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TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

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Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 14(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

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Publication Date

2026-07-14

DOI

10.5070/T4.48843

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Peer reviewed

Speculated Asian culture and techno-orientalism in *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015)

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Asian culture and technology in Rita Indiana Hernández Sánchez's dystopian novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) through the framework of techno-Orientalism. Rather than treating Asian cultural commodities as external impositions, the essay reveals how Dominican society's existing racialized hierarchies actively absorb and deploy them as mechanisms of control and stratification. The novel's hyperrealistic depictions of Japanese automobiles, Korean electronics, Chinese machines, and Japanese anime expose how non-Western modernity becomes strategically positioned within Dominican class structures, functioning simultaneously as objects of aspiration and instruments of marginalization. By examining how Asian cultural references receive markedly different narrative treatment than Western commodities, the article contends that *La Mucama de Omicunlé* exposes techno-Orientalism not as representational discourse but as a structural logic that reorganizes Dominican society through the distribution of Asian cultural commodities while reinforcing racialized hierarchies.

Keywords: techno-Orientalism, speculative fiction, Japanese animation, transpacific, dystopian literature, Afro-Asia

Introduction

The novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) written by the Dominican author Rita Indiana Hernández Sánchez depicts a dystopian Dominican Republic in 2027, when the effects of climate change and political corruption have ravaged the society. The protagonist Acilde works as a maid for Esther Escudero, an omicunlé (a chosen priestess devoted to Yeamayá, the goddess of the sea in Yoruba religion).¹ Through a gender-transitioning drug called Rainbow Brite and contact with sacred sea anemones, Acilde gains the ability to travel through time. Following a 2024 tsunami that released Venezuelan biological weapons off the Caribbean coast, President Bona enlists the help of his personal priestess, Esther, and the time traveler Acilde to prevent the worsening ecological crisis. The narrative of this time travel weaves between the early 17th century and multiple points in the 21st century, exploring themes of environmental disaster, gender identity, and technological advancement against the backdrop of Caribbean spirituality. It presents a fictional dystopian world in which the island's current societal issues, such as climate change, political corruption, and social inequality, persist. These problems are exaggerated and explored to allow for imaginative examination of possible outcomes and alternate realities through futuristic settings in the fiction.

Recent critical analyses of the novel have shed light on a Caribbean cosmology intertwined with Santería and its potential to challenge conventional notions of the body, gender, and time. One line of inquiry, as highlighted by Rosana Herrero-Martín, delves into Benítez-Rojo's quantum metaphor of the Caribbean Sea, proposing that the novel revolves around the concept of Caribbean quantum consciousness. Additionally, Alexandra Gonzenbach Perkins examines how the novel disrupts traditional understandings of bodily materiality, time, and space through its portrayal of Santería ritual tropes. Kristie Soares focuses on the experiences of queer Dominicans of color and argues that the novel's pessimistic aesthetic approach envisions a technologically advanced future. Meanwhile, Carlos Garrido Castellano focuses on the diverse backgrounds of the characters participating in the Sosúa Project, highlighting how the text challenges conventional models of creative production by transforming their artistic contexts. Finally, Sharae Deckard and Kerstin Oloff approach the novel from an ecocritical perspective, drawing attention to its neo-Lovecraftian elements.

While previous scholarship predominantly focuses on the main character Acilde within the context of Santería religion and time travel narratives as a queer character in the Caribbean, I argue that the side characters, such as Argenis and Malagueta, reveal how the novel engages with techno-Orientalism as a structural logic organizing Dominican society. Specifically, I examine how Japanese animation and Asian technology function not simply as cultural markers but as mechanisms through which racialized hierarchies are maintained and contested. Through this analysis, this article addresses an overlooked dimension of the novel: how *La Mucama de Omicunlé* represents the infiltration of Asian culture and commodities as both desirable and threatening, exposing collective anxieties about Asian economic and technological dominance while simultaneously revealing how racialized subjects become entangled within these techno-Orientalist frameworks.

This article unfolds in three sections. The first section examines the novel through the lens of speculatively, analyzing how it functions as a cultural production that critically engages with contemporary social issues through hyperrealistic portrayals of material objects and consumer goods. The second section explores how Asian technology circulates throughout the text and its relationship with racialized class hierarchies, particularly in connection to hyperrealistic descriptions. The third section provides close readings of the chapters "Psychic Goya" and "Monkey Magic," which center on side characters Argenis and Malagueta. These readings demonstrate how the text deploys Asian cultural products to construct and reveal characters' economic status, social position, and psychological identity. Through these sections, this essay argues that *La Mucama Omicunlé* reveals how Asian cultural commodities are positioned

within existing racial hierarchies in Dominican society. By examining how the novel situates Japanese technologies, Korean electronics, and Chinese machines within its speculative framework, I demonstrate how Asian capital reinforces and structures the racialized class order already in place. Techno-Orientalism in this context becomes a mechanism through which existing racial hierarchies absorb and deploy Asian commodities.

Speculative Fiction and Hyperreality

Speculative fiction, as Marek Oziewicz explains, is “a field of cultural production rather than a genre”. It encompasses literary works that abandon the assumption that “reality is objective and unambiguous,” departing from “imitating consensus reality” (Oziewicz). Rather than simply reflecting what exists, speculative fiction operates through the “non-mimetic impulse” that generates alternative realities based on imaginative rather than mimetic principles, as Oziewicz further explains. In the Latin American context, as Debra Castillo and Liliana Colanzi note, speculative fiction stands out as a framework “from which to explore philosophical ideas and to extend literary styles and formats” (2). Beyond formal innovation, this tradition produces “complex reflections on the changes that are produced in the subject and society, by positing and making possible other structures of thought” (Castillo and Colanzi 2). Castillo and Colanzi’s understanding of the potential power of speculative fiction as a literary form to push the boundaries of literary traditions stems from this “non-mimetic impulse” explained by Oziewicz.

