and inability to grasp the religions of cultures that are alien to

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him. His attitude, therefore, is much more ludic and ironic than those of Neruda and Paz. In any case, Sarduy's trips to India and different countries in the Himalayas did influence his writing. Quesada Gómez points out that the influence of Buddhism is noticeable—and takes more serious overtones—in his sonnet "Palabras de Buda en Sarnath," included in *Últimos poemas* (1991):

> There is nothing permanent or true,
>
> or alien to deterioration and old age.
>
> What is is dissolved into what is not
>
> and in the iris you will see everything.
>
> The subject is not one; but bundle
>
> of disperse fragments that at the same time
>
> —with no origin, texture or clarity—
>
> are divided into others. The notion of subject
>
> is not misleading: it is a nuance
>
> of a color that precedes all light,
>
> the face in the reverse of a tapestry
>
> that appears backlit for an instant.
>
> Or the unforgettable timbre of a voice.
>
> But never the meeting of the two.

Here, Sarduy meditates on the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anicca*), one of the three marks of existence or traits shared by all sentient beings (along with suffering or unsatisfactoriness [*dukkha*] and non-selfhood [*anattā*]), which reflects the belief that all existence is transient and in constant flux, like a river. According to Buddhism, human life is inevitably mutable, as reflected in the aging process (the "deterioration and old age" of the second line), the cycle of birth and rebirth, and all experiences of loss. In fact, suffering, according to the Buddha, is caused by attachment to impermanent conditioned phenomena. The only escape is through the unconditioned nirvana, which knows no change, decay, or death. By understanding the concept of impermanence, which Sarduy seems have achieved in this poem, one can find relief from suffering and become liberated. As Quesada Gómez clarifies, "The preponderance of the One in Hindu thought, which would be before the being and non-being, before duality, as Paz reminds us, is added to the imperfect character of that which is

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impermanent and, indirectly, to the subsequent condemnation of vacuity" (58). Sarduy, therefore, has appropriated Buddhist concepts for his writing as well as to cope with his own upcoming death.

By contrast, Sarduy's intimations with Eastern religions in his novels tend to have parodic overtones. A parodic comment about *mestizaje* and Taoism, for example, appears in *Maitreya*, where people of Chinese descent lose their modesty and become coarser as they adapt to Cuban life: "Then, as he had seasoned his Cantonese dynastic modesty with crude Cuban caprices, he scratched his balls in irritation and dedicated to Lady Tremendous a Taoist grimace of offended disgust" (91). Still within the realm of parody, in *Maitreya*, transculturation is represented by the blend of religion and fusion cuisine, when Luis Leng, a Sino-Cuban chef who happens to be Buddha's reincarnation, teaches his culinary art to a student. In this sense, Judith A. Weiss, in her analysis of Sarduy's novel *Cobra*, elucidates that relations between East and West go beyond the sexual conversion and the parody of Asian religions as a Western fad, to include a "final conversion of West to East, paradoxically through the passageways of North Africa and the dives of Amsterdam (with its parodies of Orientalism)" (63). Kushigian also finds traces of Buddhism in Sarduy's novel *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), where one can find a parody of Buddhist philosophy: "the representation of the void is derived from the teachings of the Buddha and is also the artistic approach of the baroque in Sarduy…. The artistic union of the baroque and Buddhist philosophy in Sarduy becomes a metaphor for that which I see as Sarduy's orientalist purpose" (99).

The reading of Eastern religions in Sarduy's oeuvre runs even deeper. Kushigian argues that his statements about the baroque style "reflect similar intentions, as do his statements concerning Buddhist philosophy—Tantric doctrine in general, or Zen exercises in particular," for example, "the displacement of the center, the one, that is achieved in the simulatenity of Buddhist and baroque texts" (74). She also reminds us that Sarduy defined the Zen Buddhist *koan* in the essay "Fluorescencia del vacío," included in *Simulación*, and then he transformed it in his novel *Maitreya*, where "the Buddhist text is made evident through the title of the novel, the subject of the epigraph (a statement that is taken from the Buddhist Scriptures of Edward Zonze), the rebirth of the lama into the young Instructor, the references to Tantric banquets and rituals, and the experimentation with the koan, a Zen Buddhist exercise" (75). Likewise, Kushigian adds, in *Cobra*, Sarduy "refers to Tantrism through a system that is forever baroque, of layers, superpositions, polyphony, and double registers" (86). In her view, the representation of eroticism in this novel is related to Buddhist philosophy, which blurs the differences between the sacred and the profane (87).

