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## Neutral Aliens: A Nineteenth-Century Tradition of Chinese Representation in Twentieth-Century Caribbean Fiction

Anne-Marie Lee Loy  
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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In June 2008, a number of articles appeared in Turks and Caicos' newspapers that depicted Chinese laborers as unwanted aliens who threatened the interests of local citizens. The *Turks and Caicos Free Press* argued that reliance on Chinese labor meant, "no room for a local skilled or unskilled worker to compete for the job," while the *Turks and Caicos Weekly* was even more specific in making a distinction between the two locals and the Chinese when it reported that: "We now have a situation where *our own people* are standing up, begging and picketing for work" (Handy n.p.). Depicting the Chinese as aliens in the Caribbean, as occurs in these articles, is neither new nor shocking. Such imagery has been employed since the earliest arrivals of Chinese to British West Indian colonies in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> However, the negative associations of Chinese alienation inherent in the description of the Chinese above, that is, the representation of the Chinese as being not only outsiders but outsiders to concerns and needs of locally born Caribbean people, does not necessarily reflect the earliest imaginings of Chinese identity within the Caribbean. Instead, in the nineteenth century, Chinese alienation was initially conceived in much more neutral and positive terms. As articulated in colonial discourse, the idea of Chinese neutrality was specifically understood to be what made the Chinese such a positive addition to the colonies. In the twentieth century, however, the association between Chinese alienation and neutrality is made less frequently, replaced instead with the more common image of the Chinese as a hostile "Other," particularly in reference to economic relationships. Nevertheless, less hostile images of Chinese alienation have not entirely disappeared. Indeed, in Robert Standish's *Mr. On Loong*, V.S. Naipaul's *Guerillas*, and Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, the concept of the Chinese as an essentially neutral, rather than threatening, presence is essential to understanding the structure of the novels. True, unlike nineteenth-century colonial texts, the novels do not necessarily portray this alienation as a "good thing;" however, the idea of the Chinese as isolated and distinct from other Caribbean peoples becomes useful as a trope for articulating the authors' concerns just as the image of the Chinese as neutral outsiders was in colonial discourse. In the process, these novels also strikingly reveal the long-term legacy of colonial discourse on the imaginative landscapes of the Caribbean.

### **The Neutral Good Alien in Nineteenth-Century West Indian Imagination**

In 1885, a Canadian Royal Commission investigating Chinese immigration commented:

The Chinaman seems to be the same everywhere, and the advocates of his advent or his restriction or exclusion use the very same words whether they live in Melbourne, or London. (Chapleau and Gray cxxviii)

In this, the Commission was ironically correct. The popular nineteenth-century stereotypes of "John Chinaman" as sinister, crafty, dirty, diseased, inscrutable, economically threatening, and, of course, strangely inassimilable were particularly widespread in the West, reaching locations as diverse as the United States, Australia, and the Caribbean, with the United States having a

particularly influential role in perpetrating the negative stereotypes of the Chinese.<sup>2</sup> Asian American scholars argue that in the United States such stereotypes reflect deeply embedded insecurities and anxieties surrounding the articulation of an American national narrative and corresponding national identity, as well as the pressures of the competitive labor markets at the turn of the century. For example, Lisa Lowe argues that, since “[i]n the last century and a half, the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant* legally, economically and culturally,” there emerged “the necessity of endlessly fixing and repeating stereotypes such as the threatening ‘yellow peril’” (“International within the National” 7; “Power of Culture” 36). Certainly, in places such as the United States and Australia, where Chinese migrants were understood to be in direct labor competition with working class Whites, an association between the Chinese as aliens and negative depictions of the migrants bears true. For example, when the Chinese emerged as viable business competition in the 1870s California cigar-making industry, it was soon claimed that Chinese cigars were passed through, “Mongolian leprous hands” and “sealed with black spit” (Brown and Philips 71), while Chinese direct competition in the domestic service sector led to the following popular description of the sexually deviant Chinese house servant:

[A Chinese servant] can do unimaginable things. Grown familiar, the toilets of China are suggested. The manners of the harem are introduced. The lady is taught all the luxuries of the East. Thus the luxury and debauchery of the Orient are brought into the houses of the rich. (qtd. in Gardner 80)

Clearly, where the Chinese were perceived as threatening the ambitions and positions of those deemed to belong in the nation, as in the United States, their alienation was articulated largely in terms of negative “Otherness.” In the British West Indies, however, the economic and political context in which nineteenth-century images of the Chinese were created and disseminated was significantly different from that of the United States.

Chinese immigration to the former British West Indian colonies is a phenomenon that is intrinsically rooted in the desire for the maintenance and extension of colonial power and control. The Chinese were introduced into these regions not merely to serve as plantation labor, but to also diffuse potential slave rebellions and uprisings — essentially, to become a neutralizing buffer zone between slaves and planters within the hierarchical structure of colonial society. Indeed, when first considering possible Chinese indentured labor to their West Indian colonies, the Colonial Office made this ambition clear:

The events which have recently happened in St. Domingo [i.e., Haiti] ... render it indispensable that every practicable measure of precaution should be adopted to guard the British possessions in the West Indies as well against any future indisposition of power so constituted as against the danger of a spirit of insurrection amongst the Negroes.

