

## Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

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Vol. 12 No. 2 December 30, 2011

### ***Babalawos chinos: Religion, Ethnicity and Identity in Mayra Montero's Como un mensajero tuyo***

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**Keywords:** Mayra Montero, Chinese in Cuba, Santería, Syncretism, Identity.

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Author Mayra Montero was born in Havana, Cuba in 1952, but has lived most of her life in Puerto Rico, having moved there as a child. She began her writing career as a journalist, and has also written one collection of short stories entitled *Veintitrés y una tortuga*. However, she is best known as a novelist. Montero has authored nine novels and is known for her exploration of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, among other topics, in a Caribbean context. Her background as a journalist has influenced her fictional writing, as many of her works are filled with historical facts. Scholars such as Madeline Cámara and Vitalina Alfonso, among others, have noted how Montero obscures the lines between fact and fiction in her works.<sup>1</sup>

This study will explore issues of religious, racial, and ethnic identity in Mayra Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo*, and will pay particular attention to the presence and influence of characters of Chinese descent in the novel. The story, which takes place in Cuba in 1952, deals with the lives of Aida Cheng, a Chinese mulatta, and Enriqueta, Aida's daughter with the famous Italian opera singer Enrico Caruso. Aida is a terminally ill older woman who decides to tell her daughter Enriqueta about some of the most important events in her life before she dies. Enriqueta, in turn, decides to transcribe what her mother tells her. The novel; therefore, is the transcription of the stories Aida tells Enriqueta along with interviews and follow-up investigations that Enriqueta conducts to verify her mother's story, juxtaposed with chapters narrated by Aida (Aida in her own words telling her daughter about her life). The chapters narrated by Enriqueta focus primarily on her efforts to investigate and confirm the stories her mother tells her. Her mother's narrative revolves around the romance she had in 1920 with Enrico Caruso. The romance is short-lived, but very passionate. However, it ends when Caruso leaves Cuba to return to the United States and then eventually returns to his birth city, Naples Italy, where he dies in 1921. According to Aida, Enriqueta is the child born out of this relationship. By using a historical figure like Enrico Caruso as a main character, the novel blurs the lines between reality and fiction. The dates of Enrico and Aida's romance in the novel correspond with the dates that the historical Caruso is known to have been in Cuba to perform.

This essay will examine the interactions in the novel between characters from different backgrounds, especially the relationships between mulattoes and Chinese. There will be three primary areas of focus: religious syncretism, interpersonal relationships, and ethnic identity. In regards to racial and ethnic identity, particular attention will be paid to how Aida defines herself versus how society categorizes her. The novel presents the complexities of the interactions between members of the aforementioned ethnic groups. Some interactions, such as religious, are presented in a very positive light. The religious syncretism between Santería and Chinese spiritual beliefs and traditions presents a harmonious relationship between mulattoes and Chinese. For example, on various occasions Aida points out the similarities between Santería and Chinese religious practices. Furthermore, just like the spiritual leaders of Santería, Chinese spiritual leaders are also considered *babalawos*. In contrast, many interpersonal relationships, particularly those between Domitila, Aida's mother, and Chinese men, show a great deal of tension between the Chinese and mulattoes, and moreover, how the Chinese are often demeaned and looked down upon by mulattoes. Finally, through the character of Aida the following question arises: how, or furthermore, who defines ethnic identity. While Aida recognizes all of her ethnic roots by describing herself as a "chinita amulatada" (209), others frequently classify her as exclusively Chinese. The ethnic categorization that others impose on her is problematic, since it opposes her own perception of herself, as well as interferes with her right to create her own identity and define herself as a person.

Before going into a more in depth analysis of the novel, some historical context, particularly on the mulatto and Chinese populations in Cuba will be provided. Beginning with Christopher Columbus' arrival on the island in 1492, Cuba became an important base for the Spanish. When the Spanish arrived, the island was populated by a number of groups, the biggest being the Tainos. However, the arrival of the Spanish brought with it grave consequences for the original inhabitants of the island. As a consequence in large part of the "exterminio físico y otras crueldades inherentes al enfrentamiento directo, unido a las diversas enfermedades bronqui-pulmonares desconocidas para ellos. . ." (Guanche 21), the indigenous population on the island during the first fifty years of the Spanish conquest was reduced from 112,000 people to a few thousand (Guanche 13, 20-21).

