

The Peripheral and the Ephemeral: Power Struggle, Violence and Fear in the Depiction of *Chinos* in Mexican Literature and Visual Arts

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Abstract

This article analyzes how visual colonial representations of *chinos* (“Chinese”) resonate in contemporary Mexican literature. It examines power relationships, the fear of the Oriental Other and the violence associated with it in the eighteenth-century *castas* paintings and explores repercussions of this image in the broader context of the tumultuous modern Mexican history represented in the contemporary novel by Juan José Rodríguez *Asesinato en una lavandería china* (*Murder in a Chinese Laundry*, 1996). This text offers a controversial image of the Oriental Other, submerged in the world of violence, fear and power struggle where, as in *castas* paintings, characters live in a space that combines the historical and the imaginary. The article looks into these parallel images to uncover avenues of Orientalization of the *chino* and compares them to other images of the Orient that appear alongside it, exploring how these images relate to Mexican national identity.

Keywords

Mexican Orientalism, Other, *castas* paintings, Chinese, vampires.

The European Inheritance of the Mexican Orientalism

Transpacific connections play a crucial role in the process of defining the self and the Other in Latin America. From Columbus’s travelogues to the image of China Poblana and its cultural references, from direct and tacit references and parallels between Oriental and local cultures in Latin American literature and art to the anxiety surrounding waves of Asian and Middle-Eastern immigrants in the New World, transpacific connections have deeply influenced cultural interactions between different hegemonic and subaltern groups. However, due to the historical legacy of colonization, Eurocentrism has become essential for the interpretation of the social and racial complexity in the New World and its relationship with the Orient. Embedded in the sociopolitical structure of Latin America, it continues to exercise its influence on the popular imaginary long after the end of the colonial period. The interpretation of the Eurocentric model of interaction with the Other in Latin America oscillates between the negativism of Edward Said’s (1978) traditional approach to the colonial relationship as a

hierarchical construct, and a more positive interpretation of the relationship with the Oriental Other in the Americas by Julia Kushigian (1991). Following the premises of the latter, Axel Gasquet argues that although Hispanic Orientalism is indebted to the European Orientalist tradition, in Latin America, it sometimes reaches complete autonomy since it is based on specific knowledge that local intellectuals adapt to local culture (377). Subsequently, these perceptions determine not only the relationship between the hegemonic and subaltern cultures, but also gender and ethnic stereotypes and expectations.

This dialog between the legacy of the Eurocentric model and the uniqueness of Latin America's cultural and historical situation often results in the opposition of the two concepts. Brett Levinson, in his analysis of the role of Eurocentrism and "Latinamericanism" in determining the boundaries of the Orientalism in the New World, notes how three predominant interpretations of this relationship contradict each other. First, "Latinamericanism," is viewed as a continuation of Eurocentrism. In this interpretation, the Old-World hegemony is substituted by the United States and other First World countries that take upon themselves to construct a new Orientalized image of Latin America. The second notion of "Latinamericanism" presupposes the opposite: it is a protest, a critique of the Orientalized view of Latin America. Finally, the third approach addresses Latin America as a part of the globalized and transnational world, hence, diminishing the idea of its Orientalization (Levinson 19-20). Nevertheless, regardless of the position one takes in relation to this concept, it becomes clear that traditional Eurocentrism becomes the measurement against which Hispanic Orientalism is tested. Therefore, it inarguably exercises indirect or direct influence on the relationship with the Other in the New World.

In the conventional Eurocentric model of the relationship between the hegemonic powers and the Other in Latin America, rooted in the Saidian perception of Orientalism, the concepts of "civilization" and "barbarism" play a key role in determining the relationship between these two groups. Barbarism and violence, traditionally associated with the Other, encompass a negative attitude towards this entity by the hegemony. At the base of this perception of the Other in Americas as a representative of the "barbarie" (barbarism) is the notion of wild force of nature, often associated with brutality and primitive lifestyles and values. As such, the Other is feared by the "civilized" society that uses its position of power to "rescue" the subaltern group from their oblivion. It is not surprising then that the topos of violence plays a quintessential role in defining the Other in the Americas, be it the Amerindians or the traditional Orient, whose representatives began to be more visible in the local society with the increase of the transatlantic and the transpacific migration. This notion of darkness

and reactionary attitude of the so-called indigenous “barbarian” is questioned in Latin American literature at a later date, especially during the Independence and post-Independence movements with works like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (1845) or Rómulo Gallegos’s *Doña Bárbara* (1929). The perception of the violent Other, however, is not indigenous to Latin America. Already during the process of the Christian Reconquest of Iberia (711-1492), the Moorish Other that opposed the Christian society militarily and culturally, was often engaged in behavior that could be viewed as “barbaric” or “uncivil” from the standpoint of the European cultural values. Later, as the fear of the Muslim threat diminished, Renaissance accounts lessen the violent inclinations in the description and perception of the Other, who engages in the process of mimicry and is reimagined by the dominant group, as for instance, in *El Abencerraje y la hermosa Jarifa* (1695). While the accounts of the first colonizers and explorers of the New World carry along this peninsular Orientalist tradition based on the newly rebalanced relationship of power with the Other, they also retake the idea of its duality: an “uncivil” and unruly Other is often shown to have a potential to become more “civilized” under the guidance of the hegemonic group, therefore becoming eligible to be included in the societal hierarchical system.

This is especially true in the case of Mexican Orientalism. Rubén Gallo, in his analysis of this phenomenon, notes that as the world established a tradition of the East-West opposition, Mexico, due to its long colonial history and the process of miscegenation, “was caught somewhere in the middle of this polarizing construction,” which resulted in the creation of its own paradigm of Orientalist relationship (64). Gallo traces the origins of Mexican Orientalism to San Felipe de Jesús, whose ship sailing from Acapulco capsized in 1596 off the coast of Japan and who, along with the other members, was tortured and mutilated as a sign of expressed opposition to Christianity. Recreated consistently in Mexican visual arts, the image of San Felipe de Jesús’s Orient became a feared treacherous, sometimes violent, and unwelcoming place for the visitors (Gallo 64). Thus, it is not surprising that this image of the Orient, exotic, yet unpredictable and even violent, persisted during the colonial period both in literature and visual arts, such as *castas* paintings.

