

# The Three Origins: The Cuban Ajiaco and Chinese Cuban Voices in the Narratives of Mayra Montero and Daína Chaviano

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*The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations.*  
— Fernando Ortiz *Cuban Counterpoint*

In his well-known essay “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad,” Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz argues that Cuba’s origins could be found in the various ethnic groups that had inhabited the island through the centuries. Cuba’s distinctness was a result of its diversity, the mixing of cultures that had transpired throughout the island’s history. According to Ortiz, Cuba could best be defined an “ajiaco.” The *ajiaco*, the island’s national stew, is made by combing diverse ingredients originating from different parts of the globe, placing them into a large casserole, and slowly cooking them to create a new culinary concoction. With the arrival of new groups, came new ingredients, and thus, new versions of the stew were created. Like the *ajiaco*, therefore, Cuban identity, and by extension the Caribbean’s, is fluid and subject to change. With each migration and emigration, the *ajiaco* is redefined.

For the most part, studies on Cuban literature have placed great emphasis on the African and European elements of the *ajiaco*, including literary representations of African-based religious practices and Spanish immigration. That is not to say, though, that Cuban writers from past and present have not focused on Chinese characters or themes. Quite the opposite is true; the presence of Chinese characters in Cuban literary works may be traced as far back as the early twentieth century.



Cuban authors with works centering on Chinese or Asian themes include Alfonso Hernández Cata (1885-1940), José Lezama Lima (1910-1976), Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), Severo Sarduy (1937-1993), and Miguel Barnet (1940- ). In the past few years, however, there appears to have been a renewed interest in the topic with several Cuban and Cuban-American authors revisiting Asian immigration and its influence on the development of the island-nation's culture.<sup>[1]</sup>

Mayra Montero (b. 1953) and Daína Chaviano (b.1957) are two Cuban novelists with recent works focusing on Chinese-Cuban voices. Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo* (1998) (*The Messenger*) and Chaviano's *La isla de los amores infinitos* (2006) (*The Island of Eternal Love*) return to Ortiz's notion of the *ajiaco* to give voice to Chinese immigrants to Cuba and their descendants. Both texts narrate the history of Chinese immigration to Cuba, including intermarriage or *mestizaje* between Chinese immigrants and their descendents and other ethnic groups. What is perhaps most crucial, however, is that both novels are told from the perspective of female protagonists, either through first-person narrations or third-person omniscient narrators. Through these narrations, Montero and Chaviano re-inscribe a once marginalized group, the Chinese, into Cuba's history. Importantly, it is women who speak for their long-lost ancestors, rewriting both their family histories and the nation's and revealing the complexity and fluidity of Cuban identity. Montero and Chaviano follow in the footsteps of other Latin American and Caribbean women writers, writing from and writing about the margins. As Debra Castillo explains when discussing Argentine writer Marta Traba's work on women and marginality, "... how well women perform this essential function of giving voice to the margin, both their own marginality and that of other marginalized groups" (57). She goes on to add: "For this reason, the women writers of Latin America are in some sense privileged in their accessibility to the peripheries of culture, licensing them not only to speak of issues relating to private spaces but also to speak to and between and as intermediary for other marginalized groups: implicitly, the disadvantaged social groups, the Indians, the [B]lacks" (58). In their novels, Montero and Chaviano re-inscribe various marginal groups within Cuban society, women, Blacks, and especially the Chinese, into the nation's narrative, to show the important role these groups have played in the formation of the island's culture.

### A Brief History of the Chinese in Cuba

The arrival of the Chinese in Cuba can be specifically traced to the 1840s. By the mid-eighteenth century, strict anti-slavery treaties were being enforced worldwide



and Cuban planters began to find it difficult to purchase African slaves to work on their plantations. Cuban planters, therefore, sought other ways to obtain cheap labor. In 1847, 600 Chinese workers, or *coolies*, arrived on the island as part of an experimental exchange between a Cuban smuggler and Chinese authorities. By 1853, the trade was made official and Chinese workers began arriving on the island in large numbers. By 1874, the year when these importations stopped, approximately 125,000 Chinese had arrived in Cuba. They were all but officially bound to servitude and the conditions they lived in were dismal (Corbitt 130). According to the historian Louis A. Perez Jr., Chinese laborers were contracted at a wage of approximately four pesos monthly on the basis of a twelve-hour day for a service period of eight years (53). No doubt, the life of the Chinese laborer was harsh. According to Perez, Chinese laborers had a mortality rate of fifty percent. They succumbed to death from overwork on the plantations, malnutrition, and tropical diseases, but according to Perez, suicide accounted for the largest cause of death, surpassing the number of suicides among Black slaves (55).