For the Spanish, the decline of the indigenous population meant the loss of a labor force. The desire of the Spanish to replace this workforce, lead them to begin bringing African slaves to the island. According to Guanche:

Diferentes oleadas sucesivas y crecientes de africanos comienzan a vincularse con el escaso número de aborígenes en el fatigoso laboreo de las minas muy rápidamente se convierten en la fuerza de trabajo fundamental, tanto del extenso ciclo agrícola e industrial azucarero –que constituye la principal base económica de la isla–, como en los oficios y demás actividades de las poblaciones urbanas. (45)

The meeting and subsequent interaction between these ethnic groups has a significant impact on the island's ethnic composition. The lack of women in the Spanish migrations contributed greatly to the mixing of the ethnic populations. Despite the fact that Spain and Great Britain agree to end the slave trade to the American colonies in 1820, it is actually during the 19th century when the largest numbers of African slaves are brought to Cuba. More than 600,000 African slaves are brought to Cuba during the 19th century, and a great number of these slaves are brought after 1820 (Knight 13). The slave trade does not actually end until 1865 (Helly 10), although it is not officially abolished until 1886 (Yun 11).

During the struggle to abolish slavery in Cuba during the 19th century, the Spanish begin to look for workers in other places. The Spanish begin to bring workers from Asia, China in particular, under a "contract system," or in other terms, indentured servitude. However, this new system is extremely similar to slavery. According to Guanche:

Las condiciones del contrato resultaban vejaminosas para el emigrante. Éste se comprometía a trabajar por ochos años, así como debía rembolsar los gastos de su pasaje y todos los demás incurridos por el agente de emigración. El culí se convertía así en una mercancía barata, sujeta a todo el sistema de compraventa del capitalismo; pero en un régimen de servidumbre y convivencia junto con los esclavos. (75)

In addition to the questionable contracts, according to *The Cuba Commission Report*, many of the Chinese laborers were misled, or even forced into going to Cuba to work.

The majority of Chinese that went to Cuba did so between 1847-1874. During this time frame, approximately 125,000 people arrived from China. The Chinese laborers faced horrible conditions during their journeys to Cuba. *The Cuba Commission Report* states, "Of the more than 140,000 Chinese who sailed for Cuba, more than 16,000 died during the voyages, a fact which is sufficient evidence of the absence of effective regulations" (42). Once they arrived on the island, as indicated above, they were subjected to treatment similar to the treatment African slaves received. Due to the abuse and exploitation to which the Chinese were subjected in Cuba, when their contracts expired, many fled to the United States and Latin America, while others returned to China. By 1899, there were less than 15,000 Chinese in Cuba (26).

As with the first Spanish migrations, the majority of Chinese that arrived in Cuba were men. This fact also contributes to the racial and ethnic mixing on the island. Guanche explains that these men faced considerable social and racial discrimination (84) and furthermore, were not permitted to have relationships with white women. They were only allowed to have relationships with mulatto and black women. In reference to Chinese men Guanche states, ". . . solo pudieran, al liberarse de los contratos, formar parejas con mujeres de los sectores marginados, principalmente mulatas y negras nacidas en Cuba" (84). Guanche adds that the same holds true for the waves of Chinese immigrants that arrived on the island at the start of the 20th century (84). Most of these were also men who ended up forming relationships and having children primarily with mulatto and black women.

The arrival of some of the first Chinese laborers to Cuba is depicted in the novel when Aida tells Enriqueta about how Yuan Pei Fu, who Aida for much of her life only knows as an important *babalawo* (priest of the Santería

religion) and friend of the family but later discovers is actually her biological father, arrived to Cuba. According to Aida, Yuan Pei Fu arrived on the ship the *Oquendo*,<sup>2</sup> from the Canton province of China. Aida states that Yuan Pei Fu was only 8 years old, when he and his father left for Cuba aboard the *Oquendo* on January 2nd, 1847 (39). Aida's description of Yuan Pei Fu's voyage clearly shows the suffering faced by the Chinese laborers during their voyages to Cuba. Aida explains, ". . . se desató la enfermedad, el cólera o el tífus, y los hombres se morían en cubierta, boqueando y saltando como pescaditos. Noventa y seis cadáveres tuvieron que tirar al mar, y el padre de Yuan Pei Fu estuvo entre ellos. . ." (39). As she continues her description of Yuan Pei Fu's arrival in Cuba, it becomes very clear that these Chinese workers were treated as slaves, and furthermore, received very little sympathy or empathy from the Cubans that saw them arrive, "La gente, al principio, se reía: era la primera vez que veían esclavos chinos, encadenados como negros, pero más andrajosos y desesperados, con los ojos hundidos y los pies hinchados por el mar" (39).

