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The Chinese Shop as Nation Theatre in West Indian Fiction

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[The Chinese shop counter] was the site of the first sustained encounter between the cultures, the locus of their accounting with each other and the source of the peculiar dependency and hostility that have marked that relationship.

—Victor Chang

Introduction

When Benedict Anderson described “nation” as an “imagined community” over twenty years ago, in some ways, he was not making a particularly novel statement. From the rise of the earliest modern nation states, philosophers and statesmen have sought to represent nations as more than mere geographical territories or political entities. What Anderson’s phrase captured eloquently and precisely, however, was the creative complicity of the members of a nation in both inventing and maintaining the sense of community integrally associated with nationhood. By doing so, Anderson drew attention to the production of nation and was a major influence on a generation of thinkers across a variety of disciplines exploring “nation” as a socio-cultural construct. For example, postcolonial and cultural critics, like Bhabha and Hall, investigate the roles of narration and representation in producing nation; Hobsbawm and Billig explore the performance of nation through official and everyday symbols, rites and rituals; and Balibar and Wallerstein, Smith, and Connor consider the relationship between ethnicity and nationhood. Even cultural geographers, particularly those interested in tourism, have entered into these debates by investigating how specific identities are imposed on literal landscapes as part of the process of constructing nation. It is on these latter debates, namely the role of place in the representation of nation, that this essay is built. More specifically, I examine the key role that the Chinese shop in its various forms plays in the representation of nation in fiction from the former British West Indian colonies.¹

This paper begins by accepting the premise that nations are, at least on one level, socio-cultural constructs and that the representation of landscapes in fiction can be integral to this process. I also employ an understanding of “place” as the site of dynamic social interactions at specific periods in time as perhaps best articulated by Deborah Massey in her study of the relationship between space, place and gender in Britain. In this work, Massey defines “place” as a “constellation of social relations meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” and argues that the identity of any given place can only be truly understood through its connection to other spaces and places (154). In this paper, I argue that the Chinese shop as depicted in West Indian fiction is a place where ideas of the community defined as “nation” is performed; that is, finds dramatic textual representation through the social interactions that occur there. This performance is what gives shop space its identity. This identity is, however, never stable territory. Instead, shop space is represented as both alien and home ground. This paradox is the

result of shop space's identity being connected to other larger, and sometimes conflicting national discourses. In particular, West Indian fiction reveals that "nation" in these regions is conceived as both a community of those historically oppressed and exploited who are engaged in a continuing struggle to survive, and as a creole community whose identity is directly linked to its multiethnic reality. Thus, to paraphrase Massey, since the representation of Chinese shop space is linked to the concept of nation which is itself multiple, the dominant image of [the Chinese shop] will be a matter of contestation and change (21).

The Chinese Shop as Alien Territory

In 1952, an editorial captioned "Occidental Chinese Wall" appeared in a Jamaican newspaper (qtd. in Lind, 162-3). The article accused the Chinese in Jamaica of living in isolated and self-contained communities that existed in a parasitical relationship with the rest of Jamaicans. By depicting the Chinese in this manner, the author positioned them as outsiders to Jamaica and identified the shop, the place most closely associated with the Chinese, as alien territory within the nation. Such a negative representation of the Chinese shop is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the history of Chinese migration to the West Indies and the role which the Chinese have often traditionally been accorded in representations of West Indian colonial societies.

Chinese migration into the West Indies began as early as 1806 when a group of estate laborers were brought to Trinidad; however, more substantial Chinese immigration started in the mid 19th century as part of the colonial government's indentured labor program. Like migrants from India, the Chinese were brought into the West Indian colonies specifically to shore up plantation economy and the social hierarchy it supported after the emancipation of the slaves. As a result, early representations of the Chinese in the West Indies were tied to their role on the plantation and their relationship to the colonial power.² The Chinese shop had no place in the West Indies as far as the colonial government was concerned since such an enterprise would only draw the Chinese away from the plantations. Thus, it is no surprise that in what might very well be the first depiction of a Chinese shop in West Indian fiction, Chin-a-foo's gambling and opium den in the 19th century novel *Lutchmee and Dilloo*, the establishment is situated on the very fringes of the dark and threatening jungle that surrounds the estate. Clearly, the Chinese shop has no place in the colonial order represented by the plantation.