In 1877, the Treaty of Peking between the Chinese and Spanish governments provided for the free migration to Cuba of Chinese laborers with or without families and for their treatment on the island on equal terms with Cubans (Corbitt 130). In addition, Chinese immigrants, many of whom came from the United States and were known as “*chinos de California*,” entered Cuba for commercial purposes. Following the Spanish-American War, US influence limited the entry of Chinese into Cuba as was the case in the States (131). This changed following World War I when Chinese laborers were once again allowed entry (131).

Despite the difficulties they faced on the island, the Chinese arrivals were active participants in Cuban society. In fact, they played a vital role in the nineteenth-century wars of independence against Spain and the Cuban army included several Chinese Cubans, called *chinos mambíses*, such as Juan Han Lai, José Bu, and Sebastián Sian.<sup>[2]</sup> Later, during the twentieth century, Chinese businesses played an integral role in Cuba’s economy. Havana’s Chinatown, or “*Barrio Chino*,” was for many years the largest in Latin America, with thriving theaters, restaurants, grocery stores, and other small and medium-sized businesses.

### **Mayra Montero’s *Como un mensajero tuyo* (*The Messenger*)**

As already mentioned, the appearance of Chinese migrants is not new to Cuban literature. What is striking, however, is the increased number of literary works published in the last decade that feature the Chinese in Cuba. Mayra Montero’s



novel, *Como un mensajero tuyo*, is one contemporary work whose aim is to retell the story of Chinese immigration to Cuba and their lives there. The novel weaves the tale of Enriqueta Cheng and her mother, Aída Petirena Cheng. Montero bases her novel on an obscure historical event, the visit of Italian tenor Enrico Caruso to Cuba. In 1920, Caruso traveled to Cuba to play the part of Ramses in Verdi's opera *Aída*. According to legend, a bomb exploded during a performance in a Havana theater and the Italian tenor and others were forced to flee the scene. Although the exact cause of the bomb was never determined, some blamed local political groups, while others blamed the Italian "Mano negra" or "Black Hand" organization, who supposedly had ordered a hit on the singer. Newspaper and popular accounts report a Caruso running through the streets of Havana dressed in the costume of an Egyptian pharaoh. It is precisely at this point where Montero decides to add fiction to history, and in that way lends a voice to the marginal sectors of Cuban society. In her version of the story, Caruso meets and falls in love with a Cuban woman of mixed Chinese and mulatto extraction following the explosion. Curiously, the young woman is named Aída, like Verdi's heroine. Part of the novel's plot focuses on their torrid love affair that lasts only until his departure from the island to New York and Aída's attempts to save Enrico from imminent death. Enriqueta, the novel's other main character and one of its narrators, is the illegitimate daughter of that short-lived union. In an attempt to learn about her origins, Enriqueta asks her mother to narrate her life story so that she may write it down for posterity.

The novel, then, has two narratives, Aída's first person narrative of her life, in regular font, and Enriqueta's on her quest to uncover her family history, in italics. Through their life stories, these two women, mother and daughter, shed light on the various racial mixtures in Cuban culture, giving voice to the marginalized, and inserting them *and themselves* into the national narrative. According to Jean Franco in her well-known study on Mexican women writers *Plotting Women*, "Women have long recognized the imaginary nature of the master narrative. Without the power to change the story or enter into dialogue, they have resorted to subterfuge, digression, disguise or deathly interruption" (xxiii). In *Como un mensajero tuyo*, Montero rewrites an obscure historical event, Caruso's visit to Cuba, and changes the story so that the marginalized — women and non-European Cubans — have a space from which to speak. Through these once marginal voices, Montero calls attention to such groups as the Chinese in the formation of the national culture.