The same perception came into play in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, when immigration from China and the subsequent *antichinista* movement once again tested the boundaries of the relationship with the Oriental Other. After the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the United States’ refusal to grant work visas to the Chinese workers, who flooded the northern Mexican cities in hopes to cross into the United States, created one of the largest Chinese communities there by the beginning of the century. The intense sinophobia, as the newcomers often worked for much lower

wages, resulted in various official and popular actions against Chinese, among them the law (1930) prohibiting Mexican women from marrying Chinese men (Gallo 65). Such marriages, like racial mixtures represented in *castas* paintings of the colonial period, were considered deteriorating and threatening the Mexican race. Yet, the influx of Chinese immigrants, especially in the northern territories, contributed to the local economy, creating a “petit bourgeois class” in areas like Sonora (Schiavone Camacho 81-82). Despite this gradual economic integration into Mexican society, their diasporic ties were very strong, which played against the idea of the united mestizo nation.

This tension contributed to the stratification of Mexican society and resulted in the opposition to the Chinese community in subsequent years and the chastising of Mexican women who married Chinese men, as well as fearful, negative, and even violent attitudes towards Chinese women and Mexican-Chinese children. Robert Chao Romero points out that women who married Chinese men were considered “unpatriotic” and “lazy,” and they were perceived as trying to avoid work and live off their husbands (78). In other words, the relationship with Chinese led to the degradation of the Mexican race, as the post-revolutionary Mexican elites saw “a foundation for national unity and racial homogeneity based on the triumph of the Europeanized mestizo” (Delgado 5). However, after years of exile, even the subsequent return of the emigrant Mexican-Chinese who predominantly relocated to Sinaloa and Sonora during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), was tainted by the prejudice against the Other and forced separation of families. For instance, this policy benefitted mostly women and children, barring the man from returning to Mexico (Schiavone Camacho 89). This often led to many Chinese-Mexican families divorcing in China in order to be able to return; it is estimated that over 400 women and their children returned to Mexico between 1937 and 1939 (Romero 87). This cultural and familial rupture put the newly arrived families in a vulnerable position in society, prompting further breach between “us” and the Other.

Despite these contentious sociopolitical processes, Mexico City intellectuals were swamped by an “intense Sinophilia” that resulted in increased attention to this Oriental Other. Poets and writers, like José Juan Tablada and Octavio Paz, among others, discovered in the Orient a source of inspiration that allowed them to go beyond the national to the universal. The perception of the Chinese changes after World War II and the installation of the Maoist regime, as artists like Diego Rivera embrace communist ideology (Gallo 65). This condition of simultaneous love and hate, the fear of the Other and its influence in contemporary society and the reverence of Oriental art and culture, echo the situation in medieval and Renaissance Iberia where the threat of the Muslim invasion was intertwined

with the curiosity and acceptance of the reinvented figure of the Moor, who, while conserving its “Arabness,” undoubtedly had passed through an Orientalizing lens of the hegemonic society.

In this sense, the analysis of the power struggle, fear and violence in the relationship between hegemonic and subaltern groups in the representation of Chinese and Arabs in Mexican literature and visual arts allows to cast a brighter light on the interactions between the hegemonic group and its traditional Oriental Other, as it relates to the establishment of the national identity. Following the proposition of Michel Foucault, coined in *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), who argues for the need to regress to the foundational period to understand any given phenomenon, this article looks at *castas* paintings, one of the first representations of the so-called *chinos*, as a testimony of this contemptuous relationship with the subaltern that produces a wide impact on the colonial society and its perception in the metropolis. As eighteenth-century encyclopedic representations of all-American things, *castas* paintings contain diverse representations of the *chino* castes that, despite their name, are not related to Chinese diaspora, but rather reflect phenotypical similarities between the Chinese and the representatives of the *chino* castes that usually display a significant presence of the Indian or African blood. *Castas* paintings also depicted other “Oriental” groups that display an array of stereotypical characteristics, including certain gender and ethnic expectations. It is of especial interest considering that the *chinos* represent a less popular subject for the hegemonic narrative and visual representations, while the references to the Middle East and the traditional Moorish and Arab Other are much more present in the earlier narrative, such as the chronicles of the conquest and discovery.

Having established this original paradigm of the relationship between the dominant society and the Oriental Other, this article traces how visual colonial representations of *chinos* (“Chinese”) resonate in contemporary Mexican literature. It aims to examine the power relationships between this subaltern group and hegemonic society, the fear of the Oriental Other and the violence associated with it in the eighteenth-century *castas* paintings. The article explores repercussions of this image in the broader context of the tumultuous modern Mexican history, as represented in the contemporary novel *Asesinato en una lavandería china* (1996) by Juan José Rodríguez. A crime novel, this text depicts the offspring of Chinese immigrants submerged in the world of violence and drug trafficking, echoing the tumultuous period of the rising tensions with the Chinese diaspora in the early twentieth century. The focus on this type of novel is not accidental for the discussion of the relationship with the Other. As Vicente Torres notes, it presents in harmony the intellectuality of the dialog between the hegemony and the Other, while simultaneously reviving the romantic interest for the mysterious outlaw who defies societal conventions, a typical characteristic of an Orientalized Other (142). This highlights the

contraposition between the concepts of the “gentle and exotic” Oriental Other, as opposed to its wild and barbaric counterpart, casting light on how these images are adapted and are adapting to the local culture, shaping the conversation about the creation of a national identity.