As we have seen, while Neruda focuses on the misery around him in Eastern countries and rejects the (for him) esoteric teachings of Eastern religions, which were then in vogue among Latin American intellectuals, Sarduy tries to find existential answers in these (for him) exotic religions and lands (the case of his sonnet "Palabras de Buda en Sarnath") or irreverently mocks the Westerners' inability to grasp the deep meanings of Eastern cultures and religions in his novels. In turn, Paz uses these cultures and religions to try and understand his own country, Mexico.

Another canonical Latin American author influenced by Eastern religions is Jorge Luis Borges, who became familiarized with Buddhism thanks to his reading of texts by the German existentialist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Eventually, as Axel Gasquet points out, Borges would write, along with Alicia Jurado, the book *Qué es*

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el budismo (1976) (“El orientalismo” 21). Along these lines, Sonia Betancort points out the following comments in his text “Ginebra,” included in his 1984 *Atlas*: “I owe it, since 1914, the revelation of French, Latin, German, expressionism, Schopenhauer, Buddha’s doctrine, Taoism, Conrad, Lafcadio Hearn and nostalgia for Buenos Aires” (Betancort 70). According to Betancort, along with his reading of Schopenhauer’s texts, his friendship with Macedonio Fernández and the painter Xul Solar opened the door to the world of Eastern religions and philosophical concepts. Fernández’s adaption of Hindu and Buddhist theories through his readings of Schopenhauer would end up influencing several of Borges’s essays and short stories, including, according to Betancort, the essays “La nadería de la personalidad,” “El tiempo circular,” “Notas sobre Walt Withman,” “Dos antiguos problemas,” “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” “Magias parciales del Quijote,” “La nadería de la Personalidad,” “La doctrina de los ciclos,” “El arte narrativo y la magia”; the poems “El truco” and “Ajedrez;” and the short stories “El acercamiento a Almotásim,” “Las ruinas circulares.” For instance, in his 1942 essay “Una alegoría china,” he concludes “The love for the cycles of enormous time and of the unlimited spaces is typical of the Hindustan nations” (Betancort 79). Along these lines, Kushigian draws attention to the presence of Buddhism in Borges’s peculiar representations of the East: “The Orient, presented ironically, with familiarity, and at times inverted and parodied, is a metaphor in Borges’s works for infinite time, fantasy, and utopia” (19). According to her, Borges’s Orient is textual, modeled after his literary readings: “Through cultural displacement, slipping irreverently at times between Buddhist philosophy and German hegemony, for example, Borges orders the chaotic universe, giving freedom to personal desires for a more active existence like that of his pirates, military heroes, and tigers” (20).

Another canonical Argentine author influenced by Buddhism was Julio Cortázar. In an interview with Sara Castro-Klaren, Cortázar mentioned that he became an avid reader of the Japanese author Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, “who meant for me a tremendous existential shock” (25), and he acknowledged this influence on different occasions: “I felt until what point the West sees philosophical systems as closed and, by contrast, the Orient is the opposite, total opening and, if possible, the negation of causal concepts, in the case of time and space. All this seemed to me very methodologically useful for a Western man” (González Bermejo 1986: 73; Quoted by Boyás Gómez n.p.). In fact, the first title that Cortázar chose for his masterpiece *Hopscotch* was “Mandala,” the name of the ritual geometric design symbolizing the universe that aids meditation in Hinduism and Buddhism. In the plot, mandalas are mentioned in chapters 18, “just as mandalas are allegorical for everyone else” (73), and 82, “I connect with the Center—whatever it may be. Writing is sketching my mandala and at the same time going through it, inventing purification by purifying one’s self” (402). And there are numerous other references to Zen Buddhism and other Eastern religions, including some to karma, “this mirror is karma” (157), and the yin-yang, “sometimes the Yin is the ascendancy, sometimes the Yang” (159).