It is conceived that no measure would so effectively tend to provide a security against the danger, as that of introducing a free race of cultivators [i.e., Chinese indentured laborers] into our islands who from habits and feelings would be kept distinct from the Negroes and who from interests would be inseparably attached to European proprietors ... (Hislop CO 295/14)

Inherent in this construction of the Chinese as a social and political middleman class in colonial discourse was the representation of the Chinese migrants as a fundamentally alien people in the West Indies; that is, as “distinct from” the Negroes, and “attached to,” but not a part of, the European planter class. Alienation in this sense, however, did not necessarily refer to antagonism either to Black or White West Indians; rather, it suggested a position of neutrality or “outsidership” in relation to both groups. Indeed, specifically represented as being neutrally disposed to the political demands and interests of Black West Indians, and posing no real economic competition or social threat to the planter class — after all, they were recruited by the government to shore up the plantations and the social structures inherent in the plantation system — the notion of Chinese alienation reassured White colonials that their positions of power and privilege would remain secure. Thus, in many ways, the imaginative landscapes of nineteenth-century West Indian colonies as expressed in colonial texts were predisposed to depict the Chinese as positive additions to the populace; namely, as “superior to any immigrants” and “unquestionably, the fittest sort of immigrants for the colony” (Parliamentary Papers, vol. XXVII; *Royal Gazette* 19 January 1854).

The positive assessment of the Chinese in colonial texts was directly linked to their supposed political neutrality. Specifically, the Chinese were deemed “settlers of the best kind” and a “good addition” to the West Indies when they were perceived as having settled “down quietly into their proper places” as estate workers (*Royal Gazette* 12 June 1860; *Royal Gazette* 12 May 1860). The significance of this nineteenth-century connection between Chinese neutrality and alienation is perhaps never more clear than in what is probably the first fictional depiction of a Chinese character in the West Indies, Chin-a-foo, in Edward Jenkins’ 1877 novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo*. Although Jenkins’ novel is set in then British Guiana, Chin-a-foo conforms to popular negative nineteenth-century stereotypes of the Chinese elsewhere: he is dirty, unreadable, unknowable, and tricky, and also presents a moral and physical danger to the rest of the community. The striking dissimilarity between this fictional character and other nineteenth-century West Indian colonial texts that depict the Chinese positively emphasizes the colonial desire that the Chinese migrants support the colonial system by remaining an alienated neutral presence in the West Indies.

Jenkins’ novel was a direct response to a Royal Commission that had been called to investigate the conditions of indentured laborers in the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, an English barrister and author, had been sent to advocate on behalf of the indentured laborers during the Commission by the Aborigines Protection Society and the Anti-Slavery Society. Nevertheless, Jenkins was never totally “on side” with those he had been sent to represent. Indeed, one

participant in the Commission complained that, during his time in British Guiana, Jenkins “appeared to have been somewhat biased towards [the planters’] side of the question at issue,” and “was not at first by any means enthusiastic for the cause which he had come to advocate” (Des Voeux 134 & 135). In reality, however, Jenkins was simply on the side of “British honour and British fame,” that is, committed to retaining and disseminating ideas about British civilization as the apex of a global racial and cultural hierarchy, a position that gave them both the right and the responsibility to rule others (Jenkins 29). His novel was not, therefore, an attempt to radically overhaul or subvert the indentured labor system, but rather to insist on the superiority of British culture and civilization by warning of the catastrophic dangers that awaited colonial society if the British shirked their “divinely appointed” moral responsibilities. The character of Chin-a-foo reinforced this idea and, in the process, reveals the connection between Chinese neutrality and positive representation in nineteenth-century texts.

Unlike most nineteenth-century Chinese migrants to the West Indies, Chin-a-foo is not an indentured laborer. Instead, he runs a gambling and opium den on the fringes of the sugar estate. In doing so, he not only literally and metaphorically abandons the place afforded to him within colonial discourse, but also poses a very real threat to the plantation system. After all, opium use made indentured laborers physically unable to do their work and gambling caused serious problems in terms of worker morale. It is no accident then that Achattu, formerly one of the best workers on the estate, meets his demise in Chin-a-foo’s establishment, first physically, through his addictions, and then emotionally through his gambling losses, both of which contribute to his sudden death. Similarly, Chin-a-foo is directly implicated in the disruptions that rock the estate in the first section of the novel. It is he who encourages the indentured laborers not to cooperate in the investigation into Achattu’s death and eventually stabs the hero Craig, which leads to the ensuing *melée* on the estate. Significantly, it is during this riot that the cry, “take him from them,” is made in reference to Craig; this suggests not only the violence of the laborers, and more particularly, the Chinese, but also an antagonistic political division between “us” and “them,” the laborers and the estate management (113). Represented as no longer being an alienated community since they take a side against estate management, the negative representation of the Chinese, and particularly Chin-a-foo, is heavily invested in their lack of political neutrality; that is, their perceived contribution to the political tensions in the society. Indeed, in some ways, Chin-a-foo can be read as the precursor to more negative images of the Chinese in the Caribbean such as those utilized in the Turks and Caicos’ newspaper articles. At the same time, by setting Chin-a-foo’s ugly depiction against the more positive representations of the Chinese in other colonial texts, it is evident that Chin-a-foo’s characteristics re-inforce the importance of perceived Chinese neutrality to the colonial imagination. The three twentieth-century novels under study in this paper do not carry on the tradition of positioning the Chinese as a problematic community in the Caribbean as is suggested in Jenkins’ novel. Instead, they draw on the legacy of colonial images of Chinese alienation that Chin-a-foo disrupts; namely, nineteenth-century representations of the Chinese as simply outsiders to everyday Caribbean issues and concerns.