Speculative fiction could be a term particularly well-suited to define *La Mucama de Omicunlé*. In an interview with Carolina Venegas K, the author Rita Indiana Hernández Sánchez herself describes the novel as a “speculative story”: “Es una forma útil. Prefiero llamarla historia especulativa y como toda especulación, exagera. El problema es que, como sabemos, en Latinoamérica la ficción se queda corta en comparación con la realidad”. Her reasoning resonates with the limitations of the mimetic Western literary traditions from which speculative fiction wanted to depart. The genealogy of Latin American history is longer than the genealogy of literary form. Thus embracing speculative fiction can create a non-linear narrative that crosses temporal and thematic boundaries, which is a formal strategy necessary to accommodate historical complexity that conventional mimetic literature cannot encapsulate.

As explained in the introduction, *La Mucama de Omicunlé* incorporates multiple narrators embodied in different bodies, moves across centuries, and shifts between genders and temporal positions. The novel focuses primarily on the protagonist Acilde while weaving through other perspectives and timeframes. These formal choices are not merely stylistic but structural necessities. As the author notes in interviews, speculative fiction is essential for representing the

crises afflicting the contemporary Caribbean, namely crises rooted in centuries of colonialism, racism, and environmental exploitation. Linear narrative forms cannot adequately capture events embedded in such deep historical structures. Speculative fiction, by rejecting mimetic realism, enables the novel to hold multiple temporalities in tension, making visible the continuities between colonial past and speculative future.

Yet paradoxically, the novel makes this speculative future believable through hyperrealistic details that include specific brand names, commodities, and technological specifications, grounding the futuristic setting in recognizable material culture. Speculative fiction does not simply invent alternative realities; rather, it assumes extreme conditions of present-day political and social reality and projects them forward. To make this extrapolation convincing, the novel must ground it in hyperrealism, where every object, technology, character, and relation is described with such detail that the imagined future feels tangible and imminent. For instance, the very beginning of the novel introduces Acilde's daily job: "Acilde espera a que el hombre deje de moverse para desconectarse y reanudar la limpieza de los ventanales que, curtidos a diario por un hollín pegajoso, sueltan su grasa gracias al Windex" (Hernández Sánchez 12). The specific brand name Windex combined with precise environmental details demonstrates how present material culture persists into the speculative future. Rather than imagining a radically different world, the novel grounds its description in recognizable contemporary consumption and labor conditions. This precision makes the speculative future feel more inevitable to readers.

Hyperrealistic descriptions also reveal how characters' daily routines are shaped by what they desire and admire, which is itself constructed around foreign culture. In Mirador, where Acilde once worked, foreign culture, especially Italian culture, circulates as a luxury good that local residents can consume and admire. The Italian restaurant El Cappuccino exemplifies this phenomenon as a site of aspirational consumption where Dominican subjects imagine themselves as more sophisticated. Acilde treats herself at El Cappuccino, describing the experience in these terms: "Allí ordenaba en el pobre italiano que aprendía online durante las horas muertas del Mirador e imaginaba conversaciones completas con los tipos que comían en El Cappuccino todos los días, italianos con zapatos que excedían las tres cifras y hablaban de negocios y de fútbol" (Hernández Sánchez 18). At this restaurant, Acilde practices linguistic and class aspiration, ordering in Italian and imagining conversations with wealthy Italian patrons, performing an identity she cannot truly claim. The significance of this scene lies in its revelation of structural constraint. Acilde pursues foreign culture as a pathway to sophistication and social mobility, yet the very materials through which she must construct this aspiration, whether Italian language,

Italian food, or Italian style, keep her perpetually outside the wealthy community she observes and admires. She is trapped in the position of observer rather than participant.

Foreign pop culture references appear frequently throughout the text, functioning not only as class markers but also as survival strategies for marginalized characters. When Acilde's former work as a sex worker is introduced, the text describes her strategy: "Para las horas de trabajo preparaba un playlist que terminaba siempre con «Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!» de ABBA" (Hernández Sánchez 17-8). Rather than directly demanding payment from clients, Acilde deploys Western pop culture as a coded language. The song's chorus becomes her demand for compensation, transforming a degrading transaction into an ironic performance. Foreign culture provides her with a linguistic mask, allowing her to assert her right to payment while maintaining emotional distance from the brutal reality of her labor.

Similarly, when the character Peri, Acilde's friend, is introduced, the text emphasizes her immersion in American tv shows and an Italian film: "Peri sabía diálogos completos de comedias del siglo pasado que nadie había visto, como *Police Academy* y *The Money Pit* . . . el *Giorgio Moroder Experience*" (Hernández Sánchez 19). These accumulated foreign cultural products and the constant presence of these references create a textured world that demonstrates foreign culture is not exotic or exceptional to these characters but rather woven into their everyday existence. The subsequent description reveals how Peri's escape from reality involves drug use intertwined with foreign cultural consumption: "El juego-experiencia de Sony te permitía estar en una fiesta disco de 1977 y bailar con otros *fevers* . . . que acudían a la fiesta virtual, combinado el viaje con pastillas para sucumbir al sintetizador palpitante y sensual de «I Feel Love» de Donna Summer" (20-1). Through this consumption of foreign cultural products, the text reveals how they shape her desires and aspirations, offering her imaginative escape from her material reality.

When the text enumerates foreign objects through hyperrealistic representations, it relies entirely on readers' everyday lived knowledge. Readers already know these objects, have seen these names, and carry these images. The proper nouns themselves carry the social and capital resonances already embedded in collective consciousness, requiring no further narrative explanation. In other words, the reader's familiarity becomes the text's resource. These foreign names stand alone, offering semantic value without requiring description, invoking the socially agreed meanings and capital resonances they carry.