Early, in the fourth chapter of Hopscotch, we sense Cortázar’s interest in Zen: “‘She closes her eyes and hits the bull’s-eye,’ thought Oliveira. ‘The Zen method of archery, precisely”… When La Maga would ask about Zen... Gregorovius would try to explain the rudiments of metaphysics… Finally, she convinced herself that she had understood Zen and sighed with fatigue” (25). When La Maga asks with the *Bardo* is, Oliveira first explains that it is a book for the dead in which lamas make revelations to those who are

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about to die in order to guide them to salvation, only to end up admitting that he has no idea of what that book actually teaches. Then, Ossip Gregorovius adds that the *Bardo* returns us to a pure life precisely when it is too late. Like Sarduy, therefore, Cortázar plays with the idea that, regardless of the interest Westerners may have in Eastern religions, this world to opaque to them. Later, in chapter 28, Ronald confesses his desire to learn Tibetan Buddhism from his friend Wong: "'Wong put me through several tests,' Ronald was explaining. 'He says that I have enough intelligence to start destroying it profitably. We agreed that I should read the *Bardo* carefully, and from there we would go on to the fundamental phases of Buddhism. Can there be a subtle body, Horacio? It seems that when one dies… A sort of mental body, you understand" (156).

In other passages, Zen and Hinduism are referred to as something unnecessary. Thus, Oliveira conjectures that La Maga will be able to reach the symbolic Heaven square in the hopscotch without the need to resort to metaphysics: "A pebble and a toe, what La Maga had known so well and he much less well, and the Club more or less well, and who from a childhood in Burzaco or in the suburbs of Montevideo would show the straight and narrow path to Heaven without need of Vedanta or Zen or collected eschatologies, yes, reach Heaven with kicks, get there with the pebble" (215). The same applies when Oliveira says to himself: "We're not Buddha, and there are no trees here to sit under the lotus position" (291). Furthermore, in chapter 95, the study of Zen Buddhism is described as out of fashion: "In some note or other, Morelli had shown himself to be curiously explicit about his intentions. Giving evidence of a strange anachronism, he became interested in studies or nonstudies such as Zen Buddhism, which in those years was the rash of the beat generation" (430). By contrast, in rare cases, the engagement with Zen Buddhism becomes less casual. Thus, in chapter 57, Ossip Gregorovious claims that "Zen has a precise explanation for the possibilities of pre-ubiquity, something similar to the feeling you've just described, if in fact you did have such a feeling" (353). Finally, in chapter 95, Étienne makes the observation that Morelli "turned loose his Zen phrase, and one kept on listening to it—sometimes for fifty pages, the old monster" (431). As seen, although for the most part, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and Hinduism are engaged from a distance by Cortázar's characters, these religions and philosophies are a constant in Hopscotch, as proof of the author's avowed interest and curiosity.

Yet, another Argentine author, César Aira, has also approached Buddhism in his novella *El pequeño monje budista* (2005), where a tiny Buddhist monk, one of the three protagonists, dreams with leaving South Korea and moving to the West. Secretly hoping that they will help him move to Europe, he becomes the eloquent and wise guide of a French couple that is visiting Buddhist temples. In the end, members of the French embassy reveal to the French couple that the tiny Buddhist monk is actually a virtual hologram programmed to know numerous facts about Western culture.

Buddhism in Peru

Along with the aforementioned canonical authors, many other Latin American writers have made incursions into the world of Eastern religions. One of them is Augusto Higa, a Nikkei Peruvian author who, in his novel *La iluminación de Katzuo Nakamatsu*

