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“A Whole New Race”: Chinese Cubans and Hybrid Identities in Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*

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More so than its predecessors *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*, Cristina García's 2003 novel *Monkey Hunting* establishes her sense of Cubanness within the broader context of the Caribbean experience. More importantly, it seeks to create an inclusive and diverse sense of what it means to be Cuban that destabilizes the very notion of racial identification, which fails to account for the dynamic nature of identity and the importance of adopted cultural and religious traditions. What *Monkey Hunting* offers as an alternative is a process of identification through self-chosen cultural and religious hybridities that provides a source of agency in a time and place fraught with various forms of brutal and racialized socio-political oppression.

García, a Cuban-born novelist who has spent all but her first two years of life in the United States, addresses issues of race and identity in her previous novels, but does so in a way that makes use of themes and historical events closer to her own experience. These narratives take on Castro's revolution, the condition of exile, and family politics and division, and are equally concerned with Cuba as they are with Cuban-American culture in the United States. *Monkey Hunting* surprised critics with its broader concerns and unusual subject matter. When asked during an interview in *L.A. Weekly* what made her choose to write about the legacy of a Chinese man in Cuba, García answered:

Monkey Hunting probably came from my first visit to a Chinese-Cuban restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, circa 1965. "You mean I get to order the black beans and the pork fried rice?" That blew my mind. Later, I got to thinking more seriously about compounded identities. My own daughter, for example, is part Cuban, Japanese and Russian Jew, with a little Guatemalan thrown in on my paternal grandmother's side. Traditional notions of identity don't work for her. I don't think they work for a lot of people anymore. I wanted to explore this. (Huneven 38)

This response calls attention to García's preoccupation with hybridity, which is evident throughout the text's various narrative threads. Spanning over 150 years, four generations, and at least three continents, the novel concerns itself with issues of slavery, indentured servitude, colonization, the sugar plantation, and Cuba's complex racial and political history, and presents readers with a Cuban identity that is inclusive of the Asian and African presences on the island. This paper argues that through the narrative of Chen Pan and his family, García explores the ways in which self-chosen hybridities allow for the inclusion of both Chinese and African cultures in Cuban identity and function against patriarchal Spanish colonial paradigms that tend to restrict identification along the lines of race and gender. Privileging cultural and religious hybridities over fixed racial identifications, García celebrates her characters' ability to create fluid and dynamic identities, even if she is at moments ambiguous about the role of racial politics in their choices. Moreover, this preoccupation allows the novel to participate in Caribbean discourses surrounding race since, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo points out, "the Caribbean area ... [is the] most extensive and intensive racial confluence registered by human histories" (199), and

Cuba is no exception. Reading the novel as distinctly Caribbean, while also acknowledging it as a product of the Cuban-American exile community, requires that due attention be paid to issues of race and hybridity.

The potential of this self-definition is perhaps most emphatically realized by Chen Pan's wife, Lucretia. Chen Pan first learns of Lucretia through an advertisement for her sale in the local newspaper; before the reader even meets her, she has already been reduced to a marketable object. The advertisement reads, "*A negress (with her first child) young and robust, birthed six weeks ago, good and abundant milk, very regular cook, basic principles of sewing, excellent handservant, particular skills, healthy and without vices*" (García 60). Her physical characteristics are coarsely linked to her subordinated position as female slave, which is inextricable from her race. Her value is determined by these characteristics in their proof not only of her ability to perform physical activities, but also of her uniquely female capability of producing milk. These traits ostensibly make her a desirable object to possess and a good investment. When Chen Pan visits Don Joaquín in response to the advertisement, the latter "shoved the girl forward and crudely pointed out her attributes," saying, "You can cancel the milkman with this heifer in your house" (García 67). Lucretia's body, black and female, relegates her to an inferior position given the social and political situation in Cuba at the time; she is likened to a beast whose worth is determined by what it produces. It is only by escaping this racialized and gendered definition that Lucretia is later able to adopt a more liberating self-definition that transcends the limitations of race and gender.

In the process of trying to forget the trauma surrounding her genealogy, she pieces together aspects of various cultures and religions in order to create a space in which to thrive as an individual. She is denied any claim to her white ancestry; the one time she dared to call her rapist/father "Papá" he responded by choking her until she lost consciousness (García 34). She had instead turned to her mother's African sayings for solace, but after her mother's death she loses access to that heritage as well. Yet after years of marriage to her Chinese husband, Lucretia speaks *chino-chuchero*, a language that is neither Spanish nor Chinese, as well as the African phrases her mother taught her. She is at home in Chinatown, where she eats tamales with smoked duck and her favorite Chinese dessert (137). Her marriage to Chen Pan allows her access to another culture, and her adoption of the Cuban-Chinese way of life provides for healing through self-definition. Her active construction of identity provides an opportunity to assert her agency: "Sometimes Lucretia questioned the origin of her birth, but she didn't question who she'd become. Her name was Lucretia Chen. She was thirty-six years old and the wife of Chen Pan, mother of his children. She was Chinese in her liver, Chinese in her heart" (138). Moreover, Lucretia chooses to be buried in the Chinese cemetery when she dies, and her last meal is a Chinese dish. It is through these choices—particularly her marriage to Chen Pan—that Lucretia is able to empower herself after having suffered various forms of subjection and abuse as a woman in slavery.