### John On Loong, The Perfect Neutral

Robert Standish's 1946 novel, *Mr. On Loong* is steeped in pulp fiction tropes — mulatto seductresses, inexplicable supernatural events, a stolen child, and romanticized death scenes — all set on the fictional and steamily tropical Newcastle Island. Despite the melodramatic tone of the text, however, Standish attempts to address deeper issues; most importantly, to understand the causes and implications of racial prejudice in the West Indies and the connection between behavior and race. The novel's title character, John On Loong, is the only Chinese individual on the island and as such, is positioned as an outsider to the traditionally antagonistic binarism of Black-White relations in the West Indies and the political and racial prejudices that support this division. Standish makes John's isolation even more complete by distancing John from any Chinese community. Not only do John's parents die while he is still a child, the time he spends living and working amongst Chinese Trinidadians is particularly brief. The extreme condition of alienation within which Standish casts John is no mere dramatic device, however. Instead, it is what allows John to become the touchstone against which Standish clarifies ideas about race that are addressed in the novel.

As the only Chinese person on the island, bereft of not only ethnic community, but of political or religious affiliations as well, John is not only an alien on Newcastle, he is represented as being neutral to the divisions in the community. Indeed, John is described as a "perfect neutral" on more than one occasion because he lives outside of the society that is defined under these terms:

They like to say: here is a black man, a white man ... call their fellows heathen or Christians; Catholics or Protestants; Jews or Gentiles. They insist upon wearing a political label. They group occupations according to whether they are respectable or outside the pale. (88)

John is the only character who has the freedom to live beyond the boundaries of the racial, political, and religious bigotry of his society and is used by Standish to comment on them. One of the most memorable of these occasions occurs when John decides to hire a Black man, Zachary Griffin, as the general manager of his Newcastle Emporium.

The hiring of Griffin is a particularly significant moment for the community because, in doing so, John places Griffin in a supervisory position over his two remaining White staff, Mr. Hibbetson and Miss Gunsen (the rest of the White staff having left earlier as they refused to work under a Chinese man). Despite his own freedom from prejudice, John is always careful to refrain from unnecessarily injuring anyone and, knowing that Hibbetson and Gunsen will feel insulted and humiliated by such a hire, does not make his decision lightly. In the end, however, John's freedom from racial prejudice allows him to hire Griffin because he "had proved himself trustworthy, was able to control the staff and was a good man of business;" he was simply, "the best man in sight, regardless of the colour of [his] skin" (180, 181). John reaffirms these

sentiments at the inquiry into Hibbetson's subsequent suicide when he responds to the accusation that he hired Griffin to humiliate his two White employees with the simple statement: "I appointed Mr. Zachary Griffin only because he was the most competent person in the store" (199).

As his hiring of Griffin reveals, John is, in fact, entirely apolitical in terms of the racialized politics of his island; so much so, that when Griffin's political activities begin to impact his behavior in the store, Griffin soon discovers that there is no longer any place for him there. John's neutral stance does not end there, however; he is also free from national political affiliations, and is depicted as having no great interest in either the nationalistic politics of Dr. Sun Yatsen in China or in supporting the British troops in World War II. John is also free to support any charity that he chooses, regardless of which racial community it benefits. Indeed, John's only affiliation is to the poor both at home in Newcastle and on his visit to China. For Standish, the end result of John's neutrality is twofold. First, John becomes a Christ-type figure in the novel, described not only as a Christian in behavior if not in dogma and creed, but also as being surrounded by a "godlike, neutral vacuum" (184). Second, John is the only character who is able to fully consider the ugly senselessness and limitations of a world controlled by racial, political and religious bigotry, which leads him to make the novel's most profound statements on these divisions. For example, when considering the outbreak of World War II, John sees both its similarities with all wars in general when he notes that, "the rape of Europe did not seem any more horrible than the rape of China," and the senseless hatred of other men that war fosters when he comments that, "For the reason that race hatred was being fostered and exploited by Hitler and his thugs, John was spiritually against Hitler. But never having known any Germans, he could feel no animus against them" (26). John's neutrality is also the reason that he is able to consider what larger issues might be behind the problems attributed to race on Newcastle. Thus, in a discussion with a Socialist MP who visits the island from Britain, John comes to the novel conclusion, at least for Newcastle Island society, that "the so-called race problems were economic problems" (230).