*Como un mensajero tuyo* is a novel full of intrigue and constant plot twists. As with many of Montero's works, there are frequent references to Afro-Cuban religious beliefs. Chinese culture, however, also plays a paramount role, especially the way in



which this culture intermeshes with African-based spiritual beliefs, especially Santería. These two distinct cultures, East Asian and West African, coexist through the female protagonists of the story: first through Aída, of European, African, and Chinese ancestry, and then through her daughter Enriqueta, also of mixed ancestry. Because Aída is the daughter of a mulatto woman and Chinese man, her spirituality takes root in three distinct traditions: Spanish Catholicism, Santería, and Chinese spiritual beliefs. All three are, in a sense, syncretic in origin. In the now classic *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues that the Caribbean is supersyncretic, in particular, in the ways in which religious imagery is adapted and re-imagined by the various ethnic groups, which have populated the islands. As Benítez-Rojo explains:

Certainly, in order to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely various elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed. This unforeseen journey tempts us because as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the supersyncretic manifestation that we're studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or in all these continents at once. When these points of departure are nonetheless reached, a new chaotic flight of signifiers will occur, and so on ad infinitum. (12)

The supersyncretic is not limited to European and African cultures, Chinese belief systems are in and of themselves syncretic. As James Miller explains, in the case of Chinese religion, it is impossible to separate religion and culture:

... the Chinese people have embraced a trinity of traditions with an even more complex pantheon of gods, ghosts and ancestors that vie for the spiritual allegiance of the living. Those three traditions — Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (also spelled Taoism) — have been the principal repository of the beliefs and practices that have shaped the evolution of Chinese religious and cultural history. (12)

In Montero's novel, spiritual beliefs of different origins are manifested in Aída's search for spiritual guidance and protection for Caruso and herself during their travels from Havana to other provinces. A product of African and Chinese cultures, Aída turns to her two protectors, her Black *Santero* godfather, José de Calzán Bangoché, and her Chinese father, Yuan Pei Fu, for help and guidance. The two men vie for Aída's allegiance, in much the same way that China's three "traditions" vie for allegiance from followers. Aída, and other characters in the novel, follow and respect several traditions at once and her two mentors, Calzán and Pei Fu, agree,



"[l]os santos son iguales en todas partes, son los mismos en China que en Guinea" ("the saints are the same everywhere, they're the same in China and Guinea"; 39; my translation). Indeed, Aída accepts the validity of both Santería and Chinese spiritual beliefs as seen with the appearance of San Fancón in her narrative. Aída first makes reference to San Fancón when describing her childhood. According to her story, Yuan Pei Fu, her father, arrives in Cuba in 1847, with the first group of Chinese laborers. A devotee of Cuan Cong, a deified Chinese warrior, the young Yuan Pei Fu brings the figure on the ship that takes him to Cuba. During the voyage, Yuan Pei Fu and the men who accompany him gather around the statue in the evenings, lighting incense and asking the saint for safe voyage to Cuba. Upon arrival in Regla, the people at the port gather around to see the newly arrived Chinese:

La gente, al principio, se reía: era la primera vez que veían esclavos chinos, encadenados ... con los ojos hundidos y los pies hinchados por el agua de mar. En medio de esos hombres había un niño, un chiquito de pelo largo que cargaba con una imagen que a los lucumíes de nación se les pareció a Changó.

At first, people laughed: it was the first time they had seen Chinese slaves, chained ... with their sunken eyes and their feet swollen due to the saltwater. In the middle of those men there was a child, a little boy with long hair that carried an image that the Lucumí nation thought looked like Changó. (39; my translation)

The mythical and syncretic figure of San Fancón can be traced to the Chinese Han period (220-280 AD) when a brotherhood was formed between three legendary ancestors/warrior/ philosophers, Lau Pei, Cuan Yu, and Chiong Fei. The three were later joined by a fourth member, Chiu Chi Long. It is Cuan Yu/Kuan Kong, however, who becomes crucial in the formation of the figure of San Fancón. San Fancón, the patron saint of Chinese Cubans, historically appears in 1900 with the establishment of the first Chinese clan on the island and would come to represent Chinese values, strongly related to Confucianism (Scherer 9-10). But in addition, he appears to be a combination of figures from several traditions coexisting on the island. Most important, however, San Fancón has his origins in the Chinese warrior Cuan Cong, but he also resembles Changó, the African God of War, and Santa Barbara, the Catholic martyr and saint. It should be stressed, though, that despite his Chinese roots, San Fancón was and is only venerated among Cubans, he is not known in China or in Chinese overseas communities (Scherer 10).