The image of the Chinese shop as alien territory in the West Indies re-emerges in the 20th century, although at this time its depiction is linked to a burgeoning sense of nationhood that is at least partially constructed through a binary positioning of "native" and "foreigner". This was particularly true in Jamaica, where the Chinese were perceived as dominating the small retail sector of the economy. As early as 1913, for example, a newspaper article suggested that "natives" were being forced to sell out their shops to the Chinese and called upon authorities to

do something to “let *Jamaicans* feel that Jamaica is still their home, and *strangers* will not be allowed to elbow them out of what is theirs by right” (qtd. in Lind 156, emphasis added). Just over twenty years later, a similar article complained that the Chinese have “swept out of existence the *native traders* for the most part, and men capable of entering this line of business find themselves today with no opportunity of trading in *their own country* (qtd. in Lynch-Campbell 94, emphasis added). In such representations, shop space becomes the space of the alien and stranger, an image that resonates throughout West Indian fiction.

The positioning of Chinese shop space as alienated from nation space is linked to a discourse that defines national belonging in terms of those who have traditionally suffered and resisted forces of exploitation and oppression within West Indian spaces. Such a construction of nation is clearly evident in many of the speeches made by early West Indian nationalists. For example, in Jamaica, Norman Manley argued that “the mass of the population [i.e., the Blacks] are the *real people* [of the nation ...] those who will not unite with them on all fundamental matters are the real *aliens in the land*” (Manley 100, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Eric Williams’ call to his fellow Trinidadian nationals to resist British and American imperialism during the so-called Chaguramas Incident was expressed explicitly in terms of the arguments of anti-abolitionists and identified “the West Indian people” as those who had been slaves when he stated:

Our enemies said we would never be free. They said we would never be fit for freedom. They said we could never govern ourselves. They said that we were a lazy, servile race, desirous only of sitting in the sun and eating yams and pumpkins, capable only of aping the graces of our European masters. They said we could never operate democratic institutions, we could never be governed along European lines.

Our magnificent demonstration today gives the lie to this imperialist indictment of the West Indian people. (Williams 232)

When fictional West Indian landscapes are contained within such a discourse, Chinese shop space is often represented as a site of exploitation against which members of the nation struggle. Indeed, physical attacks on Chinese shops are presented as acts of resistance that nurture the nation’s sense of self. Thus, in *Guerrillas* the so-called revolutionaries target Chinese shops in their riot while the Chinese shops in “Dog Food” and “Wing’s Way” become the sites where the desperation, rage and frustration of the locals find an outlet. As Lowe, the Chinese shopkeeper puts it in *The Pagoda*, “when their [the villagers’] lives hit rock bottom, they came [to the shop] waving their fists” (Powell 39). Indeed, the burning of the Chinese shop in *The Pagoda* is not so much an act against Lowe the person as it is against his relationship with the representatives of White colonial power in the community. Lowe’s son-in-law, in response to Lowe’s desire to build the pagoda, expresses the villagers’ fear that Lowe will step into a position of abuse over them: “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” (Powell 73). Because of the shop’s association with exploitative power, it is identified as outside of the nation and by burning the shop the villagers indicate that for them, shop space is enemy territory.

A similar separation of Chinese shop space from nation space occurs in the representation of Chin-Quee’s daughter and her mother, Martha’s experience in the Chinese shop of *The Hills of Hebron*. When Chin-Quee wants to separate his daughter from those he deems an “alien race,” he confines her within the shop (Wynter 185). In doing so, Chin-Quee is clearly hoping to keep an eye on her and prevent her from becoming involved with any of the local men. At the same time, however, his actions can be read as suggesting the he considers the shop to be outside of the rest of the community. More importantly, Martha’s experience within the shop is depicted in imagery that is rife with allusions to slave women’s experiences in both the extensive labor she is engaged in within the shop and the apparent sexual exploitation and abuse she endures from Chin-Quee.

One of the most striking depictions of Chinese shop space as enemy territory occurs in Earl McKenzie’s “Platform Shoes.” Indeed, the story’s opening scene makes the boundary between members of the nation and outsiders clear when it depicts Chinese businesspeople as an invading force and their shops as the territory gained in this invasion. Throughout the remainder of the story, the Chinese shop is the place in which the narrator’s dreams to improve his lot in life, symbolically rendered through his desire for platform shoes, is systematically destroyed: he loses his earnings gambling with his boss and is eventually shot and permanently maimed when he attempts to break in to the shop. In this way, the narrator’s experiences become a logical outcome of the “Chinese invasion” that opens the story.