In addition to re-inscribing nineteenth-century ideas of Chinese alienation, John Standish's novel reinforces such imagery by depicting John's neutrality as an innate racial quality. Nineteenth-century texts provide no real explanation for the assumption that the Chinese migrants might remain neutral aliens upon their arrival in the West Indies. Instead, they routinely ignored the fact that Chinese and Black West Indians had a lot in common in terms of their working and living conditions, or indications that Blacks and Chinese were not entirely isolated from each other as revealed in the number of sexual liaisons that Chinese men engaged in with Black women. Colonial texts simply relied on blanket statements of an assumed predilection for political neutrality on the part of the Chinese in its depictions of the migrants as when, for example, a newspaper asserted that the Chinese were just "too sensible to be led away into riots" (*Royal Gazette* 10 November 1870). In a similar fashion, *Mr. On Loong* presents John's

neutrality as a natural result of his racial heritage; that is, as an inevitable quality of his “Chineseness.”

As part of Standish’s exploration into the question of nature versus nurture, all of the characters in the novel are depicted as exhibiting racial characteristics; that is, as being controlled by their “blood.” For example, Pierre’s logical mind and his adventurous spirit are explained in terms of his Norse and French heritage, while Julie and Laurette’s open sexuality is described as their mulatto blood’s response to the African drums throbbing in the island nights. However, it is John’s assumption of the “role as onlooker” in his society, despite not being culturally trained to take on such a position, that best embodies the connection between blood and behavior that Standish ultimately asserts (128).

The earliest indication that John’s neutrality is an innate quality occurs when he is enrolled in the prestigious Anglican boys school, Williamstown College. John is unable to fit in with the other boys in the college, significantly depicted as not taking sides on sports teams, and also refusing to “take religious sides” by rejecting the catechism that he is forced to learn and parrot. In the latter case, John does not do so as an act of rebellion, but because he finds something off-putting in the need to take an absolute stand in denominational and religious matters that acceding to the catechism’s teachings seems to require. Later in the novel, John’s friend Trimmer provides a more specific reason for John’s inability to accept the catechism, when he describes the Chinese in a way that seems particularly applicable to John:

I always think of China as the land of toleration, and of the people in the same way. The Chinese don’t do anything to excess — or hardly anything .... They are like their cooking, which strives to preserve a perfect balance as between sour and sweet. Then, too, they are not so definitive as the rest of the world. They do not insist that black is black and white is white and that there are no intermediate shades. The greys exist in Chinese thought in an infinite number. (91)

John’s neutrality, his preference for living life in “a perfect balance” between extremes, is therefore understood to be a particularly Chinese quality. Indeed, since John exhibits this trait despite not being raised as Chinese, it must be a quality passed on by bloodline. In other words, John is born to be a neutral alien in the West Indies. In this sense, John’s reversion to “type,” as Trimmer might put it, refers not only to his “Chineseness” in general, but to a more specifically inherited legacy; namely, the nineteenth-century discursive practice of depicting the Chinese as naturally unmoved by or alienated from the extreme passions that marked the fraught binary relations of West Indian colonial societies.

### **Political Absurdity and the Alienated Chinese as Revolutionary**

The image of the Chinese as being not only neutral to, but politically isolated from the concerns of Black West Indians established in nineteenth-century colonial discourse also plays a central role in understanding V.S. Naipaul's 1975 novel, *Guerillas*. The novel explores a number of themes concerning the limitations and possibilities of revolutionary action on an unnamed Caribbean island within the context of its colonial history and continuing postcolonial relationship with London and, tangentially, the United States. Naipaul is particularly interested in examining how the support of White political liberals for seemingly revolutionary activities in the Caribbean serves a twofold purpose: it relieves a sense of guilt for the atrocities inherent in colonization at the same time that it diffuses the potential power of such activities, so that the inequalities of colonial society continue to be perpetrated to the disadvantage of most Caribbean peoples. Revolution thus becomes an ineffective political game of stylized revolutionary gestures. This idea is largely conveyed in *Guerillas* through the leader of the so-called revolution in the novel, a man of Chinese descent known as Jimmy Ahmed. More specifically, by focusing on Jimmy's Chinese ancestry and depicting it as separate from the sufferings of the colonial system inherited by the majority of Black Caribbeans, Jimmy's presence at the center of the revolution becomes the overriding symbol of the revolution's ultimate emptiness.