Lucretia also adopts hybrid religious beliefs in her active self-definition. Her mother, who introduces her to African traditions, "had been devoted to Yemayá, goddess of the seas. She used to dress Lucretia in blue and white and together they'd take offerings to the beach on Sundays, coconut balls or fried pork rinds when she could make them" (127). Lucretia attributes her survival at the hands of Don Joaquín to the protection offered by the Yoruba goddess. Later in life, Lucretia seems equally accepting of Buddhism and Catholicism, leaving offerings for the shrine her husband keeps in the apartment and enjoying what she sees as the best features of several religions:

In her opinion it was better to mix a little of this and that, like when she prepared an *ajiaco* stew. She lit a candle here, made an offering there, said prayers to the gods of heaven and the ones here on earth. She didn't believe in just one thing. Why would she eat only ham croquets? Or enjoy the scent of roses alone? Lucretia liked to go to Church on Easter to admire the *flores de pascuas*, but did she need to go every Sunday? (129)

By rejecting exclusive participation in any particular religious institution, Lucretia avoids further submission to patriarchal, colonial power. When she leaves Don Joaquín's house and the nuns wave goodbye, Lucretia escapes a religious institution that had been willing to cover up her father's shameful indiscretions. Later on, Lucretia brazenly asks "From what?" when Protestant missionaries attempt to convince her to convert (128). These institutions represent colonial power under the guise of salvation, and Lucretia understands that submitting to any one form of worship is akin to giving up the freedom she worked so hard to obtain.

In a similar way, Chen Pan's adoption of cultural hybridity is also a part of the process by which he seeks freedom from his indentured servitude and the economic constraints that trapped him on the island. As soon as he decides to stay in Cuba after having escaped the plantation, Chen Pan "cut off his queue and stopped dreaming of returning to his village" (García 62). When he later arrives in the Cuban capital after working his way there from the woods, "the sight of Havana, with its seductive curve of coast, stirred [something] in him ... [F]rom the moment he arrived, he knew it was where he belonged" (62). Chen Pan's decision to remove his queue is linked symbolically with his realization that he belongs in Cuba. Just as the Chinese presence in Cuba redefined its racial and cultural fabric, so did these stirrings in Chen Pan redefine his personal identity. He severs his claim to a purely Chinese self by asserting his place in another land and necessitates a negotiation of cultures that he will control.

Moreover, Chen Pan allows himself to connect with African Cubans, perhaps in part because of the kinship he feels after having cut sugarcane side-by-side slaves on La Amada plantation. Lisa Yun and Ricardo René Laremont claim that:

the history of the Chinese coolies stands out much unlike its counterparts ... because they constitute a unique history of coolies being injected (beginning in

1847) into foreign terrain *during* a time when the system of slavery was in full force (slavery did not expire until 1886 in Cuba, *over forty years after* the arrival of Chinese coolies in Cuba) ... The Chinese coolie in Cuba functioned within a predominantly black “context,” constituting a minority labor group working in close proximity among African people. (101)

These historical facts remind us that the Chinese laborers who worked on Cuban plantations were aware of the brutalities experienced in slavery, and in many cases experienced that brutality themselves. While Chen Pan’s Chinese friends ridicule him for being friendly towards Africans on the island, he admires the slaves and laments their oppressed condition; in fact, Chen Pan relates to their racial otherness and sympathizes with their plight. Years after escaping the plantation, upon observing a chain-gang of slaves on the streets of Havana, he touches the knife in his pocket and considers their overseer: “[h]is day would come, maybe sooner than the criollos feared” (García 61).