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(2008), explores the identitarian self-definition and the identity transformations of a Japanese Peruvian through the use of *kenshō* (although Higa uses kenshō and satori as synonyms, a kenshō awakening is supposed to be a brief, clear glimpse at the true nature of existence, while satori is considered a deeper and lasting spiritual experience). This work is one of the best articulations of the processes of de-ethnification and re-ethnification that can often be found in Nikkei Peruvian cultural production. Nakamatsu, the protagonist, is a self-destructive and suicidal Nisei college professor and a frustrated writer who progressively loses his mind after being dismissed from his job as a literature professor for being too old. He considers the possibility that he is possessed and finally realizes that he is losing his mind. One day, a childhood friend suggests a certain *yuta*, an 80-year-old Okinawan medium or spiritual advisor, who is able to see Nakamatsu's yellow aura when he undergoes convulsions. The yuta reveals that the traumas suffered by the Japanese community during World War II are ruining Nakamatsu's life. At a climactic point in the plot, Nakamatsu is strolling through the Parque de la Exposición when he sees a *sakura* or cherry blossom, the national flower of Japan. Suddenly, in a sort of pathetic fallacy, the beauty of the scenery elicits a death wish. He is experiencing *mono no aware* (literally, "pathos of things"), a sense of fleetingness, a nostalgia evinced by object contemplation. This strong nostalgic feeling is caused by his amazement while contemplating the harmony between the spirit and the cherry blossom's shape. His sensitivity toward utmost beauty provokes such feelings of sadness and anguish that they lead to a death wish. We find a parallel scene at the end of chapter eight, where Nakamatsu, now a mentally and physically deteriorated homeless man, who has had his sexual identity unexpectedly transformed, has another awakening (the title of the novel) upon seeing a handsome, dark-skinned teenage boy in a market. Subsequently, he screams, takes off all his clothes, goes down on his knees, and whispers twice: "beauty exists" (107). This scene echoes the same experience of *mono no aware*, which in some cases, such as this one, can also produce happiness and euphoria. Later, we learn that Nakamatsu has experienced "the vision of the essential nature" (107), that is, kenshō, a Zen Buddhist term for the enlightenment experience, which is to see one's nature or true self. In a flash of sudden awareness achieved through meditation, purifying pain, and constant control of his own breathing, he finally understands the non-duality of his body and mind. The protagonist has seen the pure, essential nature of his mind as an illuminating emptiness, a condition believed to be essential in reaching Buddhahood or nirvana. Thanks to this enlightening moment, Nakamatsu is finally able to accept his country as is, with all its virtues and flaws, and to accept himself.

Chinese Religions in Cuban Literature

Chinese religions are also present in Latin American literature and in Cuban and Cuban American literature in particular. Along with Buddhism, a major world religion, Taoism (both a philosophy and a system of religion) and Confucianism (which has never been an established religion with a church and priesthood) complete what is known as the "Three Ways." Of the three, Confucianism has been the most influential movement in Chinese thought, followed by Taoism and then Buddhism. Most works dealing with Chinese religiosity in Cuba reflect the new developments that took place as a result of

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the contacts among Chinese, *Criollo*, and black African creeds. Zoé Valdés's novel *La eternidad del instante*, for example, displays an interesting fusion of the Three Ways, which is further syncretized once it comes in contact with African and European faiths. She seems to resort to Eastern religions for verisimilitude, to make her Asian and Asian American characters seem more "authentically" Asian and, therefore, different from Western characters. Thus, in keeping up with one of the central precepts of both Taoism and Buddhism, Mr. Ying hopes that his son's marriage to Mei will not be driven by passion. Similarly, upon the monks' request, Mr. Xuang, who claims to be a devotee of Taoism, writes a long essay on patience and solitude, inspired by the flight of birds. Later, building on the Confucian concept of the balance of opposites in the world, Mr. Ying talks about the Yin, the symbol of passion and integrity. The next generation follows in his footsteps: while Mei compares her love for Li Ying with the Yin and the Yang, Mo Ying, in order to improve his "inner vision," talks with turtles about slowness and patience. Mo Ying also learns to control his mind through meditation and breathing techniques and is able to prevent his memories and desires from disturbing his life. Years later, Mo Ying, now known in Cuba as Maximiliano Megía, will blend these Asian religious beliefs with European and African ones. In the last pages of the novel, which become somewhat propagandistic, Valdés seemingly uses Confucianism to criticize Castro's government as well as her fellow countrymen: "I learned, Confucius asserted, that when the country is lost and one does not realize it, it is because one is not intelligent; if one understands it and does not fight to defend it, then there is no loyalty; if one considers himself faithful without sacrificing himself for his country, then one has no integrity" (318).

Along these lines, two early texts by Chinese mulattos, *Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba* (1927), by Antonio Chuffat Latour (1860), and the collection of poems *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* (1955), by Regino Pedroso, are marked by a deliberate process of Christianization of the Chinese ethnic discourse. Chuffat Latour presents the legend of Kuan Kong (as he heard it in Cimarrones) in a manner reminiscent of the Biblical Ten Commandments. The coincidences are such that the commandments that Chung Si received were even engraved on stone tablets. The similarities with Christian dogma recall Hung Hsiu-ch'üan's particular variation of Taoism. Likewise, referring to José Martí's intriguing description of "the Tao" (path) as a bearded man or creator deity in his 1888 article "Un funeral chino. Los chinos en Nueva York" ("A Chinese Funeral"), Esther Allen explains