**Daína Chaviano's *La isla de los amores infinitos***

In *La isla de los amores infinitos*, Daína Chaviano traces Cuba's history from the nineteenth century to post-1959. The novel has been translated into twenty-one languages, including Mandarin Chinese, and with its publication in Taiwan, Chaviano becomes the first Cuban author published in that Asian nation.<sup>[3]</sup> *La isla de los amores infinitos* intertwines several stories at once, and contains innumerable references to Cuban popular culture, including music and figures from the entertainment world, such as the cabaret singer Rita Montaner. Narrated by an omniscient third person narrator, the novel centers on a young and lonely Cuban woman, Cecilia, who has recently arrived in Miami from Havana. During a visit to a local nightclub with two friends, she meets Amalia, an elderly woman who begins to tell her the story of three different families. With each return visit to the nightclub, Cecilia learns about African slaves brought by force to Cuba, immigrants from Cuenca, Spain, and a Chinese family from Canton. At first, Cecilia does not realize that the stories are interrelated and that Amalia is, in fact, telling her the story of her own family (a mix of African and Spanish) and that of her late husband, Pablo Li, the son of Chinese immigrants. As with all of Chaviano's work, the fantastic is intertwined with the historical. By the end of the novel, readers realize that the elderly woman is in fact dead, and the reason for her ghostly visits to the nightclub is to transmit her family's story. She narrates the tales to the young protagonist, Cecilia, who unknowingly has the ability to see the dead, and who knows almost nothing about Cuba's past, more specifically, about Chinese immigration to the island.

Although the novel intertwines Cuba's African, Spanish, and Chinese origins, there is no doubt that the novel places special emphasis on Chinese influence in Cuban society. As with Montero's novel, *La isla de los amores infinitos* explores Chinese spiritual and religious beliefs and the intermeshing of these with others on the island to create a distinct Cuban culture. In addition to spiritual references, the novel points to popular Cuban expressions that refer to the Chinese. These expressions, such as "Ponerséla a alguien en China," which roughly translates as "to put someone in China," or in other words, to make something difficult, appear at the beginning of each section with an explanation aimed at the non-Cuban reader. Although not crucial for the advancement of the plot, these expressions highlight the importance of the Chinese, typically considered a marginal group within society, in the development of Cuban popular culture.



## Chinese Religious Imagery

Perhaps where this novel most emphasizes Chinese influence on Cuban culture is in its representation of Chinese spirituality. *La isla de los amores infinitos*, like Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo*, includes numerous references to Chinese religious imagery. San Fancón, the syncretic Chinese warrior, is mentioned as are the I-Ching and its Cuban version, "la Charada China." But most relevant is the inclusion of Kuan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion or the Bodhisattva of mercy in the narrative.

Kuan-yin, like the Cuban Chinese San Fancón, is herself a syncretic figure. Kuan-yin (perceiver of sounds), or Kuan-shih-yin (perceiver of the world's sounds) is the Chinese name for Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, worshipped throughout the Buddhist world (Yü 1). According to the scholar Chün-fang Yü:

Avalokiteśvara has never been worshipped as a goddess in India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, or Southeast Asia. Nor indeed was Kuan-yin perceived to be feminine by the Chinese at first, for many paintings from Tun-huang dating to the tenth century clearly show him with moustaches. The sexual transformation from the masculine Avalokiteśvara to the feminine Kuan-yin seems to be a unique Chinese phenomenon that deservedly has fascinated many scholars.  
(2)

In her study on the Bodhisattva, Fang-Yu goes on to explain that Kuan-yin, did not become associated with royalty, as occurred with the figure of Avalokiteśvara in other areas of Asia but instead developed into a universal savior who "responds to anyone's cry for help regardless of class, gender or even moral qualifications" (5). In Chaviano's novel, Kuan-yin is the goddess to whom the character Kui-Fa specifically prays for the return of her husband Síu Mend while in China, and to whom she continues to pray once she has immigrated to Cuba with her family.