Unlike the African slaves, however, Chen Pan participates in white Cuban society after freeing himself from indentured servitude. Although he is unable and unwilling to fully assimilate, he does choose to adopt the particular criollo characteristics that facilitate his success as a merchant in Havana:

A *chino* like Chen Pan in a white linen suit and a Panama hat was something of a spectacle, like a talking monkey or a sheep in evening dress. Many people glared at him before turning their heads. The Spaniards were the worst, often pelting the Chinese with stones. Chen Pan, though, was too well dressed for them to menace. (He made a point of dressing well.) (García 65)

The white Cubans are less suspicious of Chen Pan because he dresses like them, mitigating his physical difference. Although he is not free from discrimination, it is his capacity to gain the trust of a Spanish Count, having saved him from a “bandit’s assault,” that secures for Chen Pan not only protection for life but also a Letter of Domicile; this document “guarantee[s] his freedom” and contributes to his ability to open his shop (64). Chen Pan’s cultural hybridity is opportunistic: by participating in both the Chinese and criollo communities, he not only guarantees his financial success, his stated goal when he leaves China in the first place, but also secures the means with which to create a family legacy. Chen Pan chooses the traits from different cultures that will allow for a self-definition consistent with his personal ambitions. Although he adopts enough criollo characteristics to become a successful merchant, he does not accept any change that might threaten his autonomy. This resistance is best exemplified by his reaction to “the Protestant missionaries” who “besieged him constantly with the decrees of their god, Jesus Christ” (69). Like Lucretia, Chen Pan remains suspicious of anything that requires submission to one system of belief. He refuses to submit to the colonial efforts to convert him and reasserts his agency through this process of self-definition. He refuses to abandon certain Chinese elements in his life, maintaining close friendships with other Chinese men in his

community and keeping an altar to Buddha in his home. Moreover, through his Chinese-African-Spanish son Lorenzo, who shows interest in treating physical ailments with Chinese medicine from a young age, Chen Pan ensures that future generations will remain tied to their Chinese heritage. The boy is trained in Chinese medicine and becomes one of the best-known doctors in Havana, and in this manner continues to carry out Chinese contributions to Cuban culture.

The hybridities that I am addressing might better be understood through the lens of Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz's use of the term *transculturation*, which "express[es] the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place [there]" (98). He writes:

I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition, the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. (102)

This definition is particularly useful when we consider Domingo Chen's musings about his great-grandfather Chen Pan's legacy: "His great-grandfather had left China more than a hundred years ago, penniless and alone. Then he'd fallen in love with a slave girl and created a whole new race—brown children with Chinese eyes who spoke Spanish and a smattering of Abakuá" (García 209). With its attention to the implications of such mixing for multiple generations, *Monkey Hunting* accurately depicts the phenomenon that Ortiz calls neoculturation. Furthermore, Ortiz's reminder that culture is acquired emphasizes that unlike race, cultural identities can be chosen or rejected by the individual, as well as passed on from one generation to the next (although not genetically, or through the body). For both Chen Pan and his wife, Lucretia, race is bound inextricably with the oppressive systems that govern the island: colonization, slavery, and indentured servitude. Definition by race, as the novel would have it, shapes yet another facet of this oppression. Instead, by allowing these characters the agency to choose the features that determine their identities among Cuba's many different cultures, they are permitted a chance to self-define through hybridity. These self-chosen hybrid identities come to characterize each of them far more accurately than a racial definition ever could.

Towards the end of his narrative, however, Chen Pan admits that "[a]fter so many years in Cuba, Chen Pan had forgotten much of his Chinese. He mixed his talk with words from here and words from there until he spoke no true language at all ... Still, it was easier for him to be Cuban than to try to become Chinese again" (García 245). In the act of choosing the elements that come to make up his hybrid cultural identity, Chen Pan illustrates the process of deculturation that is inherent in the process of transculturation. This loss becomes part of García's project to privilege cultural hybridity over definition by race and construct a notion of

Cubanness that necessitates this type of hybridity. For Chen Pan, being Cuban positively determines his identity in relation to the loss of his Chinese language and identity.

Although García creates a space in the Cuban narrative for Chinese and African Cubans, her racial politics are at times ambiguous and her use of hybridity somewhat problematic. Consider Lucretia's observations of Chen Pan:

It made her laugh to remember how she'd mistrusted Chen Pan at first. Tall *chino* all groomed and sweet-smelling. Fingernails clean. No pigtail. Nothing like the other Chinese she'd seen—men with baskets of fruits and vegetables on poles, speaking Spanish like they were swallowing water. Men who sat in doorways, wearing pajamas and smoking long wooden pipes. Except for his eyes and his accent, Chen Pan had looked like any other wealthy criollo in the street. (García 124)

What Lucretia finds attractive about Chen Pan depends on how different he is from his fellow countrymen. She implies that the Chinese she has come into contact with are unclean and suspicious, and enjoys Chen Pan because he has left their ways behind. She even calls attention to Chen Pan's missing queue, an important symbol of male Chinese identity, and considers this absence a positive quality. García does offer us an alternative to this negative Chinese stereotype in Chen Pan, the only purely Chinese man in Cuba on which the novel focuses. However, he admittedly is not representative of his countrymen, on various occasions reminding us that he has a different lifestyle than his many Chinese friends and that they do not understand his relationship with Lucretia or the cultural negotiations he has made. Instead Chen Pan becomes a cultural hybrid, mimicking the criollo in order to succeed at business, and this identity seems to supercede his racial identity. How are we to take what García means to say about race and how it factors into Cubanness? While she takes on a project that intends to explore a racial minority that is underrepresented in contemporary Cuban-American fiction, the manner in which she approaches Chen Pan's Chineseness is problematic because he is not purely Chinese in his cultural choices.