> Martí's description of a peculiarly anthropomorphic Tao may be attributable to the nature of the information he was given by former Taiping rebels. Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, the visionary leader of the Taiping (Great Peace) Rebellion, in which Li-In-Du apparently took part, had studied Christianity for two months with an American Protestant missionary named Roberts and believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He subsequently evolved a syncretistic Taoism influenced by Christian theology, which even included a Taoist version of the Ten Commandments. (José Martí. Selected 432)

Two other novels that portray witchcraft as the threshold to the world of the Chinese in Cuba. Whereas the first work, *Como un mensajero tuyo* (*The Messenger*, 1998), was written by Mayra Montero (1952–), a Cuban expatriate who has written her entire opus in

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Puerto Rico, the second, *Cold Havana Ground* (2003), was written by Arnaldo Correa (1935–), a Cuban residing in Havana. Just as Haitian voodoo provides cohesion for the black African cultures in Montero's novels *La trenza de la hermosa luna* (1987) and *Del rojo de su sombra* (1992), in *The Messenger* Chinese Cuban witchcraft and religious practices have the same effect. Montero does not attach any of the usual derogatory or diabolic connotations to the term "witchcraft." In fact, in this novel, it works as the axis of representation of the Chinese in Cuba, as well as an alternative narrative of the history of the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean. For fictional characters of Chinese, African, and Afro-Chinese descent, it is an effective weapon for resistance and protection against the Criollo domination. Whereas these religious practices are frequently interpreted as superstitious acts of witchcraft, the narrator of the novel presents them in a respectful manner. The effectiveness of Chinese witchcraft (and of Yuan Pei Fu, its main practitioner in the novel) is understood mainly through its prevalence over African-rooted Santería, whose leader is the protagonist's godfather, José de Calazán "Cheché" Bangoché. Thus, when Afro-Cuban witchcraft proves to be inefficient, Aida, the protagonist, resorts to the more powerful witchcraft of the Chinese: "And what the black *nganga* can't do, the Chinese *nganga* always can" (21). Colonial discourses have often conceived of witchcraft and fetishism as marks of "otherness" that justify the conquest and oppression of Third-World peoples. By contrast, although Montero does use the oft-maligned term witchcraft, none of the three types of witchcraft that appear in her works (Santería, Voodoo, and Chinese witchcraft) is presented as an ignorant or primitive practice; instead, they are introduced as alternative religions. Among the numerous aspects of Sino-Cuban culture described in *The Messenger*, Montero chooses religion and witchcraft as most representative. They become physical and psychological defense mechanisms through which a good part of Cuba's history is rewritten, this time, from the perspective of two of the ethnic groups (other than Amerindians) that most suffered the consequences of Spain's colonialism. Montero tries to provide a voice for the disenfranchised Chinese and blacks while exemplifying how Europe's economical and political expansion transformed distant cultures into new, hybrid expressions.

Witchcraft is again the most emblematic Chinese Cuban cultural trait in Arnaldo Correa's *Cold Havana Ground*. In its pages, he presents the arcane worlds of African and Chinese witchcraft as integral to Cuban identity and as useful tools for understanding the Cuban character. However, in contrast with *The Messenger*, *Cold Havana Ground* displays an ambivalent stance toward Chinese and African-rooted religions. In certain dialogs, the author conveys skeptical respect for these beliefs while, in others, he openly discredits them. Interestingly, the depiction of the Chinese and their magic is, for the most part, rendered through the eyes of followers of three African-rooted religions practiced in Cuba: Regla de Osha, popularly known as Santería; Regla Mayombe, also called Palo Monte; and the Abakuá Secret Society, an Afro-Cuban initiatory fraternity for men.

The superiority of Chinese witchcraft is also underscored in non-fictional texts. Thus, in the essay *El Monte* (1992), by Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991), we read that only another Chinese man is able to undo a curse cast by one of his compatriots, and they never do it:

> That which a shaman does another one undoes it: "a cane that kills a white dog also kills a black dog." The exception is "damage" done by a Chinese shaman,

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> since Chinese magic has the reputation of being the worst and the strongest of all, and as our blacks say, only another Chinese man is capable of undoing it. And here we learn something terrible: no Chinese man ever undoes the curse, the "morubba," that a compatriot has cast! As in the case of the unfortunate E., daughter of a mulatta and a Chinese man, who died not many years ago in her prime. The doctor, also from Canton and whom her father took to her dying bed as her last hope, was unable, or rather did not want to remove the tremendous curse of this innocent victim. (22)

Cabrera will emphasize the impenetrability and mysteriousness of Chinese religious practices several times in the text. In contrast with the story line in *Cold Havana Ground*, however, a few pages later in *El Monte*, it is an anonymous Chinese man referred to as S. who is saved from a *Mayombe* curse by two *Palero* friends.