Chinese shop space is often depicted as being outside of nation space in a less overt manner. Its alienation from nation space is often subtly marked by representing shop space as being out of step with those experiences that touch the rest of the national community. Thus, in Mendes’ short story, “Her Chinaman’s Way,” shop space contains a value system that is totally different from those of the rest of the community, namely Hong Wing’s obsessive jealousy of the relationship between his baby and its mother, Maria. Maria’s total inability to understand Hong Wing also underscores the fact that in shop space, she is in unfamiliar territory. Similarly, in “Song of Sixpence,” all the Chinese shops, in this case, restaurants appear to be removed from the financial difficulties facing the story’s narrator. In *Crown Jewel*, a novel that explicitly sets out to record the birth of the Trinidadian nation, Chinese shops are always represented as sites of exploitation for other Trinidadians. More significantly, when the nation rises up in protest against the colonial government, and the people march on Government House, it is only the shops owned by Indians who support the protesters by providing them with provisions. The doors of the Chinese shop remain closed to the defining experience of the nation. In Robert Standish’s *Mr. On Loong*, the idea that Chinese shop space is separate from that of the rest of the nation is the reason that the shop is the only neutral site in a community rife with racial discord. Indeed, in the shop, the Chinese owner feels free to donate to charities because of the work they

are doing, not because of the racial community that their work is meant to help, and employees in this shop are hired and fired based on their competence regardless of their racial background. All the employees are expected to leave their racial biases outside the shop's doors. Those who cannot do so soon find that there is no space for them within the shop. In this way, Chinese shop space is represented as being devoid of the political and social tensions that define the nation and is therefore, located outside of nation space.

The Chinese Shop as Home Territory

To end the analysis of the depiction of shop space at this point would provide a false reading of the Chinese shop because it would allow the mistaken belief that the image of the Chinese shop as alien or enemy space is fixed in West Indian fiction. This is simply not the case. As noted earlier, the image of Chinese shop space is unstable and multiple since its identity is tied to "wider relations and processes," in this case, discourses, that are involved in the conceptualization of nation (Massey 120). Certainly, the Chinese shop is a place where antagonistic relationships are used to mark out national boundaries through a polarization of exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed, outsider and insider to cultural norms and values, a division captured succinctly in *Guerillas* when one character simply comments about shop keeping, "that side of life was closed to me" (Naipaul 143). However, Chinese shop space is also a site that is connected to other discourses of nation that are not as invested in a story of struggle and resistance. In particular, the discourse of creolism with its celebration of a local-formed national identity developed through dynamic multicultural exchanges is so popular as a means of imagining West Indian nationhood that one theorist has claimed that "Caribbean identity occurs within the discursive space of the 'Creole'" (Hintzen 92.). Indeed, on an official level, West Indian nationhood has always been connected to the idea of Creole communities. Thus, Jamaica's national motto is "out of many, one people," Trinidad's national anthem declares, "Here every creed and race find an equal place," and Guyana is popularly known as the "land of six peoples." When Chinese shop space is linked to ideas of Creole West Indian identities, its fictional rendering becomes radically different than the images of alienation and antagonism discussed above. Instead, shop space, as the place where various members of the national community come together, is represented as the crucible in which creolism and by extension national identity is formed. Thus, Chinese shop space becomes home territory in the most basic of terms as it is the site in which the nation comes into being.

In many West Indian texts, Chinese shop space is explicitly represented as the meeting point between cultures—the site where cultural difference is encountered and eventually overcome. In *The Pagoda*, for example, it is the shop space that allows Lowe to connect with his community in that it is there where the villagers see Lowe's difficulties as a single parent and begin to assist in the raising of his daughter. In *A Brighter Sun*, the growing acceptance of the Chinese shopkeeper as a valid member of the community is indicated when the villagers replace

the generic name, “Mr. Chin” with something more personal, in this case Tall Boy. This re-naming of the shopkeeper is a symbolic act on the part of the villagers of accepting him as one of their own—he belongs. That this belonging is facilitated through their daily interactions in the shop is made obvious in *Turn Again Tiger*. In this latter novel, Tall Boy’s inclusion in the community is revealed when he attends a good-bye party for the novel’s main character. Significantly, Tall Boy has never before attended a village party and thoughtlessly has not been invited to this party either. As such, he arrives with some trepidation, “prepared for a lot of exclamation at his presence. But no one said anything. In fact, it was as if he had been attending every fete in the village” (*Turn Again* 15). The villagers’ non-reaction to his presence provides striking evidence that in their minds, Tall Boy is perceived as belonging in their community. More importantly, after the party ends, two of the characters return with Tall Boy to the shop to continue drinking. It is at this point that they make plans to visit each other’s homes to share food representative of their different ethnic backgrounds and a Black Trinidadian recognizes Tall Boy as “a real creolise Chineese” (*Turn Again* 15).