The colonial description of the traumatic realities of the Haitian Revolution quoted in the introduction to this paper as simply, "[t]he events which have recently happened in St. Domingo," and as "a spirit of insurrection amongst the Negroes," hints at one of the means by which planters tried to contain some of the fear that their lifestyles, based on a hostile yet intimate relationship with their slave labor force, fostered. In this case, the playing down of the Haitian Revolution that occurs in the authoritative, controlled language of the document can be read as one approach to containing the sense of menacing chaos the Revolution undoubtedly unleashed. Although they live more than a century after the abolishment of slavery, for the newly privileged middle-class society on the Ridge in *Guerillas*, the community upon whom the novel largely focuses, the fear of the Black masses inherent in plantation society has not abated. Instead, it remains barely hidden under the surface life of picturesque images of country people, "walking to church or rocking in their hammocks or drinking in their little bars" (221). Indeed, the stories that Harry tells around the time of the riots — stories about how Mrs. Grandlieu's father-in-law is convinced that he is poisoned before his death in 1938, or how Harry's father always insisted that the only qualifications needed when hiring a Black man is to know that, if necessary, one can physically overpower him — combine with the nervousness with which Harry, Jane and Peter treat their Black staff at this time, to bring the hidden terror directly to light. The novel suggests that contemporary responses to this fear combine measures from colonial times as well as a new strategy. First, the Ridge residents try to diffuse the threat they feel by turning it into a joke, as evident in the constant self-satirizing in which the characters engage, or the forced jocularity surrounding Mrs. Grandlieu's "jokes" about Black people. In the latter case, her insistent use of the word "nigger" in her jokes is a means of containing the threat

of the rising Black classes on her island by keeping Black people in their place through language, as in the case of the colonial document regarding the Haitian Revolution discussed above. Second, the Ridge residents sometimes revert to more overt shows of authority, as when Peter tells Jane, “Every time I meet Jimmy, ... I make it a point to lose my temper with him at least once, to bring him back to earth” (28). The third response, namely, to sponsor and thereby contain revolution so that it becomes a mere parody of rebellion is new; and it is in this latter strategy of control that people like Jimmy have an important role to play.

*Guerillas'* opening chapter is unrelenting in sounding out a note of falseness in both the society and the characters that the reader encounters. For example, the signboards sporting revolutionary slogans are sponsored by big corporations like Coca-Cola; the revolutionary commune (supported by one of the island's biggest firms, which, ironically, made its fortune in the slave trade) is named “Thrushcross Grange” after the property of the wealthy Linton family in the novel *Wuthering Heights*; and the young men on the commune are seen hard at work in the fields when Jane and Peter arrive, although Peter points out that, “No one works in the fields at this time of the afternoon” (13). Jimmy is no less fraudulent. In addition to setting up the show of communal workers that greets Jane and Peter upon their arrival, Jimmy falsely gives himself the title of “Haji,” writes classified communiqués that are steeped in clichés, and lives in a house that celebrates his connection to England rather than reviles it. Although such examples point to an insincerity in Jimmy's revolutionary activities as a whole, it is the connection between Jimmy and his Chinese heritage that establishes that Jimmy is more than insincere; rather, he is deemed totally unsuitable to lead a Black revolution. For example, the picture of Jimmy over the slogan, “I'm nobody's slave or stallion,” might be a powerful memorial to and statement of defiance against the history of slavery and the inhumane treatment of Black men under that system and its legacy (17). But, as a descendant of Chinese in the West Indies, Jimmy has not been part of that experience (despite the fact that he is made to “appear more negroid than he was” in the pictures) and this empties the slogan of its power and meaning (17). Jimmy also makes a point of telling Jane that he was born in the back of a Chinese grocery store. He does so as a means of asserting his validity as a revolutionary leader, claiming that it is because of this background, “[he has] always felt hungry” and must be deemed a “worker” (23, 27). Again, the history of the Chinese in the West Indies and, in particular, their role as shopkeepers, undermines the very narrative of oppression that Jimmy is trying to establish as a background to his position as revolutionary leader. As difficult as shopkeeping might have been, Chinese shopkeepers were often in much more privileged positions than the Black clientele they served. Meredith captures the perceived distance between the experiences of Chinese shopkeepers and their Black customers when he claims:

I used to envy Jimmy. And most boys were like me, eh. A shop — how could a thing like that ever go bust? A shop had everything. It was a place where your mother sometimes sent you to get things on trust ... Jimmy's mother was a very pretty woman ... I used to envy old Leung, and I used to think: You can get a

woman like that only if you have money, if you have a shop. To me that was just a fact of life, that *our woman* went to live with Chinese shopkeepers. There was nothing you could do about it. Nobody had to tell me anything. I knew *that side of life* was closed to me. (143; emphasis added)

Throughout the novel, Jimmy's attempts to assert his legitimacy as a Black revolutionary leader are undercut by his Chinese heritage. Mrs. Stephens shows no respect for the commune or for Jimmy, referring to him continually in the disparaging phrase, "that Chinese man," while during the riots, Harry notes that, "at a time like this [Jimmy] is just another Chinaman" (191). This latter statement is particularly insightful in light of the fact that Harry has suggested that it is the Chinese and Syrian shops that will bear the brunt of the Black rioters' rage. In his interview with Peter, Meredith again points to Jimmy's unsuitability as a Black revolutionary leader by distinguishing between Jimmy's Chinese background and Meredith's own. In particular, Meredith remembers that in England, Jimmy recounts playing a "banana-skin game" in which the way a banana skin falls indicates the complexion of the person one will marry. Jimmy apparently uses this story in England as background material to his rhetoric of colonial suffering, but for Meredith, it is an experience that has nothing to do with him or other Black people on the island. Meredith concludes that it is simply a "Chinese game" and notes that Jimmy's life is so different from his own that when "Jimmy talks about this country, I couldn't recognize it" (206). In the end, it is Jimmy's "Chineseness" and the perceived distance in Black-Chinese relations that leads Meredith to claim that Jimmy is simply out of "tune with the aspirations of black people" and therefore unsuitable to serve as a political leader — claims which echo a similar understanding of Chinese lack of involvement in Black political concerns asserted in nineteenth-century texts (207).