At the same time, another noticeable feature of the novel is that foreign proper nouns and brand names appear exclusively when describing characters and their consumption, whereas nature alone is represented without such markers. This textual pattern reveals that nature is depicted through its own terms rather than through the grammar of foreign commodities. When the text

describes Playa Bo, a privatized beach in the Dominican Republic, for the first time, it illustrates how the landscape underwent industrialization: “había pasado por un proceso de construcción ecofriendly. Donde antes había un bosque de cambrones y guasábaras . . . El acantilado y la playa quedaban a la izquierda del edificio y habían habilitado una escalera de madera para acceder mejor al agua” (Hernández Sánchez 51). The passage juxtaposes the original forest and cliffs with the constructed house, terrace, and wooden stairs, revealing how the landscape was transformed into developed economic space. Notably, by omitting any mention of specific commodity names or foreign brands, the space of nature appears rooted within Dominican geography itself, despite the foreign capital that has invaded it.

This representation of influx of foreign and Western cultural consumption echoes what Ericka Beckman calls “capital fictions,” narratives that help societies come to terms with economic transformations. Beckman argues that late nineteenth-century to twentieth Latin American texts naturalized the idea that “labor, land and nature exist so that they might become commodities” (11), enabling elites to reach consensus about the desirability of “progress” through economic liberalization. In the contemporary context, *La Mucama de Omicunlé* engages with this legacy differently as a speculative fiction. Rather than naturalizing capital’s operations, the novel uses its speculative framework to expose what capital fictions concealed, namely the gendered and racialized violence beneath the surface of economic progress. The novel demonstrates this through its representation of physical space and temporal layers, where twentieth-century exploitation persists visibly into the speculative future. The text introduces Acilde’s room in Esther’s house:

La habitación de Acilde en casa de Esther es uno de esos cuartuchos obligatorios de los apartamentos del Santo Domingo del siglo XX, cuando todo el mundo tenía una sirvienta que dormía en casa y, por un sueldo por debajo del mínimo, limpiaba, cocinaba, lavaba, cuidaba niños y atendía los requerimientos sexuales clandestinos de los hombres de la familia. La explosión de las telecomunicaciones y las fábricas de zona franca crearon nuevos empleos para estas mujeres que abandonaron sus esclavitudes poco a poco. Ahora, los cuartos del servicio, como se llama, son utilizados como almacenes u oficinas. (Hernández Sánchez 17)

This passage exemplifies how the novel embeds multiple historical temporalities within a single physical space, exposing what Beckman’s “capital fictions” naturalized. Acilde’s room is not simply a present-day bedroom but a structure that carries the twentieth century’s history of exploitation within it. The text connects slavery, gender violence, and economic transformation all within one room, showing how these problems are not merely historical but structurally persist into the speculative future. The room becomes a spatial manifestation of what capital fictions naturalized,

namely, the commodification of human labor, particularly women's labor. Rather than naturalizing this legacy, the novel makes it visible by anchoring it to a specific, recognizable domestic space that readers understand as continuous with their own present.

What allows this jumping of timelines and exposing the critique of the economic progress is the speculative fiction that operates under the non-Western logic, the Santería religion, which was indigenous to the Dominican Republic. The protagonist's touching of the sacred "anémona de mar viva" (Hernández Sánchez 26) becomes the fuel for tackling the conventional mimetic reality and the cornerstone for developing the narrative of the novel. It further explores the seemingly mimetic and unambiguous reality by invoking indigenous religious frameworks. This indigenous spirituality thus becomes an essential tool that "dismantle[s] the traditional Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality" (Oziewicz). By navigating and exploring the dialogue that emerges under the reign of Santería, mediated through the protagonist Acilde from *La Mucama de Omicunlé*, the act of touching the sacred anemone that Esther keeps in her house becomes a transformative moment. Through this sacred contact, the boundaries between realistic and speculative fiction dissolve, allowing for the exploration of alternative modes of being and knowing that challenge Western literary conventions.

The overflow of hyperrealistic representations, focused on the objects surrounding and consumed by the characters, reduces the depictions of the novel's space to a surface level. Characters are shown through visible and tangible objects rather than through their thoughts and dialogues, deliberately stripped of depth. When Morla, a black market worker who assists Acilde's plan to steal the anemone, appears in the text, he communicates not through dialogue but through technological display: "La activa en ambos ojos, en modo pantalla total, dos videos distintos: en un ojo, «Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!», y en otro, «Don't Stop 'Till You Get Enough», ambos a todo volumen" (Hernández Sánchez 29). Reduced to two song titles whose English lyrics convey what Morla would otherwise say, the character becomes a conduit for the consumed objects rather than a voice. This reduction exemplifies how the novel constructs character identity not through interiority or speech, but through the foreign cultural objects they consume. Even as this depersonalization serves the plot's necessity of obscuring Morla's identity during the anemone heist, it demonstrates the novel's critique: under conditions of overwhelming foreign capital infiltration, individuals lose their voices and become mere vessels for global consumer culture.

Techno-Orientalism

Another key element that comprises the thematic center of the speculated space in the novel is advanced technology. As Castillo and Colanzi explain, technology is integral to speculative fiction,

which they define as “an umbrella term to define genre fiction that takes technological advances as its point of departure” (2). However, what makes this technology function critically in the novel is not technology itself but rather its interconnection with the racialized class system. The advanced technology visible throughout the text reveals the interplay between hierarchies of race, gender, and economic issues within the society depicted in the novel.