Tracing the repercussions of the visual representations of *chinos* during the colonial period in contemporary literary works is not accidental. Beginning with the first most impactful encounter of the Iberian civilization with the Oriental Other during the time of the Arab conquest, the Christian Reconquest of Iberia, and the subsequent process of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, hegemonic power used a variety of tools to achieve and assert its dominance. Often times, it opted to exercise indirect influence on the popular mindset through visual arts, especially in light of the literacy levels and limited access to the written word. Therefore, pictorial representations became a common avenue to visualize the unfamiliar Other; they conveniently allowed depicting it from a point of view that was favorable to the dominant cultural group. These representations became a political tool for advancing hegemonic agendas, as well as asserting the colonial power and channeling the ongoing dialog between the dominant and the subaltern groups. This technique was successfully used in the Americas, where the power relationships between hegemonic and subaltern groups directed by fear of the unknown or unpredictable Other resulted in their stereotyping by the dominant groups. Contemporary literary texts, such as Rodríguez’s novel, seek to overcome these perceptions in search for a unified national identity that comprises the legacy of different periods of Mexican history.

Power struggle, fear and violence in the representation of the Orient in *castas* paintings

Originated in eighteenth-century in colonial Mexico, *castas* paintings were predominantly pejorative representations of the subaltern in an attempt to categorize, in terms of gender and race, the diverse racial mixtures, which sprang from miscegenation in Latin America. Created in sets of twelve or sixteen, the images were often exported to the metropolis as a type of postcard or encyclopedia of colonial life. *Castas* paintings depict the gradual development of the process of *mestizaje* (“racial mixture”) in the Americas, which led to imminent desire on the part of the local upper class to redraw and reestablish their hegemony in the colony. There are discrepancies about the number of castes that existed during the colonial period. According to Nicolás León, who pioneered the research on *castas* paintings, there were fifty-five different groups representing various degrees of racial mixture; however, several of them may be synonymic (21-27). These representations were racially charged not only on the pictorial, but also on the linguistic level; titles of castes often revealed condescending and patronizing attitudes towards “impure” races; for instance, *tente en el aire* (Hang-in-the-Air”), *saltatrás*

referring to a darker offspring (“Jump back”), *no te entiendo* (“I-don’t-understand-you”) or *mulato* (“Mulatto” derived from “mule”). Castes focused explicitly on racial mixture, leading to a meticulous investigation of one’s origins to the extreme of *tercerón de...*, *cuarterón de ...* and *quinterón de* (“Third,” “Fourth,” and “Fifth” generation of a given race). It was especially true in the case of the so-called pseudo-traditional Oriental castes, the ones bearing the name of an Oriental Asian group, but having little in common with it, like *chino* (“Chinese”), *chino cambujo* (“Darker Chinese,” referencing the use of “cambujo” in Mexican dialect, as describing a bird of black flesh and feathers), and *cuarterón de chino* (“Quadroon of Chinese” or “Forth-generation Chinese”). The parallels between the Chinese and the representatives of these castes were based merely on their appearance rather than genetic relationship. Similar obsession with color can be found in the representation of the so-called pseudo-Muslim castes that referred to groups from the Middle East, such as *morisco* and even *moro* (of Moorish descend), *genízaro* (“Janissary,” in reference to the elite troops of the Ottoman sultan), *albarazado* and *barcino* (both words can be etymologically related to Arabic adjectives used to describe the color of a horse). This reference to color in the process of naming the Other is not unique to *castas* paintings, and often becomes a distinctive feature in descriptions of colonial society in the literature of the period.

So-perceived Oriental castes do not appear consistently in all the series. Their presence in a series may be indicative of the place a certain Oriental Other occupied in the popular mindset: more familiar groups, such as the *morisco* group that goes back to the Reconquest times, are almost always present in the series; its ethnic origins, the offspring of Mulatta and Spaniard, are also consistent and well defined. The representations of *albarazado* and *barcino* are less popular, while the *genízaro* caste rarely makes an appearance in the paintings; consequently, their ethnic heritage is not as clear. At the same time, the various *chino* castes are relatively popular in *castas* painting series. While the predominant racial component in the *chino* caste is Indian or African, different variations, such as *cuarterón de chino* or *chino cambujo* display different mixtures of all three racial components (*indio*, *negro*, *blanco*). The diverse *chino* castes represent a peculiar amalgamation: while they are not ethnically Chinese, they indisputably convey an Orientalist perception of this group by hegemonic society, seemingly, based on phenotypical characteristics. As a result, the *chino* of *castas* paintings represents an ephemeral subject, a quasi-Chinese. Following the Saidian definition of Orientalism, these representations invite the spectator to analyze “the Orient” as “a fantasy constructed by Mexican artists [that] will allow us to interpret the cultural fantasies and fears about alterity that permeate . . . texts and artworks” (Gallo 63). Essentially, hegemonic power manipulates the image of the Amerindian Other, fitting it into the stereotypical perception of the roles of gender and the traditional Orient associated with the Moorish

Other during the times of the Reconquest of Spain and the opulent and fabulous continental Southeast Asia, the fabulized image of which inundated European travelers' accounts. In the absence of the fear factor, the dominant group feels more benevolent towards the chino castes, representing them as less violent in comparison to castes of more prominent African descent.