Unlike Standish's *Mr. On Loong*, Naipaul does provide a more tangible context for the perceived distance between Chinese and Black Caribbean peoples along the lines of an economic division between the two groups. Interestingly, Naipaul does not depict this relationship as particularly antagonistic. In other words, neither Jimmy, his father, nor the other Chinese shopkeeper that appears in the text are described in language that would suggest that they are overtly hostile to their Black clientele; they simply live in separate spheres. Again, this is not an entirely new perception of the Chinese in the Caribbean. Nineteenth-century colonial texts also suggested a difference in economic interests between Black West Indians and Chinese migrants that was not necessarily hostile. For example, a perceived difference in economic priorities was behind the claim that the Chinese would willingly accept the conditions of indentured labor as long as they were paid enough, a significant claim in terms of establishing a division between the two groups in light of the fact that post-abolition, Black laborers were trying to renegotiate both their working conditions and pay.<sup>4</sup> In such depictions, the Chinese are not out to injure their Black contemporaries, regardless of the actual outcome of their activities; they just have different interests and priorities. Thus, nineteenth century colonial representations of the Chinese were

often emptied of overt displays of antagonism between Chinese and Blacks along an economic line of division that is quite similar to the representation of Chinese-Black division in *Guerillas*.

### Exploring Alienation in The Pagoda

Of the three novels under discussion, Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* is the most sensitive in terms of trying to create a more developed and dimensional Chinese character in Lowe, the shopkeeper who struggles to find a place for himself in his rural Jamaican community. Powell's story also differs in that it provides a specific historical context to Lowe's presence on the island, a background that is missing in both *Mr. On Loong* and *Guerillas*. Set near the turn of the twentieth century, on one level, Powell's novel can be said to explore the earliest relations between Chinese migrants and other members of the Jamaican community; however, *The Pagoda* is in no way simply a historical novel. Instead, Powell's novel reveals a special interest in the construction and mediation of social identities, particularly gender. Lowe's "Chineseness" becomes implicated in this exploration and, in the process, Powell also re-inscribes a number of colonial ideas about Chinese alienation.

One of the most obvious issues addressed by Powell is the limitations that gendered identities can place upon individuals, particularly when their own desires come into conflict with the social roles and positions afforded to their gender. The result, Powell suggests, is an alienation between the body, constrained by social expectations and definitions, and the inner being or soul that it houses. For Lowe, the alienation between his body and his personal desires begins in China. As a child, he is permitted to exist in the blurred spaces of the socially constructed boundaries between male and female. His father dresses Lowe as a boy and treats him as a son, filling his head with fantasies of freedom in his tales of travel adventures. However, once Lowe awakens "to the riveting stench of puberty," he finds himself trapped by the limitations and vulnerabilities placed upon his female body by the patriarchal societies of China and subsequently Jamaica (26). First, Lowe's father withdraws his time and affection from him, expecting Lowe to enter into "woman's space" by fulfilling the female roles his society expects of him. Next, since in the traditions of his community, the female body is viewed as a commodity for male consumption, Lowe is sold as a wife to a crippled old man with a penchant for young woman's "meat, her soft skin, her childish baby face," to pay off a family debt (243). When Lowe runs away to Jamaica, hoping to define a future for himself, he disguises himself as a male. But freedom eludes him for, once again, Lowe's body betrays him when Cecil not only discovers him stowed away on the ship, but discovers his "woman's flesh" (49). Here, the full constraints of his female body are horrifically acted out as Lowe finds himself tied up in the hold of the ship where he is regularly raped by Cecil, a terror that is set against the greater fear of the gang rapes he would undoubtedly be subject to if Cecil were to leave Lowe to fend for himself as a woman on her own in a ship full of men. Upon arrival in Jamaica, Lowe discovers that his female body still prevents him from having the power to control his own destiny. He discovers,

for example, yet another betrayal by his body when he learns that he is pregnant, an event that Lowe significantly describes as having been “forced into him” (182). Cecil subsequently outfits Lowe as a male shopkeeper, providing him with a shop and later also with a wife in Miss Sylvie as a means of protecting him from the dangers of being a single female on the island. (Although, Lowe’s disguise does nothing to protect him from Cecil’s sexual demands whenever Cecil passes through town.) Miss Sylvie captures the powerlessness and limitations of the gendered female body as it had been defined in China and Jamaica around the turn of the century best when she asks, “what women have Lowe, if it ain’t what the father give them, what the husband give them?” (146).