The opening scene specifically demonstrates the racialized distribution of technology. When Acilde activates the security camera in her eye, the text shows: “Acilde activa en su ojo la cámara de seguridad que da a la calle y ve a uno de los muchos haitianos que cruzan la frontera para huir de la cuarentena declarada en la otra mitad de la isla” (Hernández Sánchez 11). The Haitian reaches Esther’s house but dies due to the pre-programmed security system that identifies blackness as a dangerous virus and releases a lethal gas. Acilde, who seems accustomed to seeing this every morning, watches until the black man stops breathing completely, and then one of the automated machines that patrol the neighborhood collects the body like common trash. This description bluntly represents the racialized hierarchy between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and demonstrates the international ramifications of systemic racism, further highlighting the oppressive and dystopian nature of the futuristic society portrayed in the novel.

The socioeconomic divide within the island’s internal societies is stark, with a sharp contrast between the privileged few and the impoverished masses. The government of President Said Bona is depicted as corrupt and oppressive, favoring the elite while neglecting the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged. Such aspects suggest the uneven distribution of technology as a significant representation of this inequity, as data becomes synonymous with wealth, further highlighting the disparities present in the fiction: “Este trabajo le había caído del cielo. Sus rondas en el Mirador apenas le daban para comer y pagar su servicio de datos, sin el que no hubiese podido vivir” (Hernández Sánchez 17). Here, the technology becomes the vessel through which racial hierarchy and economic disparities are made visible and reinforced.

Among the hyperrealistic descriptions throughout the novel, another axis of technology emerges. Non-Western technology and cultural products function as distinct entities that complicate the existing racialized framework. Unlike other foreign Western commodities enumerated through hyperrealistic descriptions, non-Western Asian cultural references operate according to a different logic within the text’s racial and economic hierarchies, revealing incongruencies in how the narrator treats them. Although the novel does not explicitly identify “Asia” as a homogenous geographical or racial entity, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean commodities and their cultural products are distinctly marked and explained each time they appear in the narrative.

A prominent example where this aspect arises clearly is the chapter “Psychic Goya”. Located in 2001, it introduces the novel’s antagonist, Argenis. He works as a psychic hotline operator. The novel portrays him as a misogynistic and racist individual, frequently resorting to offensive language and curses. Argenis spends most of his time indulging in drugs and the text accentuates his highly unlikable and misogynistic nature. Despite this, he had always harbored a dream of becoming a visual artist. Fortunately, Giorgio Menicucci and his wife Linda Goldman, who are setting up the Sosúa art project to preserve marine creatures along the shore, invite him to join as a project artist.

The chapter provides context about his background, partially explaining why he developed into such an antagonist. His poverty and sense of deprivation during his upbringing played a significant role, because despite his undeniable talent, he lacked the privilege of exposure to the exclusive world of commercialized modern art that was reserved for the wealthy class. After Argenis is fired from his job after using a racial slur against his colleague, he returns home where he lives with his mother. In the following scene, his morning is described where his dissatisfied mother asks him to wake up and perform household chores: “A las seis de la mañana del día siguiente lo levantó para pedirle que le hiciera el desayuno, que limpiara la casa y que le lavara el carro” (Hernández Sánchez 44). Argenis complies with his mother’s demands and “Como a las diez de la mañana, se arremangó el pantalón y bajó al parqueo del edificio con una cubeta, la manguera y una esponja a lavar el Toyota Corolla verde” (45). The text meticulously divides the actions according to the timeline, creating a sense of slowness and emphasizing the mundane routines of making breakfast and washing the car. The text initially underscores the significance of these actions for the character. However, in an ironic twist, when introducing Giorgio’s morning right after, the narrative shifts its focus to highlighting Argenis’ pitiful condition:

Del otro lado de la calle se había estacionado una Montero del año, de la que salió un hombre peinado hacia atrás como Robert De Niro en *El Padrino 2*, con una camisa de lino azul, bermudas kaki y unas alpargatas españolas en los pies. Giorgio Menicucci parecía más ready para subir a un catamarán que para andar por las calles de Santo Domingo. (Hernández Sánchez 46)

Giorgio’s morning is portrayed in a brief yet impactful scene that captures its dramatic, straightforward nature. He arrives home in a brand-new car, exuding an air of prosperity, complemented by his stylish attire. The mention of the car brands in each description, specifically the Toyota Corolla and the brand-new Montero, serves as an eminent indicator of each character’s social background. The mention of Montero signifies wealth and is associated with affluent individuals, while the Toyota Corolla carries a more commonplace connotation. Yet the text

provides specific context that contradicts this initial impression. Argenis' household would not usually be able to afford such a car, as the text explains: "su mamá había logrado comprar hacía poco, después de haberlos criado a golpe de transporte público" (Hernández Sánchez 45). This revelation emphasizes the low-income status of Argenis' household, further reinforcing the stark disparities between the two characters. By employing these proper names, the narrative effectively underscores the contrasting social classes between Argenis and Giorgio, utilizing the imagery associated with these vehicles to highlight their fundamentally different positions within Dominican society.

For another example, the chapter "El jardinero," of the year 1991 depicts the aftermath of Acilde's gender transition and his newfound ability to travel through time after touching the sacred anemone's tentacles. Nenuco, a descendant of the Taino tribes and a gardener, who safeguards the marine biodiversity of Playa Bo, including the anemones, embraces Acilde as a destined individual based on their religious beliefs. While Nenuco's family cherishes their sacred rituals, Yararí, Nenuco's daughter, stands in contrast. Ananí, who is Nenuco's wife, believes that her father's death is related to the government, so she refuses the annual gifts sent by the government to their household, which include electric appliances. The chapter addresses the issue of foreign capital power appropriating the land, for instance, as depicted in the line: "quería quitarle las tierras para añadir las a las que había ofrecido a los judíos que acogió durante la guerra grande" (Hernández Sánchez 102). The text also mentions different countries such as Russia and Australia (100) and implies the anxiety and wariness that the characters feel towards them. However, Nenuco's daughter Yararí is represented as someone who seems not to care about this situation, but rather embraces it:

Yararí tenía catorce años y estaba harta de tanta ceremonia y tanta vaina rara. No quería pertenecer a aquel mundo de misterios y habladera en susurros de sus padres y había convencido a Ananí de que se quedara con un televisor Sony Trinitron que le había mandado Balaguer la última Navidad. . . . Yararí elegía lo que quería creer, y cada vez que se guayaba los nudillos lavándole los pantalones a su papá y a su hermano, maldecía a la madre por haber regalado la lavadora coreana que le habían enviado de regalo con la televisión. (Hernández Sánchez 106-7)

Ceremonial and strange rituals are juxtaposed with manufactured products such as televisions and washing machines, which function as symbols of externally introduced modernity. The text explicitly marks Asian electronics, a "Sony Trinitron" television, and a Korean washing machine as integrated into daily Dominican households, establishing them as prominent markers of

observed reality. This contrast reveals how foreign products shape local households, particularly among the younger generation who demonstrate a clear preference for them. More significantly, these electronics exemplify the government's deployment of bribery through controlled distribution, using the availability of modern amenities as a mechanism to maintain social order and control. By restricting access to these goods, the government manipulates consumer desire and reinforces hierarchies of status. This pattern substantiates the society's growing awareness of imported Asian technology as a crucial component of foreign capital, a presence already visible and predominant since 1991.

Along the trajectory of foreign capital's penetration into Dominican society, Asian electronics are positioned as benign components integral to daily household labor. Within this seemingly innocuous representation, the younger generation, exemplified by Yararí, embraces foreign technology as a vehicle for liberation rather than as an invasive force. From 1991 to 2027, foreign commodities seamlessly evolve from instruments of government control and bribery to normalized consumer goods, much like the Japanese automobiles that become ubiquitous throughout the narrative. This temporal shift marks the progressive integration of Asian cultural commodities into Dominican life.

The narrator frequently provides contextual commentary about these Asian references, explaining their significance in ways that markedly differ from Western commodities. This becomes particularly apparent through the novel's specific depiction of Japanese automobiles, electronics, and animation, as well as Chinese references, which position them as simultaneously desirable and threatening to Dominican society.

To understand these distinct patterns of Asian cultural references in the novel, techno-Orientalism provides an essential analytical framework. As Greta A. Niu defines it, techno-Orientalism refers to "a practice of ascribing, erasing, and/or disavowing relationships between technology and Asian peoples and subjects" (74). Techno-Orientalism, as its term clearly shows, is rooted in the lens of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), where he explains how the colonial European West constituted and structured its identity not only geopolitically but also ontologically through defining, designating, manipulating, and materializing the Orient as an antithesis of the West (1-3). Scholars have debated whether Latin American Orientalism can be fully encompassed within Edward Said's framework. Julia Kushigian, for instance, argues that Latin America's perception of Asians reflects a positive and respectful admiration, viewing them as "Others" outside of a hierarchical structure, with the intention of self-discovery and projecting a sense of infinite time, fantasy, and utopia onto Asia (3-19). However, Araceli Tinajero contends that

Kushigian's argument merely reiterates the "exotismo/escapismo" demonstrated by traditional modernists (29).

Ignacio López Calvo offers a different approach in *Alternative Orientalisms in Latin America and Beyond* (2007), arguing that Latin American Orientalism focuses on different vectors and, in some cases, pursues South-South interconnection between previously colonized peoples. In these instances, he explains that Latin American Orientalism does not involve ethnocentric self-idealization or attempts to establish cultural, ontological, or racial superiority. Instead, it has the potential to provincialize Europe and challenge the traditional center-periphery dichotomy (5). Zoila Clark similarly argues that Latin American Orientalism, situated on the periphery, presents a distinctive approach compared to European and North American Orientalism. Rather than viewing the Oriental Other as an object of domination and inferiority, it depicts them in a distorted and stereotypical manner (108).

Despite these varied perspectives on Latin American Orientalism, scholars have yet to adequately address how techno-Orientalism functions within Latin American speculative fiction. López Calvo's framework of alternative orientalisms offers valuable insights, yet it remains largely theoretical. Techno-Orientalism differs from traditional Orientalism by moving beyond Western representational authority over the East. Rather than "arresting Asia in traditional, and often premodern imagery," techno-Orientalism presents "a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an "Orient" undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations" (Roh et al. 3). Crucially, techno-Orientalism operates through what they term a "bidirectional" logic, wherein "discourses [are] mutually constituted by the flow of trade and capital across the hemispheres" (3).

This bidirectional framework proves essential for understanding *La Mucama de Omicunlé's* engagement with Asian commodities. Rather than depicting Japanese automobiles and Korean electronics as Western fantasies imposed upon Dominican society, the text reveals them as material products of actual capital flows and trade relations. Japanese and Korean corporations actively penetrate Dominican markets, while the Dominican government deliberately deploys these technologies to structure society. Both the East and the Dominican nation-state are agents in techno-Orientalism's production. Critically, the same technology, Japanese automobiles, functions differently depending on who possesses them and under what circumstances, becoming embedded in racialized hierarchies where it operates as aspiration for some and essential infrastructure for the marginalized. The novel thus reveals techno-Orientalism operating not as discourse alone but as a structural logic that reorganizes Dominican society through the distribution of Asian cultural commodities.