The name of the caste—the *chinos*—is indicative of the Orientalization path that was typical in the colony, itself deeply rooted in the syncretism of the actual Orient and the supposed Orient (the Americas) imposed by the colonizer upon the colonized and persisting in popular memory even after America was proven to be a different continent. As such, the word *chino* (*Chinese* in Spanish), referred not only to the phenotype of the person, but also indicated his/her occupation, as it became associated with the Quechua word *china*, a “servant girl of Indian or Mestizo blood” (García Sáiz 26). This process of merging the Orientalized subjects is rather common in the early colonial period. The fact that such denominations persisted shows the impact that traditional Peninsular Orientalism had on the Americas. It is significant that the ethnic origins of the different *chino* castes are not clearly identified in *castas* series. For instance, in the seminal work of Nicolás León he suggests that the *chino* caste is approximately 25 percent of aboriginal origin and 75 percent African (20). However, in her analysis of multiple *castas* series, María Concepción García Sáiz insists on the multifaceted nature of this group. She indicates that the *chino* could be an offspring of the following parents: *lobo* and *negra*, *lobo* and *india*, *mulato* and *india*, *coyote* and *mulata*, *español* and *morisca*, *chamicoyote* and *india* (26-27). Further analysis of the painting series reveals that the actual representations of the *chino* groups are even more complex. For instance, in some of the cases, the chino groups had predominant *indio* blood. Also, it is important to keep in mind that there are several other variations of the origins of the *chino* group (see, for instance, *No te entiendo con india, sale chino* by Luis Berruenco).

The pejorative names of castes reveal a certain sentiment of rejection of castes in a society where the concept of purity of blood determined one's position and access to certain benefits. Not surprisingly, these names were predominantly used by the upper class (Katzew 44). This indicates that the imposition of the perception of the Other came from a dominant group that projected a threatening image of the “barbaric” and “impure” Other in the colony. It offers an excuse for the hegemonic group to be fearful and suspicious of the Other, looking out for signs of violent protests against it. As a result, not all castes were portrayed equally. In her analysis of violence in *castas* paintings, Evelina Guzauskyte describes twenty-four paintings that portray how in the eyes of hegemonic society, mixing with the Other, especially that of African descent, meant *el empeoramiento de la raza* (“worsening of the race”). This resulted in the depiction of the castes of African descent as challenging gender and

race rules, and, since some of the “violent” characters were women, it reflected the concern of the contemporaries about wide-spread moral decay in the colony (Lehman 125), something that can be seen already in later chronicles of the conquest.

The depiction of violence coming from the Other was also rather unexpected, given the nature of *castas* paintings as “souvenirs” from America: the “depictions of unattractive, even bestial-looking men and monstrous women, in tattered clothing and with harsh facial expressions, would have been generally less appealing to foreign buyers and equally unattractive to domestic collectors” (Guzauskyte 179). In her analysis of castes that display violent behavior, Guzauskyte also points out that no particular caste was more prone to violent representation. However, a closer analysis of the groups identified as “potentially violent,” namely, *mulato*, *lobo*, *cambujo*, *morisco*, *saltatrás*, *chamizo*, *coyote*, *barcino*, *tente en el aire*, *chino*, and *albarazado*, reveals that at least four out of these eleven groups (*morisco*, *barcino*, *albarazado*, *chino*, and even *cambujo*, in its relation to *chino cambujo*) are the so-called pseudo-Oriental castes. Furthermore, among the twenty-four paintings, analyzed by Guzauskyte, at least two depict a *genízaro* parent, a pseudo-Oriental caste that is one of the least represented in regular series (190-92). The apparent proneness to violence among the Orientalized castes is only reinforced by examples, such as Ignacio María Barreda’s “De chino y genízara, albarazado” (“From Chino and Janissary Woman, Albarazado”), where both parents and the offspring displaying violent behavior represent the Oriental Other.

This Orientalized perception of the *chino* as potentially prone to violence finds its repercussions in other representations of Asia and Asians in Mexico. One of the most telling images, in this sense, is Catarina de San Juan, regarded as the first China Poblana. A seventeenth-century religious figure of Asian descent, she lived in the city of Puebla, which prompted the blending of the two images. Blake Seana Locklin, in her essay on the conversion of these two figures, outlines the factors that precipitated this peculiar amalgamation, rooted in transpacific anxieties, as “the repeated shifting between East and West and the changing significance of racial and sexual associations provide significant insight into the anxieties associated with the origins and character of a Mexican national icon and with Mexican identity itself” (62-63). In this sense, what contributed to the creation of this iconic image of the female patriotic figure is the appropriation of the Other into one’s own cultural paradigm. Hence, the conversion of the images of Catarina de San Juan and China Poblana, similarly to *castas* paintings, raises the question about the positive and negative perceptions of the Orient by local culture.

Catarina de San Juan’s inclusion into colonial society is determined by her religiousness. Her devotion and miraculous and pious life create a sharp contrast with her ethnic and cultural identity,

which was a convenient lens to look into Mexico's own myths of origin and positioning as the Other in relation to traditional hegemonies. Catarina de San Juan, thus, adopts the cultural values of the dominant group, which allows her to overcome her "condition" of being the Other. However, in order to shift the relationship, she has to be placed on the far end of virtue, which leads to the "fantastical constructions" of her identity and the subsequent conversion on the images of the China Poblana and Catarina de San Juan in the twentieth century, making Catarina de San Juan the "foremother" of the China Poblana and "a receptacle for fantasies of Mexican identity" (Locklin 63). As such, her saintly life and her peaceful and devoted religiousness, on one hand, and her tumultuous and itinerant life during her early years create a link between her fate and that of Mexican society, into which she is appropriated.

This devotion presents a sharp contrast with the association with the China Poblana. Much like the various representations of *chino* castes in *castas* paintings, the China Poblana's origins do not originate in Asia. Locklin points out that the origins of the name can be traced to the Quechua root referring to female animal (65). The original *china* is rather defined by her race, as indigenous woman, or by her lower class, sometimes with sexual connotation, as some of them also worked as prostitutes (Lenz 94-99). This juxtaposition is key to the perception of the Asian Other in Mexico, as it points out to the reverting of the roles of the self and Other. When faced with the cultural test, the Asiatic Catarina de San Juan is perceived as more "proper," than a *china*, whose often Indian origins relegate her to a position of servant or even more culturally tabooed roles. In this sense, the conversion of the two images is oxymoronic, as the rebellious nature of the *china* meets the peaceful obedience of Catarina de San Juan. This remarkable coexistence of the opposites may be what attracted attention to these images, relating them to the colonial religiousness and, at the same time, the sense of Otherness present in Mexico at the dawn of its colonial existence.