To return to Cuban narrative fiction, in Leonardo Padura Fuentes's novella *La cola de la serpiente* (2001), the figure of Sanfancón and Chinese religious practices are approached in a more lighthearted way. When the Chinese private Juan Chion (Li Chion Tai) learns about an assassination, he immediately sees Sanfancón's signature in it, even though, as he explains, "Sanfancón does not kill in this manner, he uses a knife" (155). Suddenly, Sanfancón acquires evil traits that were absent in other texts. Conde, the protagonist, assumes that he is a "bad saint," particularly considering that all he knows about him is that when his "grandfather said that someone was worse that Sanfancón, it was because he was really bad" (155). Within the premises of what seems to be the Lung Kong (Dragon Hill) Society, Juan Chion and Francisco Chiu, two old Chinese *compadres* who consider themselves direct descendants of the warriors who fought alongside Cuang Con (or Kwang Kung), show the protagonist and sergeant Manuel Palacios the altar devoted to this Chinese "saint." They also inform them about the saint's history:

> But he wasn't a saint, was he?—asked Conde [...] I mean, they didn't canonize him as they do with Catholic saints... Why San Fan Con?
>
> —That took place here. He came as Cuang Con, but he was Cubanized as San Fan Con, and since he is a led [red] saint, blacks say that he is Shango, see, Captain. (160)

Later, Francisco Chiu states that, although he does not believe in Sanfancón, he knows that this saint is the result of a process of transculturation, since this is the outcome of "Chinese who plactice black witchclaft and of blacks who plactice Chinese witchclaft" (160). Indeed, in the story's denouement, we learn that the murderer was Panchito Chiu, a Chinese Palero.

Buddhism in Brazil

As to the presence of Eastern religions in Brazilian literature, according to Naomi Hoki Moniz, it was limited for some time perhaps because of the influence of positivism, naturalism, Renan's ideas, and similar theories at the time: "in Brazil, one observes little

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ideological interest. There is interest in Oriental mysticism and religion, but they are not philosophical attitudes organized in a coherently adjusted system. Rather, they are states of the soul, emotions or reactions of the poet" (219). Moniz adds that during the Parnassian period, there is interest in the Orient, not only looking for the picturesque, but there is also a superficial exploration of Oriental philosophies, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, or Chinese philosophers (217). Moving on to the twenty-first century, as Beatriz Resende explains, Bernardo Carvalho, in his 2003 novel *Mongólia*, briefly deals with Buddhism:

> The mythical aura around Mongols and Buddhism is undone. In this sense, the title that Carvalho affirms to have come to his mind first, *The Anti-Buddha*, would be fully justified. The Buddhist church, in *Mongólia*, can be as authoritarian or repressive as any other, which gives another merit to the novel: working as a sort of providential antidote to the consoling self-help narratives that often use, with little seriousness, *thoughts* attributed to Orientals unconcerned by material things, such as survival or justice in this world. (83)

Conclusion

As we have seen, Latin American authors have resorted to Eastern religions for different reasons, including an attempt to understand their own countries (Tablada and Paz); to understand eroticism (Paz and Sarduy); as an excuse for escapism (the *Modernistas*); as a metaphor for infinite time, fantasy, and utopia (Borges); to find personal enlightenment (Sarduy); to make Asian and Asian American characters seem more "authentic" (Valdés); for identitarian self-definition (Higa); as an alternative narrative of the history of the Asian diaspora (Montero); to explain a Latin American literary movement (Sarduy and the neo-Baroque); to find the Other of their own culture; or to improve their writing and expand their knowledge of being, nature, and divinity. In cases such as those of Sarduy and Cortázar, we sometimes have a parodic approach in which the authors humbly admit that this world in inaccessible for Westerners. Overall, while some authors appropriate Chinese religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shinto to project their vital or literary obsessions or to find answers to their existential questions, others, such as Neruda, openly rejected the teachings of Eastern religions while living in the East.

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