The imported Asian commodities do not stand alone as consumed objects; rather, they represent a vision of modernity that Dominican society perceives as non-Western yet desirable. Argenis expresses his hostility towards Iván de la Barra, a Cuban curator participating in the Sosúa Project, suggesting that being Cuban is sufficient to gain invitations to Spain or Japan, which he sees as desirable destinations: “Todo el mundo los ama, por la maldita revolución, pero ¿hasta la cuánta es? Nada más hay que ser cubano para que te inviten a España, a Japón?” (Hernández Sánchez 55). In this passage, the text symbolically pairs Spain, a Western country, with Japan as a representative non-Western country, presenting both as escape destinations where Cubans might improve their circumstances. By juxtaposing Japan with Spain as equally desirable yet distinctly non-Western, the novel positions Asia, and Japan specifically, as an alternative modernity outside the Western axis. This textual move establishes Japan as an exemplary site of non-Western development and progress, confirming that the novel itself construes Asian modernity as distinct from yet comparable to Western advancement.

In the 2027 story, the narrator provides a more extensive explanation of how Japanese automobiles have come to dominate the Dominican transportation landscape, particularly through the figure of the “carro público” (Hernández Sánchez 59). When depicting collective taxis used in the country, the text explains: “Estas chatarras, modelos japoneses de principios de siglo, andaban en la calle a pesar de las iniciativas del gobierno por retirarlas de circulación. Su precio módico y su privacidad las hacían ideales para los indocumentados y los prófugos” (59). While the text provides specific contextual details about the condition and cultural perception of these vehicles, it significantly repositions them within racialized and class hierarchies by directly associating them with “indocumentados y los prófugos” (59). This connection reveals a crucial shift from the earlier presentation of Japanese electronics as markers of aspiration and status. Here, Japanese cars become entrenched within systems of illegality and marginalization, functioning not as a symbol of national modernity but as essential infrastructure for the racialized poor and those excluded from legal citizenship.

In 2027, the character Eric “había tenido la delicadeza de venir en un carro público, un Honda Civic 2007, que a pesar de sus veinte años conservaba la pintura original gris ceniza” (Hernández Sánchez 64). By establishing that Japanese automobiles possess exceptional durability and quality, the narrative naturalizes their continued prevalence in 2027. The Honda Civic’s material preservation justifies Japanese technology’s ongoing circulation, rendering its dominance not as a surprising or threatening development but as a logical consequence. In doing so, the text renders what might otherwise appear as a disruption to Western modernity into something natural and inevitable. This textual emphasis addresses an implicit anxiety rooted in what Morley and

Robins identify as the “Japan panic”: “It is as if the future had passed from Europe to America to Japan, from ‘us’ to ‘them’. This has created a disturbing sense of insecurity around Western modernity. If the Japanese can become modern, then what is still distinctive about the West?” (173).

At the same time, China appears as a convenient stand-in representing the unpleasant invasion of Asian capital within the continent. In the techno-Orientalist vocabulary, “Japan and China are thus signified differently” (Roh et al. 4), because “while Japan competes with the United States for dominance in technological innovation, China competes with the United States in labor and production” (4). Thus, in the novel, China becomes the space where the Dominican state manipulates the distribution of Asian commodities within racialized hierarchies. The automatic cleaning machines that collect dead Haitian refugees’ bodies are specifically identified as Chinese: “Los recolectores chinos fueron donados por la potencia comunista ‘para aliviar en algo las terribles pruebas por las que pasan las islas del Caribe tras el desastre del 19 de marzo’” (Hernández Sánchez 12). The machines’ proper name, Zhengli, which is a transliteration meaning “cleaning up the mess”, perpetuates the perception of Chinese capital as inherently associated with disposal labor. By instrumentalizing Chinese technology for handling racialized death, the Dominican state displaces responsibility for Caribbean political crises onto foreign Asian commodities. The text reveals how techno-Orientalist hierarchies enable this displacement: if China represents devalued labor and production, then deploying Chinese machines for corpse collection appears not as a choice but as a structural inevitability within the racialized distribution of Asian capital.

In addition, the text acknowledges the association between mass production and China, as illustrated in a passage discussing the commercialization of art in 2001: “Las obras que había visto, aunque a veces ni siquiera estaban hechas por el autor sino por una fábrica de juguetes de China” (Hernández Sánchez 38). Here, the narrator contrasts it with the notion of valuable artwork that is authentically created by “el autor.” The distinction between the commercialized and factory-produced items and the artistic authenticity are effectively conveyed through the image of industrialized nature associated with products made in China.

In this sense, the novel presents a sometimes contradictory view of Asian countries and their influence. Japan is portrayed as both a desirable destination and a source of cultural products that are viewed with some skepticism. The text reveals a hierarchy in cultural representation, with Western cultural products often given more specific recognition than their Asian counterparts. China, on the other hand, is portrayed more negatively, associated with mass production. This portrayal reflects both the aspirational view of Asian development and the anxieties about Asian influence. This depiction highlights the complex relationship between Dominican society and its

increasing exposure to Asian cultural and economic influences, revealing both acceptance and resistance, admiration and prejudice.

Afro-Asian future: Malagueta's monkey magic

As David S. Roh, Betsy Huan and Greta A. Niu explain, “techno-Orientalism finds some of its most pervasive expressions in SF because of the genre’s futurist *esprit* of contemporary existential, racial, and technological anxieties” (5). *La Mucama de Omicunlé* exemplifies this dynamic as well. The novel uses its speculative framework to expose how a peripheral Latin American society instrumentalizes Asian culture and technology to maintain its own internal hierarchies. Invisible hierarchies become visible precisely through meticulous description, through the cataloging of which objects warrant specification and which remain unnamed, which cultural references receive explanation, and which are dismissed. In the chapter “Psychic Goya,” (set in 2001), the narrator portrays Argenis’s contemptuous personality through his disdainful observations of those around him:

Diala, la flaca con acné que le había hecho una paja una vez en la escalera, tenía el suyo lleno de fotos de REM, Morrissey y Londres. Eddy, un pájaro cuarentón con el pelo teñido de negro, tenía fotos de sus sobrinitas en Disneyland. . . . Axel era un blanquito esquizofrénico y este trabajo constituía su terapia ocupacional; tenía un Pokémon de peluche y unos afiches de bandas de hyperpop japonés que Argenis jamás había escuchado. (Hernández Sánchez 32-3)

The passage reveals a contrast in how Western and non-Western cultural references are handled. While American and British cultural markers, such as REM, Morrissey, London, and Disneyland, are mentioned with specificity and assumed recognition, Japanese hyperpop bands receive no names and are presented as generalized and obscure. More significantly, the text emphasizes Argenis’s deliberate ignorance of those bands. This narrative choice transforms Japanese cultural consumption from a matter of taste into a marker of social pathology, which is associated with Axel’s schizophrenia. The text thus reveals that while Japanese technology circulates as aspirational, Japanese cultural consumption marks one as eccentric, mentally unstable, and even aesthetically suspect. This bifurcation exposes the racialized nature of what gets coded as legitimate consumption. Western culture requires no explanation and confers normalcy, but Japanese culture requires explanation and invites contempt. The novel demonstrates how techno-Orientalism operates not merely at the level of technological dominance but through the everyday judgments that render specific cultural consumption as strange, pathological, and worthy of disdain.

Located in 2001, the novel presents another side character through the Sosúa Project: Malagueta Walcott. Unlike Argenis, whose antagonism stems from poverty, Malagueta's is inseparable from his racialized identity as a Black subject. Rather than positioning anime as an aspirational commodity, the novel mobilizes Japanese anime culture differently through Malagueta. Anime becomes the mechanism through which a marginalized Black subject attempts to reconstruct his identity. When first introduced, the narrator describes how Malagueta became a conceptual artist:

El cómo esta mole humana había terminado de artista conceptual era un misterio que mucho tenía que ver con su afición a los dibujos animados japoneses de la televisión dominicana. Malagueta era fan de *Dragon Ball Z* y de niño había llenado unos sesenta cuadernos con hombres musculosos de venas hirsutas y melenas amarillas erizadas flotando en un cielo violeta o anaranjado. (Hernández Sánchez 72)

The peculiarity here lies not simply in what he draws, but in how the text links his physical bulk to his consumption of *Dragon Ball Z*. His body and his artistic identity become inseparable from Japanese animation. The abnormal physical features of the animated characters, muscular bodies with spiky yellow hair, become his aesthetic and psychological reference point. In this way, anime does not merely inspire his art; it becomes the framework through which he imagines and constructs himself.

Crucially, the text presents his fascination with Japanese anime as the explanation for his unusual existence, his “misterio,” not as a consequence of racialization or economic precarity, but as something made intelligible. This obsession becomes visible and comprehensible precisely through his body. The muscular and bulky physique now finds its explanation in the hypermasculine animated bodies of *Dragon Ball Z*. Japanese animation thus functions as the framework that renders his bodily abnormality legible.

Dragon Ball Z was “undoubtedly the biggest hit in Latin America in terms of anime” (Kim). The novel's specific reference to this anime reflects its historical prevalence. Yet more importantly, the text shows how a racially marginalized Black individual finds identification with this Japanese animation and incorporates it as core to his identity:

En la cabaña de Malagueta había un espejo que usaba para mirarse durante sus ejercicios y sus ensayos . . . así como un dibujo que había hecho a los nueve años de Goku, el de *Dragon Ball*, con su rabo de mono. De pequeño, cada vez que alguien le decía ‘mono’, ‘maldito mono’ o ‘mono der diablo’, dibujaban un Goku dando una patada o haciendo uso de uno de sus poderes especiales.

(Hernández Sánchez 165)

While waiting for his “sensei” (167), a transliterated Japanese word meaning teacher, Malagueta channels the negativity and insults he faces into physical strength. Japanese animation thus creates a space where he can reframe what society marks as abnormal into something powerful. As Lily W. Luo argues, “If mainstream techno-Orientalist speculative fictions reflect the dominant anxieties of the U.S. Empire, Afrofuturist creations try to imagine a future that is not foreclosed but rather radically open” (114). Though Luo speaks of Afrofuturism specifically, Malagueta’s appropriation of Goku exemplifies a similar impulse. Through Japanese animation, a Dominican Black subject imagines a radically open space where his racialized body becomes not a marker of abnormality but a site of extraordinary power.

The novel emphasizes how Malagueta’s body itself experiences the weight of racialization. When describing his rage at being repeatedly called “black” and bullied by his peers, the text says: “Cada vez que alguien la decía queriendo decir pobre, sucio, inferior, criminal, la palabra crecía, debía estar a punto de explotar lo mismo que al principio: un color. Su cuerpo era ese globo de carne que contenía la palabra, soplado una y otra vez por la viciada mirada de los otros, los que se creían blancos” (Hernández Sánchez 163-4). His body becomes a balloon inflated by the contemptuous gazes of others, a material space containing all the negative meanings of the word “black.” The body visualizes the weight of those imposed adjectives.

Malagueta’s transformation of bodily space begins strategically. He visits a hair salon to change his afro hair into an orange style, a decision that reveals the careful calculation beneath his self-presentation. The hairdresser explains that “el naranja era aún más extraño y que haría referencia a *Dragon Ball* de una forma más indirecta e interesante” (Hernández Sánchez 167). The phrase “aún más extraño” is significant. The blackness itself was already marked as strange, as abnormal. Yet the orange color promises to be even stranger, to exceed the original strangeness. But this excess comes with a condition. The reference to *Dragon Ball* must remain “indirecta.” The orange cannot directly invoke Goku; it must only suggest and gesture toward the animated character. To be “interesante,” the reference must stay oblique. This logic of indirection is central to how techno-Orientalism serves as “an expressive vehicle for” fears in competition with Asian dominance (Roh et al. 3). Malagueta’s orange hair must remain an indirect reference to *Dragon Ball* precisely because direct confrontation with this otherness would undermine its strategic value. Japanese animation becomes the mechanism through which his racialized body is made simultaneously visible and neutralized, rendered acceptable through careful distance.