Both the images of *chino* castes found in *castas* paintings, as well as that of the China Poblana provide a "carefully arranged illusion," conveniently manipulated by the hegemonic group (Guzauskyte 176). At the same time, as Hernán Taboada notes, this points out to a remarkable assimilation of the Orientalist tradition existent in Iberia during the time of the Reconquest, contributing to the transfer of the idea of violence associated with the image of the feared Moor to the Americas (192). As a mechanism of racial and social differentiation, the violent or non-violent behavior, exotic environment, and typical occupation, depicted in the paintings, served as an anthropological landscape, the tacit reference of which was Spain and the white Spaniard. The popularity of such images increased as a result of centuries-long Orientalization of the Amerindian

and African Others in the New World, rooted in the mentality and power struggles of the early colonial period. This echoes the notion of civilization and barbarism discussed earlier in connection to the Mexican Orientalism. These amalgamated origins allowed the local ruling class to review the Oriental Other “in a way that allowed them to avoid the task of reconciling their anti-Spanish glorification of ancient American cultures with their oppression of contemporary indigenous people” (Locklin 74). This idea of what is truly Mexican developed after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, resulting in the definite exclusion and cultural rejection of the Chinese, which further deteriorated the image of the Oriental Other (Schiavone Camacho 83). Its representation gradually escalated the threat of violent behavior that made it unfit for the integration in the society in the eyes of the dominant power. This Orientalization from inside is key to understanding the process of transculturation of Mexican Orientalism that gradually absorbs the characteristics of traditional Orientalism, assessing and reimagining ethnic and cultural figures from the newly hegemonic perspective of an independent country for the purpose of defining national identity in accordance or against the Other.

The Orient at War and in Peace in *Asesinato en una lavandería china*

Starting with the beginning of the twentieth century, despite the escalating tendency of political and cultural rejection of the Oriental Other in Mexican society, the artistic Mexican elite retook, often with enthusiasm, the Oriental subject, analyzing it from the position of the newly acquired national hegemony. These Orientalist works reassessed the perception of the Oriental Other, tracing close parallels between local and Oriental cultures. In this sense, the novel by Juan José Rodríguez, *Asesinato en una lavandería china* (1996), represents a continuation of this relationship with the Chinese Other in the twentieth century. Current events in the novel can only be understood through the retrospective analysis of the origins of fear of and violence towards this Oriental group throughout the century. While *castas* paintings represent an imaginary Chinese, a type of contemporary projection of the perception of “Chineseness” in Latin America, similar to *moro*, *morisco* and *genízaro* castes, this text reflects upon the actual historical events that led to the stigmatization of Chinese immigrants in Mexico. Rodríguez revisits the history of the relationship between Mexican society and Chinese immigrants from the moment of a relatively peaceful coexistence to the shakedown of protests, the exile of Chinese and Mexican-Chinese, and the actions of the “Comité Antichino Pro-Raza” that instigated the unrests against its Asian neighbors (Rodríguez 56). As he introduces his protagonist in the present, the author immediately establishes his oriental connections in the past and follows up with a flashback to 1917 and a retrospective review of the anti-Chinese movement in Mexico (1911-

1934), as it affected the protagonist's extended family. However, this historical background contrasts the phantasmagoric reality lived by the protagonist, Alejandro Medina, who, along with the reader, falls under the exotic Oriental spell of the *china mexicana*, while being exposed to the dealings of a Mexican-Chinese vampire drug cartel. In the novel, Alejandro describes himself as living in two different worlds, the "real" mundane one, the world he knew before meeting the representatives of the vampire drug cartel, and Mexican-Chinese drug gangs' world of shocking clash of love, fear, violence, life and death. The symbolic vampire bite of Alejandro's lover, Yolanda, a member of one of the gangs, represents a rite of passage for the protagonist, who can no longer escape the vicious opposition of the two Mexican-Chinese clans and is forced to take side, merging his identity with that of his Oriental—and Orientalized—counterparts.

Fear and violence are ever-present themes in the novel. The protagonists both experience and perpetrate vicious acts—murders of the opponents and their families, physical assaults, including on their own family members—as a part of the power struggle among Mexican-Chinese tongs. This reflects on their character, but most importantly, on their ethnic origins and gender. Eduardo Antonio Parra, in his analysis of the narrative of Northern Mexico, notes that the ragged and "barbaric" landscapes that abound in this literature have an immediate impact on the storyline and characters, making them more prone to violence (73). In the novel, this manifests in the constant presence of blood and the color red, which acquires an additional significance in relation to Chinese protagonists. In the text, the color red, which bears positive connotations in the traditional Chinese culture, is not only the color associated with the murder scenes or vampire's diet (literally, the color of blood), it can also be seen in descriptions of certain characters as a premonition of the violence they are about to experience. Its constant presence and the routineness of violent acts in everyday life, like the tribal revenge-style murder of Alejandro's relative or a massacre performed by the Tong gang members that aimed to instigate fear in the community, can be seen as a metaphor, a reflection of modern political processes in Mexico. The violent manifestations of human nature in the novel echo the broader context of the tumultuous modern Mexican history and various social issues, including drug trafficking and traditional gender roles. The image of the border, in this case, the Mexican-U.S. border, is one of the leitmotifs of both Mexican literature of the North and a crime novel. The role of the borderland is of "vital transcendency," for it determines the role and the social position of all involved parties (Castillo Carrillo 6). In *Asesinato en una lavandería china*, the border also plays a key role. However, it is not as much the Mexican-American border, but rather the boundaries between the self and the Other, between the all-Mexican and the immigrant, the Chinese, the fine line between ethnic and national

identity. The protagonists in the novel look at their homeland and each other from their own side of the border, which leads to an unavoidable confrontation of both parties with the perceived “transgressor.”