Trapped within discourses that define a strict division of male and female roles and experiences, unable to create a life for himself free from such constraints, Lowe lives thirty years in Jamaica as a participant in what he calls a “fabulous masquerade,” “molded ... into something both unrecognizable and foreign” (33, 107). It is a lifestyle that keeps Lowe separate from his inner self, unable to develop or pursue any of his own dreams, a reality expressed by his repeated reference to the fact that he has merely lived out the fantasies of others and is re-emphasized when Lowe realizes that his desire to build the pagoda is his first dream (99, 40). Simply put, he is a “self that no longer had inherent meaning” (125).

Lowe’s inner alienation is also revealed in his inability to get close to anyone around him. He is, of course, physically and emotionally alienated from his family in China; but this alienation also occurs within his immediate family in Jamaica as well. Lowe is not close to his daughter and a vast emotional distance exists between him and his wife Miss Sylvie for Lowe feels that he has nothing to offer her outside of the empty role into which he is cast. As Lowe recognizes poignantly, “Didn’t you have to throw your whole self into [love], and what did he have to throw?” (179), “He didn’t feel as if he had agency, as if he had voice” (114). Lowe’s general state of emotional isolation extends to his domestic staff and the villagers as well. Indeed, the novel reverberates with Lowe’s continuing complaint that he does not know anyone in his life, a lack of knowledge that is explicitly connected to the falseness of his life when Lowe states: “He had been so locked up in his self, in his survival, more and more he saw how he did not know them. Had not figured out how to read them” (212).

The alienation that Lowe experiences from himself and his loved ones gains depth and resonance because it is set against the presumption that, as a Chinese individual, Lowe is expected to be an alien in his community. As in nineteenth-century texts, *The Pagoda* depicts Lowe as distinctly separate from both Black and White West Indians. Black West Indians are presented as overtly hostile to the Chinese in the threat of physical violence that hangs over the heads of Lowe and the other Chinese on the island: “He was there only on sufferance. Himself and the other five thousand Chinese on the island” (13). Furthermore, despite his association with Miss Sylvie, Lowe is neither accepted as a White West Indian nor has access to the power that they wield in society. Thus, Lowe notes that the police are only interested in the destruction of his shop because Cecil dies in the fire, makes brief mention of the fact that laws are being

considered to restrict the entry of the Chinese to the island at this time, and comments on the fact that, unlike Lowe, “commands steamed effortlessly from Miss Sylvie’s velvet lips ... with the authority of near-alabaster porcelain skin” (33). Indeed, Powell presents a landscape in which the Chinese are such an alienated presence that there is no truly viable Chinese community in which Lowe and other Chinese might find belonging. Instead, the Chinese are scattered across the country, apparently meeting at Kywing’s irregularly. The negative responses from other Chinese characters to Lowe’s desire to build the pagoda and his attempt to reach out to a fellow Chinese shopkeeper by speaking in Chinese re-emphasizes the fragmented state of their community, an issue that is further complicated for Lowe by his radically different life experiences. As he states succinctly, “he was not one of them” either (46). Thus, for the duration of the novel, Lowe remains “the outsider. The foreigner. The newcomer” (33); “not dark-skinned, he was not of the African peoples, not mixed race, not Indian, not low-class white, he was Chinese, *different altogether*” (92; emphasis added) and, one might add, altogether alone. The emphasis in Powell’s depiction of Lowe is on his solitary existence, not on making a link between his alien status and an antagonistic attitude towards other members of his West Indian community. Lowe does not, for example, hate the villagers or attempt to harm them in anyway. He is simply isolated from them. In this way, Lowe’s depiction reflects the alienation assumed of the Chinese in many nineteenth-century texts. In turn, his isolation in the community becomes a powerful lived example of Lowe’s personal struggle with an internal alienation that occurs because of his longing to define his identity on his own terms against the socio-cultural limitations inscribed on his body.

*The Pagoda* also connects to nineteenth-century discourse regarding the representation of Chinese migrants in Powell’s explicit interrogation of the image of Chinese alienation established in colonial texts. Specifically, while Standish and Naipaul begin their novels with the presumption that the Chinese truly are aliens in the Caribbean, Powell represents a more ambiguous and fraught relationship between Lowe and his community that brings into question the image of Chinese alienation even as she employs it for her own purposes. Indeed, by making an explicit link between the purported alienation of Lowe and the other Chinese in the novel and colonial desire to retain control and power in the colony, Powell undermines the image of Chinese alienation by drawing attention to the fact that it is, at least partially, the product of colonial discourse. In doing so, she draws attention to the fact that the image is a colonial interpretation of reality.

Discursive constructions of identity, colonial or otherwise, are inherently embedded in the intersection of power and knowledge. Simply put, power produces knowledge. It is those who are in positions of authority and have the power to control the dissemination of ideas who shape what we know, or think we know, about ourselves and others, despite the fact that this knowledge reflects the desires, biases, needs and anxieties of those who construct it and are as such, limited sites of knowledge. In the case of *The Pagoda*, people like Lowe’s father, Cecil and even Miss Sylvie have power to create and impose identities upon Lowe that meet their own

needs. Further, as a figure of colonial authority, Cecil, with the complicity of Miss Sylvie, creates a place for Lowe in Jamaican society and the terms in which Lowe will be perceived in the village, including, as an outsider and alien. Lowe recognizes as much when he complains that, “every time Cecil came it disrupted the relationship he had built up with the villagers” (95), or comments that once he moves in with Miss Sylvie, “the people would never trust him” (108).