The text reveals that Malagueta is acutely aware of this calculation. He understands precisely what attracts “un público particular, que leería estilo y no moda, búsqueda y no tendencia”

(Hernández Sánchez 167). His orange hair must reference *Dragon Ball* only indirectly, his blackness diluted by foreignness, his obsession with animation visible enough to be legible yet subtle enough to avoid threatening viewers. Japanese animation serves as a conscious mask, a tool he deploys to exist as an artist within a system that would otherwise exclude him. Yet this strategic awareness cannot liberate him. The knowledge that allows him to navigate the system also confirms his entrapment within it. He must constantly calibrate, constantly dilute, and constantly hide. The otherness he performs remains both chosen and compelled.

This reconstructed body finds expression in his artwork. When Giorgio sees Malagueta's art pieces for the first time, which consist of images of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist, one depicting nudity with feathers and another carved into the ground and set on fire, the narrator explains: "Algo conectaba estos gestos extraños con los héroes animados que habían encendido su obsesión infantil" (Hernández Sánchez 73). The word "obsesión" conveys an excessive desire, setting him apart from ordinary consumers of animation. His art remains positioned outside dominant artistic reference, incompatible with mainstream taste. Yet this outsider status becomes marketable, and his peculiarity is commodified. The obsession with Japanese animation, the unconventional gestures, and the strange body all construct him as legible within the market precisely because they maintain the appearance of marginality. Yet he remains contained and consumable, his difference transformed into a product.

The chapter's final sentence, "Ahora su piel era puro plástico," (Hernández Sánchez 167) encapsulates the trajectory of Malagueta's attempted transformation. The plastic skin suggests that his effort to reconstruct his identity through Japanese animation ultimately produces only surface change. The muscular physique and orange hair remain external modifications. His body has not escaped the system that marked it as abnormal; it has simply learned to perform its abnormality differently.

Yet the plastic metaphor reveals something more troubling. Plastic is not alive. It does not breathe or feel. It is entirely artificial and entirely constructed. Malagueta's strategic awareness, his careful calculations about indirectness and appeal, his deliberate deployment of anime as a mask, all of this has not liberated him but has instead rendered him completely artificial. He has become the very thing he performed. The consumption of Japanese animation, the strategic reconstruction of his body, the cultivation of his peculiarity as a commodity for a particular audience, all of this has not provided escape but has instead completed his transformation into an object.

The character Malagueta exemplifies the novel's central argument about techno-Orientalism's seductive trap. His adoption of Japanese anime initially appears to offer radical reclamation of his racialized identity. Yet the text reveals a more troubling trajectory. His carefully

calibrated orange hair and strategic deployment of anime expose not liberation but deep consciousness of his own commodification. The final image of his “puro plástico” skin encapsulates this fate. He has become entirely artificial, entirely constructed for consumption. What appeared as choice (embracing Japanese animation as escape) was constrained by the very racialized hierarchies that produced his marginalization. The novel thus presents Malagueta as an emblem of how marginalized subjects seeking escape through non-Western cultural consumption become further entangled in the capitalist logic that produces their exclusion.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated how *La Mucama de Omicunlé* exposes the structural logic of techno-Orientalism in peripheral Latin American contexts. Asian cultural commodities are not imposed upon Dominican society as external fantasies but are actively instrumentalized by existing racial and economic hierarchies. The novel’s hyperrealistic cataloging of Japanese automobiles, Korean electronics, and Chinese machines exposes how these technologies become embedded within racialized class structures. Throughout the narrative, these commodities function simultaneously as objects of aspiration and instruments of marginalization.

The novel demonstrates this through its treatment of different characters and temporal moments. From Argenis’s Toyota Corolla to Eric’s durable Honda Civic, from Yarári’s refusal and acceptance of government-issued electronics, to the collective taxis that serve undocumented migrants, to the Chinese machines that collect dead bodies, Asian technologies organize Dominican life in ways that appear natural but are deeply structural. The character Malagueta epitomizes this trap. His strategic adoption of Dragon Ball Z anime initially appears to offer liberation. Yet his commodified body demonstrates how marginalized subjects seeking escape through non-Western cultural consumption become further entangled in the capitalist logic that produces their marginalization.

This structural understanding distinguishes techno-Orientalism from traditional Orientalism. Rather than operating through fantasy or symbolic representation, it functions through actual capital flows and material circulation. Japanese, Korean, and Chinese corporations penetrate Dominican markets while the Dominican state deploys these technologies to maintain social order. Both are agents in techno-Orientalism’s production. The novel thus reveals that examining how Asian capital is positioned within existing racial hierarchies exposes the logic of peripheral capitalism itself. Speculative fiction becomes the formal strategy through which these operations become visible, amplifying contemporary patterns to reveal their structural inevitability.

Notes

¹ According to Rosana Herrero-Martín, the Yoruba people, who were forcibly relocated through the transatlantic slave trade (16th-19th century) from Yorubaland (modern-day Nigeria, Togo, and Benin), significantly shaped Caribbean culture through Santería, a syncretic religion. *La Mucama de Omicunlé* uses this historical foundation to build its speculative future (2027-2037), where Esther serves as a santera (Santería priestess) in an “eco-ravaged, neobiblical, fundamentalist and neighbour-unfriendly Caribbean” (53). Through her connection to Olokun, described as ‘the Orisha deity, ruler of the bottom of the sea,’ the novel explores themes of environmental redemption and “Caribbean quantum consciousness” (54-55).

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