This enterprise of looking at current political events from the standpoint of foreign culture is not accidental. The interest in the foreign subject, especially the Orient, was notably on the rise among writers born after 1965. Furthermore, in recent years, beginning with the 1990s, a significant cultural shift among artists of the new generation resulted in them moving away from the so-called “cultural nationalism” and exploring the Orient as a fascinating mythical construct. For instance, Mexican painters and sculptors, such as Fernanda Brunet, Pablo Vargas Lugo, Eduardo Abaroa, and Rodrigo Aldana, among others created artwork inspired by traditional images of the Chinese, Japanese and other Eastern cultures (Gallo 60-61). It is significant that the nations that sparked most attention were located in the Far East, which represented a gradual shift from the traditional attention to the Middle East and the perception of visible and invisible links between Arab and American selves, present in Mexican and Latin American literature and visual arts well into the independence period. Interest in the faraway Other also presented a convenient mechanism that allowed authors to distance themselves from their immediate reality, observing their subject from the perspective of a *flâneur*. As two mirrors placed in front of each other, it created an endless corridor of images, each reflection containing a part of the self and the Other.

Similarly, the Oriental and local cultures are closely intertwined in *Asesinato en una lavandería china*. The events in the novel take place in the cities of Mazatlán and San Fernando in Juan José Rodríguez’s native State of Sinaloa. The protagonist, Alejandro Medina, whose name the reader discovers only later, is looking for a distant relative of his estranged father to convey a certain message unknown to the reader almost until the end of the text. While looking for the relative in a decayed and ill-reputed part of town, Alejandro recalls his family story, which serves as a background to the unfolding events. Alejandro’s grandfather, an offspring of Spaniards and Arabs, is the key for understanding what will unfold. His grandson has only a critical assessment of his character, calling him a snake and a drunk whose main profession was “engaño” (“lies;”¹ Rodríguez 13). Curiously, Alejandro did not keep his grandfather’s last name, selecting, in his words, a plain and less pretentious last name, Medina. Yet, as fate has it, even this name carries an Arabic root (مدينة), meaning “a city.” This name can also refer to the name of one of the holiest cities for Islam, located currently in Saudi Arabia, Medina. Alejandro’s father does not fall far from the apple, following his father’s footsteps and engaging in various dubious enterprises.

This lineage of men “sin ninguna moneda en la bolsa, pero . . . hábil[es] para vivir sin trabajar, mentir sin ser descubierto, asesinar sólo cuando era necesario y escapar antes de que el mundo le[s] viniera encima” suffers a type of crisis when the grandfather is almost killed by his adversaries² (Rodríguez 12). Fleeing from certain death, he finds shelter in the hacienda of *el chino* Wang Fong, “el amable criador de hortaliza,” who represents the crescent middle class that the Chinese immigration to Sinaloa and Sonora areas created in the twentieth century (“courteous farmer,” 13). Unlike the “serpiente endemoniada” of Alejandro’s grandfather, Wang Fong and his family are “laboriosos,” “sencillo[s] y honrado[s],” “hombres sin malicia [con] sus hermosas hijas” (14).³ This “original” Chinese family seems almost idyllic in its description: working the land and living in harmony, Wang Fong’s household is a quintessential representation of the docile and amenable Orient untouched by Western civilization. Even the most promiscuous of the *chino* community, like the Chinese trafficker Rafael Yeng, are capable of magnanimous feelings. Yet, this almost pastoral existence comes under threat when Alejandro’s father falls in love and eventually marries one of Fong’s daughters, uniting the two families. This pivotal moment defines the fate of the characters. The seeming successful integration into Mexican society results in civil unrests and literal extermination or expulsion of the Chinese and their mixed offspring, echoing the forced exodus of Mexican-Chinese at the beginning of the twentieth century. This retrospect of the relationship between Chinese and Mexicans in the twentieth century presents a historic review of the relationships between the families setting the tone and providing the background for the reader to understand the unfolding cascade of violence and intimidation in present-day events in Alejandro’s life.

This ethnic and cultural opposition of Mexican society and the two Oriental Others in the novel reflects, on one hand, a contemptuous relationship of Mexico with its colonial past, where the conquistadors and explorers, and later authors of literary texts traced parallels between the Amerindian self and the image of the Moorish Other during the period of the Reconquest. On the other hand, it reflects critically on the twentieth-century problematic relationship with Asian, predominantly Chinese and Japanese immigrants. However, Arab and the Chinese ancestries are not viewed similarly in the text. The novel displays a clear juxtaposition of the two groups that carry Oriental blood. This, curiously, also echoes the situation in Mexico itself in the twentieth century where the *antichinista* movement and the expulsion of the Chinese were spearheaded by figures like Plutarco Elías Calles, Governor of Sonora (1915-1919), who himself had Middle Eastern roots (Schiavone Camacho 83). In the novel, while the descendants of Arabs are portrayed as violent and cunning, those of Chinese descent are surrounded by the almost fairytale-like romantic aura of exoticism, like the mysterious

beauty of their women and the smell of vanilla that they emit (Rodríguez 38). They are surrounded by Oriental epithets and metaphors, like “dragón de la mafia china,” “princesa de Pekín,” or “tigre” (“Chinese mafia dragon,” “princess of Beijing,” “tiger”; 58, 36, 56). It is symbolic that the characters of Chinese descent who appear more prompt to violence (like Lisandro, who beats his sister and commits other violent acts) display fewer oriental features; the author goes even further, highlighting the indigenous features of his face and his body. On the other hand, the Chinese-Mexicans who conserve “Orientalness” in their behavior also have more prominent Oriental features and habits, such as Yolanda, Lisandro’s sister. Coincidentally, their mother, Dolores Avicena, like Alejandro, also carries an Arabic reference in her last name: it evokes the name of Avicenna (ابن سينا, 980-1037), the renowned scientist and philosopher of the Islamic Golden Era. Both Yolanda and her mother, Dolores Avicena, who is another daughter of Wang Fong, are accompanied in the novel by the constant presence of the color yellow or lights, as well as red that often represents blood. At the same time, Lisandro is more associated with blue that can be interpreted here as a color of death (for instance, the Hotel Iguana Azul, *Blue Iguana hotel*, is the headquarters of Lisandro’s gang; the blue fumes that wrap around Lisandro as he is plotting his revenge, etc. (Rodríguez 38). As in the case of *castas* paintings, color plays a crucial differentiating role in the novel. Each of the characters appears accompanied by certain shades and color, much like representatives of different castes were ascribed certain phenotypical characteristics, based on their color.