García's representation of Cuba's African minority is also problematic. While the novel certainly articulates sympathy for victims of racial discrimination, it does not lead readers to any conclusion regarding the Africans's place in its definition of Cubanness. Domingo, on account of his looking different from other American soldiers in Vietnam:

was permitted into the officers' club because he worked for General Bishop, but he wasn't welcomed there. His skin was too dark, his features not immediately identifiable as one of them. The bartender refused to make him a *mojito* ... Domingo got a warm beer instead. In the hospital, wounded and with a couple of medals to his name, he hadn't been treated right either ... The problem wasn't exclusive to the U.S. Army. Four years ago, he'd been arrested by a policeman in

Guantánamo for practicing “negritude”—all because he’d let his hair grow into an Afro. *Por favor*. (209)

The injustices Domingo experiences in the U.S. Army are especially bitter considering the risk to his life that he undertakes for his new country, only to be treated as an inferior. But this passage also reveals the climate of race relations in the post-Revolutionary Cuba of Domingo’s upbringing, where his own mother disapproves of her son’s attraction to rhythm and drumming because she associates them with “blacks who didn’t work and drink too much” (57). However, there are no “blacks” in the text to counter these stereotypes; Domingo is racially mixed and Lucretia is also the product of her African mother’s rape by a white criollo. The only purely racial Africans in the novel are depicted in slavery, with little to identify them outside of this subjugated and dehumanized position. While certain African characteristics make their way into the text in the form of religion and music as a part of the self-chosen hybrid identities characters like Lucretia and Domingo attempt to adopt, García’s inclusion of the African in what defines Cubanness seems somewhat limited. Her use of hybridity proves somewhat problematic because in celebrating mixed identities over pure ones the novel tends towards treating Chinese and African culture in a way that might reinforce negative stereotypes. Lucretia’s and Chen Pan’s exceptionalism raises interesting questions about the novel’s racial politics even while it allows them to subvert racial hierarchies that are well-established both on the island and in the region.

Although the manner in which the novel approaches hybridity and syncretism allows it to participate in contemporary Caribbean discourse, perhaps we can better understand *Monkey Hunting*’s unwillingness to take a definitive stance on race by considering the community from which it emerges. Isabel Alvarez Borland reminds us that García’s first two novels, published in the 1990’s, were part of a “boom” in “literature of the Cuban-American children of the first exile generation” (51). Moreover, these writers must deal with a frustrating obstacle, “the lack of historical truth” (Alvarez Borland 51). In other words, many of these writers, termed *Cuban-American ethnic writers* by Alvarez Borland, “are the group of younger writers who came from Cuba as infants or who were born in the United States to parents of the first exile generation” (8). This group, which includes García, is twice removed from the realities of race relations in Cuba: first, by exile, a situation fraught with social and psychological dilemmas, and second, by the Western version of colonial and postcolonial history, which often ignores or undermines the lived realities of the oppressed. From this twice-removed position, Alvarez Borland says, these writers are “introspective, leading them to examine their own history and culture” (51), but the scope of their historical projects is inevitably limited. García herself admits to knowing very little about the Chinese presence in Cuba before starting her research for *Monkey Hunting*. This removal from the racial minorities that are very much a part of Cuba’s history, which is an inevitable consequence of Cuban-American exile, contributes to the novel’s evasion of authoritative racial claims. It should account for *Monkey Hunting*’s problematic treatment of these individual races and privileging of hybridity in culture and religion.

Nevertheless, although she claims to have been plagued by “self-inflicted charges of ‘Fraud!’ every working day of [*Monkey Hunting*]” (Huneven 39), García does successfully claim a space for Chinese culture within her construction of Cuban identity and also directly addresses the legacy of both indentured servitude and African slavery on the island. She reminds her readers that Cuban history and identity—as in other Caribbean nations—has been determined by the presence and struggles of racial minorities as well as by the island’s European colonial legacy. Therefore, this novel takes on challenges that *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* do not, especially in how it deals with a much earlier period of Cuban history and necessarily involves racial and cultural issues that were not as prominent in the earlier novels. As such, it broadens the scope of scholarship on and by exiled Cuban-American writers and substantiates García’s space in the Caribbean literary canon.

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