One of the most beautiful renditions of the cross-cultural exchange inherent to creolism that occurs within shop space is evident in “Many Things,” the short story by Noel Woodroffe. The story details a changing relationship between a village boy and a Chinese shopkeeper (and his wife) that mirrors the gradual process of creolisation that the villagers are undergoing. The Chinese shopkeeper’s changes are perhaps more obvious as they are indicated by his learning English and his enthusiasm for participating in Christmas celebrations. Importantly, however, the boy, a representative of the larger village in which the shop is located, is also changed by the end of the story. The boy’s attitude moves from scorn to that of accepting the shopkeeper and also finding beauty in his wife. This acceptance is partially the result of the boy’s realization that the shopkeeper is trying to find space for himself in the village by sharing in their Christmas celebrations despite the fact that he never knew that holiday in China. Indeed, although the shop is “Chinese space,” so to speak, it is decorated for Christmas. The story ends with the boy having arrived at the shop planning to torment the shopkeeper with his usual pranks but choosing rather to greet the shopkeeper with a traditional Chinese greeting that he has overheard them exchange in the shop. The scene provides a powerful depiction of the Creole nature of the community in the image of a village boy speaking Chinese and a Chinese shopkeeper in the midst of Christmas celebrations. That the scene takes place at the shop only underscores the important role that the shop plays in this transformation as it is the location where the boy and the shopkeeper encounter each other’s various cultures and are changed through that encounter.

Chinese shop space is not only important to the birth of the nation as a site of creolism, it is also represented as a central location where resistance to the colonial order, so integral to national consciousness, occurs. In both Olive Senior’s “The Tenantry of Birds” and Deryck M. Bernard’s “Ben,” the Chinese shop is represented as the place where a sense of community, free from middle-class Anglo values and norms imposed through the colonial system comes into being. As such, the sense of community and the creation of its own values that occurs in shop

space is understood to be much more organic to the nation as it emerges from them rather than is imposed upon them. In *The Pagoda*, a more explicit form of such resistance to the forces of colonialism is connected to Chinese shop space when Lowe notes:

He saw the sea of brown faces he'd seen every night since he'd had the shop huddled in a corner, talking softly and plotting. He knew that like the church hall, protest groups were founded right there on the piazza of his rum bar in the dead of night and in hushed tones. That the labor unrest sweeping through the countryside and the workers' rebellion strikes against the landholders paying them little to nothing and overwhelming them with work had started up right there with the glassful of rum cocked in their hands and the heads close together. (Powell 31 - 32)

Chinese shop space is also connected to nation space in that its depiction often provides a microcosm of what is happening in the nation at large. In Sam Selvon's *Highway in the Sun*, when Tall Boy builds a wall in the shop to separate the American GIs from the rest of the villagers, his action becomes a visible representation of the divisions that are happening in the village as their sense of community is eroded by the changes wrought by the war. Other texts depict Chinese shop space as being entirely affected by the life of the nation in which it exists. Thus, in Woodroffe's "Wing's Way," the constraints of the "ramshackle chaos of [the] dying village" is reflected in the "ragged fence-wall of rusted galvanised sheets that ringed" the property, while the shop in "Victoria" fails because its fate is so tied up in the lives of the villagers (143, 141). Indeed, Meiling Jin's "Victoria" provides one of the most dramatic images of the link between Chinese shop space and nation space in the brief description of the estate laborers reaction to a pay-cut: "There was one big grumbling on the estate, you had only to stand in the shop to hear it" (Jin 10). Although this statement can be read simply as indicating that the same complaints that are being made on the estate are heard in the shop, its semantic structure also suggests that the estate and shop space are actually one space. In doing so, Chinese shop space becomes nation space. A similar convergence of shop space and nation space is depicted in Powell's *The Pagoda* when Lowe remembers how shop space facilitated his contact with the village: "He knew every child by name. He knew who was carrying belly for who. He knew who had money in bank and who was working obeah for who. They left it all there in the shop ..." (Powell 13). What is left in the shop is village life. Thus, shop space becomes the repository of nation.

Conclusion

In West Indian fiction, Chinese shop space is literally and figuratively embedded in the landscapes of West Indian nations. Indeed, Chinese shop space is in many ways as much a given in West Indian fictional landscapes as sun and palm trees. And yet, the presence of the Chinese

shop is often deemed unimportant or simply ignored in the analysis of West Indian fiction. If, however, we understand national identity to be a cultural construct performed through the representation of social interactions in fiction, the depiction of the Chinese shop in West Indian texts must be read as a seminal site in such performances. Both the interactions and relationships of the characters within shop space, as well as the identity given to that space (whether alien or home territory) are part of this performance. It is in this sense that national belonging and identity are defined around and within Chinese shop space and the Chinese shop becomes a theater of West Indian nationhood.

Notes

¹For the purpose of this essay, only texts from Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana will be explored.

²For a sustained exploration of the representation of the Chinese in the West Indies, see Anne-Marie Lee-Loy's *Reading Mr. Chin: Images of the Chinese in the West Indies* (UK: Dido Press, 2006).

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