The fairy-tale-like, almost idyllic descriptions given to women of the Chinese diaspora in Mazatlán radically contrast with the violence they are exposed to in Rodríguez’s text. It is not accidental that, even though men, both of Chinese and Arab ancestry, are the most active characters, it is women who play a key role in advancing the plot. Alejandro’s mother is the reason he starts looking for his Chinese relative, and it is the love stories that produce the major entanglements of the novel, such as the relationship between the protagonist’s father and Fong’s daughter and Alejandro and Yolanda, whose resemblance to her Chinese ancestors is constantly present in the direct and indirect comments of the author and the other characters. This active position is indicative of the societal role and the perception of Chinese women, despite the fact that most of them are subjected to violence both from their nuclear family and Mexican society: Alejandro’s father suffers the loss of his Chinese wife at the hands of Tong gang members; Dolores is killed by the itinerant mafia-like gangster Carlos Goldoni (a foreigner); and, finally, Yolanda, who is regularly beaten up by her brother, suffers a similar attack, however, with a different outcome. With her throat cut, she manages to kill her offender at the very moment he is about to behead Alejandro. However, the other women present

in the novel are, interestingly, blurred into an undistinguishable crowd, as if the author hovered over a magnifying glass that can only focus on one person at a time; the shaky hand may accidentally move the lens revealing the surrounding faces, but, nonetheless, irrevocably blurring out the rest of them, thus making the character in the focus a representative and a spokesperson for the entire group. This damnation of the fate of Chinese women echoes the vestiges of the everyday Orientalism present in quotidian language. Gallo, in his analysis of the language of Mexican Orientalism, points out the often-negative connotations of the use of the word *chino* in the popular tradition, as in expressions like “la quinta China” (“too far”) or “está en chino” (“it’s all Chinese to me,” i.e., incomprehensible). He even draws the association between *china* and “la chingada,” the euphemism for “rape,” concluding that “the Chinese woman . . . becomes a euphemism for the raped one” (68-69). In this sense, Chinese women in the novel carry a mark of the capital sin; they are perceived as a reason for the downward spiral that the Chinese community in Mazatlán is going through.

Their prominence and their pivotal role in all the events only reinforces this proposition. However, the trajectory of violence is revelatory of the author’s perception of the Oriental Other. It also echoes the historical relationship between local society and the Chinese during the *antichinista* movement and exclusion policies on the beginning of the twentieth century, when Mexican-Chinese women were targeted because of their ethnicity. Even during the resettlement process in 1930s and 1940s, it was officially only women and children who were allowed to return, thus, effectively, denying them the support of men and making them vulnerable in their new society. As such, in the novel Fong’s daughter, the first target of the anti-Other movement encountered by the reader, is a passive victim who is killed almost as a byproduct of the gang war; however, Dolores’s death is different. She is deliberately targeted as a Chinese (and a vampire), whose death should advance the liberation of Mexico from the estranged, incomprehensible and far away (considering the average age of a vampire) Other. Dolores’s life and death provokes a deep reaction in the community, uniting it in its opposition to the adversary. Finally, and despite being subjected to violence both within and outside her community, Yolanda is able to put an end to all the opposition movements. Not only does she kill the vampire slayer, Carlos Goldoni, a Mexican of Italian descent—a possible allusion to the Moor slayer or maybe even Christopher Columbus in his mission to “discover” and redefine the New World—but her romantic relationship with Alejandro overcomes the opposition between the two ancestral Others, the Arab and the Chinese. It is also significant that in the novel it is Alejandro, a male figure, who is experiencing fear under the pressure of violence, while female protagonists are gradually portrayed as more active players in their own fate. This can symbolically represent the unity of the

Mexican national character that overcomes racial and ethnic divides imposed by the hegemonic groups, first during the colonial period and then subsequently, during the post-independence period.

It is symbolic, however, that the adversary of the Oriental Other is not Mexico—the Chinese vampires coexist with locals rather remarkably—but the rival group whose history goes back to the original opposition between the cunning Arab ancestry and the Tong gang. This creates a much more complex picture of Mexican Orientalism that points to the *levels* of hegemony, rooted not only in cultural, but also political and economic realia of the country. In this sense, it retakes the dialog between civilization and barbarism, reassessing the roles of the self and the Other across space and time. In the novel, both Oriental Others, the Arab and the Chinese, have two opposite sides. As such, Alejandro overcomes his ancestral curse by showing interest and being more “understanding” of the Chinese Other. At the same time, the Chinese are also split into peaceful and violent sects that are forced to face each other. The power (im)balance between different characters in the novel also echoes this relationship. José Manuel Torres Torres links this idea of power over the Other and its function in the novel to Michel Foucault’s definition of the “micro-physics of power” (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975). He argues that Rodríguez uses this idea of power as a result of strategizing rather than the traditional type of authority to establish different types of domination, more mobile and with different localizations. This results in the simultaneous existence of distinct local powers that function differently (Torres Torres). In this sense, the opposition between the Mexican and the Oriental creates this power (im)balance that precipitates the opposition of the two entities in their struggle for domination.