The impact of Cecil and Miss Sylvie on Lowe’s personal relationships with the villagers is set against the larger experience of Chinese migration in colonial Jamaica. In particular, *The Pagoda* draws attention to the specific role that the colonial government created for the Chinese when bringing them into Jamaica, and how it shaped the reactions of other West Indians to the Chinese migrants: “They had been brought there only to supply cheap labor and keep down wages. They had been brought there only to keep the Negro population in check” (45). The novel makes it clear that the image of the Chinese as aliens is a cultural production that expresses a colonial desire to maintain economic, social and ultimately political control by creating divisions between Blacks and Chinese. Lowe eventually comes to that realization himself when he notes: “... he saw how they all were in this together, how Cecil had thrown them all in together ... Yet here they were like hungry dogs, setting upon each other and biting over the one little dry bone Cecil had flung them” (162). Similarly, the villagers’s antipathy towards Lowe is connected to their fear that Chinese association with White authority will eventually allow the Chinese to oppress and exploit Black Jamaicans. Such sentiments are best expressed in Lowe’s son-in-law’s negative reaction to Lowe’s desire to build the pagoda: “At first is farming and such. Then next thing shop, and before you know, a little shop in every blasted corner you turn. Now is school and property. Soon you have my people working for you on the estates, cleaning for you in the big house. Calling you massa and such” (73). Powell makes it clear, however, that such perception of Chinese power is only illusionary. In the novel, any such power that the Chinese have is that which is allowed them by colonial authorities in service of colonial needs. Indeed, when Lowe displeases Miss Sylvie, he soon discovers that his status is basically on par with the Black house staff. Thus, by revealing the colonial role in creating the image of the alien Chinese and its vested interests in this image, *The Pagoda* raises intriguing questions about the reality of the long-accepted Chinese identity as alien and neutral in the Caribbean. In other words, Powell questions some of the nineteenth-century assumptions on which her story is largely based by asking, how real is Chinese alienation? How much is our continued image of Chinese alienation simply a product of discourse? These questions are very similar to those Lowe asks when he comes across Dulcie’s illegible correspondence and asks: “was this how things got set down by people misreading and misinterpreting? ... Was that how they made history?” (213). Thus, Powell explicitly connects the image of Chinese alienation to an assertion of colonial power, recognizing both the legacy of the alien image of Chinese in the nineteenth century, and raising questions about its continuing use and place in Caribbean imaginations.

## Conclusion

In his 1871 memoir of a Christmas holiday spent touring the West Indies, British novelist Charles Kingsley recounts visiting the races in Trinidad and being disturbed by what he saw as excessive amounts of frivolity. He describes seeing another man, standing somewhat separated from the events, and suggests that, like Kingsley, this man, who turns out to be Chinese, is emotionally aloof from the scene before them. It is but a moment in Kingsley's memoir, but in this description, we see illuminated the boundaries of Chinese representation in nineteenth-century colonial discourse. The Chinese man is presented as a neutral alien to the West Indian life before him, a position that is then used by Kingsley to articulate colonial values in a memorable and effective fashion. This combination of alienation and neutrality with regard to the representation of the Chinese was common in nineteenth-century West Indian texts because such imagery was comforting to the colonials for whom and by whom it was produced; however, it is an image that is often forgotten in more contemporary depictions of Chinese migrants to the Caribbean. *Mr. On Loong*, *Guerillas* and *The Pagoda* return to this nineteenth-century tradition of representing Chinese alienation free from hostility and antagonism. By drawing on such imagery, they increase the effectiveness of their fiction and confirm the continuing powerful impact that colonial discourse has on contemporary Caribbean imaginations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper, “British West Indies” and “British West Indian colonies” refers to Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana before independence; “Caribbean” will be used to refer to these regions post-independence.

<sup>2</sup>For example, California-based author Bret Harte’s phenomenally successful poem “Plain Language from Truthful James” made the nineteenth-century stereotype “The Heathen Chinees” popular on a global level.

<sup>3</sup>For more background on the Commission, including Jenkins’ role, see Jenkins’ “Prelude” and David Dabydeen’s introduction to the 2003 reprint of *Lutchmee and Dilloo*; Des Voeux’s memoirs of his colonial service (*My Colonial Service in British Guiana, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Fiji, Australia, Newfoundland, and Hong Kong with Interludes*); and Jeremy Poynting’s “John Edward Jenkins and The Imperial Conscience,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21(1) (1986): 211 - 221.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Parliamentary Papers claimed that the Chinese were “anxious to do anything that offered, by which they might earn a small consideration” and “eager for gain, and [willing to] do anything for money”. For more on the post-abolition labour relations between ex-slaves and planters, see Douglas Hall’s “The Flight from the Estates Reconsidered” in *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present*. Ed. by Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd. Kingston: Ian Randle, 1993: 55- 63.

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