References to Kuan-yin appear several times in the narrative as do other female goddesses. Indeed, the novel makes a correlation between Kuan-yin, goddess of mercy, and Ochún, Yoruba goddess of love. At one point, this novel, like Montero's, suggests that religious beliefs are by nature syncretic. After describing a Chinese ritual the narrator contends:

Ese era el lenguaje que hablaban y entendían los dioses; la miel dulce y las flores olorosas, el humo del incienso y las ropas de colores alegres que los humanos les ofrecían cada año.





That was the language the gods spoke and understood; the sweet smells of honey and fragrant flowers, the smoke from incense and the colorful, vibrant clothing women offered them each year. (Chaviano 91; my translation)

In the novel, Kuan-yin and Ochún appear as protectors of the women who are devoted to them. Chaviano, however, does not exclude Cuba's European connection to the exclusivity of African or Asian beliefs. But rather than turn to Christianity or Roman Catholic figures, the novel turns to Celtic Pagan beliefs and Greek mythology. As with Chaviano's 1998 novel *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, this novel also contains elements of Spiritism. According to Marguerite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert:

In the Caribbean, the creolization process led to the creation of a distinctly Cuban and Puerto Rican varieties of Spiritism — *Espiritismo* — and, in the diaspora to the United States, *Santerismo*. A Creole spiritual healing practice with roots in the United States, Europe, Africa, and the indigenous Taíno Caribbean, *Espiritismo* amplified and transformed European Spiritism in its travels back and forth from the Old World to the New. (171)

As occurs with the female protagonists' connection with and devotion to goddess figures, *La isla de los amores infinitos* also stresses the powers that women themselves possess. Therefore, despite their ethnic background (Asian, African, or European or a mixture of the three), the women in Chaviano's novel possess clairvoyant abilities. Medium abilities are at the core of *Espiritismo* and as Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert argue in their study, women in general are more actively involved in this spiritual practice (204). According to the scholars, women subscribe to the practice, "... undoubtedly due to the spiritual possibilities it affords them, that they cannot find in mainstream religions. The spirit hierarchy is egalitarian; spiritual categories are not linked to age, race, class, or sex, and ascending in the spiritual pyramid is open to all" (209). In Chaviano's novel, the capacity to heal and the ability to see and speak to the dead are transmitted down from woman to woman, from generation to generation. Women hold their family's history, and by extension the nation's, and through Amalia's narration of her family history, another woman, Cecilia, is able to carry on the story of Cuba's multiple transculturations. *La isla de los amores infinitos*, thus, tells the story of Cuba's different ethnic groups through the voice of women. As the feminist scholar Trinh Minh-ha argues in her now classic *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*:

The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the



process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings to life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. (121)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in both *Como un mensajero tuyo* and *La isla de los amores infinitos* family and national histories are passed on from woman to woman through time. The various female protagonists in both novels are products of Cuba's continuous mestizaje; they are the guardians of the family, and by extension, the nation's stories. Through their telling and retelling, they lend voices to those who precede them, re-inscribing Cuba's marginal groups, like the Chinese, into its history, thus affirming the syncretic nature of Cuban culture and identity, which Fernando Ortiz once labeled "the Cuban ajiaco."

## Notes

[1] See Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting* (2003)

[2] See José Baltar Rodríguez, "Los chinos en la nación cubana," in *Revolución y cultura*, no 7, Havana, July 1988. Also, Kathleen López, "One Brings Another: Formation of Chinese Communities in Cuba," in *The Chinese in the Caribbean*, ed. Andrew Wilson, Princeton: Marcus Wiener, 93-127.

[3] For more on this novel's success in foreign markets, see the author's webpage [www.dainachaviano.com](http://www.dainachaviano.com).

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