However, the key to understanding Rodríguez’s Orientalism is rooted in the peculiar treatment of the Mexican-Chinese that the protagonist discovers almost at the end of the novel. On the surface, the *chinos* from his father’s past seem peaceful, laborious people who keep to themselves while contributing to the good of their adopted homeland. Yet, their secret is buried deep in their souls. It is only well into the story when Alejandro discovers that the Chinese community in Mazatlán and San Francisco are actually clandestine vampire clans involved in drug trafficking and are at war for territory and influence. Rodríguez, following the predominant tendency of the 1990s “to treat the Orient as a screen for projecting their fantasies—positive and negative—about alterity” engages in the role-play that allows him to manipulate the image of the Orient (Gallo 70). As such, he uses *vampirism* to reassess the traditional understanding of the Other.

The discovery of clandestine vampire life comes as an unexpected surprise to both the protagonist and the reader. The author uses this element of “shock” to draw the audience’s attention

to regnant perceptions of the Chinese Other rooted in Mexican history. Alejandro, who learns about Yolanda's relationship to Chinese vampires after spending several passionate nights in her company, is faced with questions and fears about his own identity, when he recalls her gentle bites in the neck, an iconic image of the "blood feast" of a vampire. Yet, Lisandro rejects all traditional speculations about vampire life as outdated and simply untrue. Silver bullets, garlic, immortality, fear of the daylight, all these canonical associations are laughable for the modern vampires. The natural question then arises: if our own perceptions of such a "well-known" Other are so wrong, what are we missing when we are looking at the Orient? This blunt rejection of the stereotypes forces the reader to accept the necessity to look at the Oriental Other in Mexico from a new perspective. Thus, the Other becomes a victim of the circumstances, rather than the perpetrator of violence; forced to abandon the traditional jobs and flee into the inhabitable lands, Lisandro and his men find the only source of income accessible to them, the cocaine business.

It is not accidental that the author chooses the image of the vampire. The relationship of fear and violence, blood, bloody ties and bloody murders, as well as the concept of the purity of blood traditionally associated with the Orientalist enterprise, play a key role in the novel, casting light on the process of stereotyping of the Other. Blood becomes a symbol of both continuity and rupture of the tradition. As such, *vampirism* in the novel is not always "contagious" and, if transmitted, it is not through the bite, but rather through continuous sexual relations. As the offspring of the different ethnic groups in *castas* paintings, the creation of the Other or the remodeling of the self becomes a task that is achieved through *a relationship* with the Other as an equal rather than through *violence* perpetrated by the Other. This invites the readers to reassess the ways they see the Orient: rather than passive observation (or reimagination, as often happened in literature), the audience is invited to engage with the Other and allow it to enter into one's life in order to truly understand it. When confronted with violence, the Oriental Other responds in kind, but so does hegemonic society. This duality of both the Other and the self (as Alejandro's ancestry also displays violent behavior) results in the impossibility of decisively dividing the Other characters in the traditional "good" and "evil" groups. Lisandro both beats his sister and is protective of his community; his ultimate desire is to be integrated into Mexican society. Yolanda represents both the sweet enchantment of the sexualized female Orient and the unbreakable fearless force capable of murder for the sake of saving her family. This new Orient is much more "humanized" and related to their new homeland than the ephemeral Orient of colonial times and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Conjunctions and Disjunctions of the Mexican Orientalism

In conclusion, *Asesinato en una lavandería china* invites us to redefine an Orientalized image of the Chinese that exists in Mexican society. Like *castas* paintings' representations, in the novel, both female and male characters of Chinese origin live in a space that combines the historical and the imaginary: the author artfully intertwines the reality of contemporary Mazatlán with the mythical world of vampires, perhaps, a metaphoric representation of the roots of social and economic instability in Mexico. Both *castas* paintings and the novel display an unequal approach to the *chino* who, in the eyes of the dominant group, conserves its Oriental aura, on one hand, but also, shows that behind this amicable appearance there are passions and even violence.

However, differences in these representations are significant. What distinguishes them is the approach to the Other. *Castas* paintings invite the traditional hegemonic reading of the Oriental Other that highlights its subordinate position in society and its cultural and ethnic "deficiencies" as an "impure" race. At the same time, the novel seeks to view the Other in the historical context of Mexican society, taking into consideration its role in its development and the fact that for many of these "Others," Mexico was the only homeland they ever knew. This intimate view of the Other from the standpoint of contemporary processes of globalization burrs the cultural and ethnic barriers. Another significant difference lays in the prominence that is given to the female figure. While *castas* paintings represent a more traditional image of the mother, the novel gives a prominent place to Chinese-Mexican women who become the center of the resistance, echoing the symbolic representation of the China Poblana as a quintessential image of Mexico.

The differentiation between the perception and the values of the Chinese and the Moorish cultural influences plays also a significant role. The perception of the Arabness associated with the process of the Conquest and the Christian Reconquest, and ultimately, with Spain and the colonial period, brings negative connotations in the novel. The protagonists are constantly trying to distance themselves from this legacy, which is not the case when it comes to the influence of the Chinese culture. It can be seen almost as an anticolonial protest. *Castas* paintings, on the contrary, display a surprising unanimity when representing the castes "related" to the Arabized Orient, while relegating the *chino* castes to the second tier and featuring their less favorable characteristics. However, both representations of the *chino mexicano* play with the notion of the exotic Orient, while contemplating the possibility of violent behavior forced by the external circumstances. In the novel, however, the author invites his reader to overcome the fear of the "unknown" in order to contemplate the possibility of a

unified national character that is an amalgamation of the different identities present in Mexico during its historical development.

Notes

¹ Here and further the translation is mine.

² “With no money in the pocket, but suited to live without working, for lying without being discovered, for killing when necessary and for escaping before the world rebels against him.”

³ “Bedeviled snake;” “laborious, simple and honorable person, a man with no malice who had beautiful daughters.”

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