The contact between the different ethnic groups in Cuba had a significant cultural impact on the island. The interaction between the Spanish and Africans led to the creation of *Santería*, a syncretic religion that combines Catholic and African religious beliefs and practices. In the book *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, Katherine J. Hagedorn describes *Santería* as:

the popular name for the Afro-Cuban polytheistic religious tradition that, during the almost four centuries of the slave trade in Cuba, gradually developed by the end of the nineteenth century into a series of religious practices born of mostly West African and some Spanish Catholic roots, more formally known as the *Regla de Ocha* (the law of the *orichas*); focuses on *oricha* worship [. . .]. (253)

Along with the information provided in Hagedorn's description of *Santería*, it is important to note that in addition to worshipping *orishas*, the veneration of ancestors is another important dimension of *Santería*, one that will be discussed in other sections of this essay. The contact between Africans, mulattoes, and Chinese also led to religious syncretism. In the book *Los Chinos de Cuba*, José Baltar Rodríguez points out that the interaction between people of African descent and Chinese people in Cuba led to what Cubans call "*brujería china*" (173-175).

Alejandra Bronfman in *Measures of Equality* and Carolyn E. Watson in *Citizenship, Religion, and Revolution in Cuba* both state that in the early 20th century, after Cuba gained its independence, *brujería*, which literally means witchcraft, became the common classifying term for African religious practices (Bronfman 21-23; Watson 49). Bronfman quoting the *Guía del policía cubano* states that "*Brujería* was characterized... as an 'African fetishism or cult that was imported to Cuba by enslaved blacks'" (23). As may be inferred by Bronfman's explanation, the term *brujería* commonly brought with it negative connotations. Baltar Rodríguez's discussion of *brujería china* shows how the use of the term *brujería* is used to describe non-European religious practices in general. Furthermore, Baltar Rodríguez suggests that the cultural differences between those of African and Chinese descent, combined with Africans trying to interpret Chinese religious practices from their own worldview, led to Chinese religious practices or "*brujería china*" being mythicized:

[Se puede inferir que]... las profundas diferencias culturales entre africanos y chinos, hayan llevado a los primeros a observar con cierta perplejidad la conducta de los segundos, la cual intentaron explicar desde sus propias concepciones mágico-religiosas, de manera sobredimensionada, al extremo de mitificarla.

Esta imagen del chino iría extendiéndose al resto de la población mediante la tradición oral, enriquecida por la imaginación popular. (177)

Finally, it is worth noting that Baltar Rodríguez suggests that in Cuban society *brujería china* is viewed as the most powerful of all the "*brujerías*" (173-178).

Religious syncretism plays an important part in the novel. Much of the plot unfolds through religion. Furthermore, the syncretism between *Santería* and Chinese religious practices is evident throughout the novel. First, when Aida recalls the story Yuan Pei Fu told her of his voyage to Cuba, we see that it was important for the Chinese laborers traveling to Cuba to bring along with them their spiritual traditions and symbols. While describing Yuan Pei Fu's trip to Cuba Aida states, "Yuan Pei Fu tenía en ese entonces ocho años y viajaba con su padre, que era custodio de una imagen de Cuang Cong. Por las noches, los hombres se reunían en torno de esa imagen, quemaban incienso, y y le pedían al santo que los hiciera llegar con bien a tierra firme" (39). Unfortunately, Yuan Pei Fu's father falls ill during the voyage and passes away. However, before dying, he entrusts his son with taking care of the image of Kuan Kong (39).<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that religion remains an important part of his life, because as an adult, he, along with José de Calazán

(Aida's godfather), is one of the most highly respected *babalawos* in the region of Cuba in which he lives. It is these two *babalawos* who, through divination, inform Aida that Enrico Caruso will soon enter her life. They also foretell that he has little time left to live, and that his death in the near future is inevitable (27-29). She first learns of Caruso through Calazán, who in a divination session tells her “—Dice Ifá que va a venir un hombre. . . . Viene a coronarte, a decirte que eres la reina de su pensamiento” (28). He continues predicting her future and in reference to Caruso states, “Viene a morir. Pero si tú no quieres, si me lo traes enseguida, no morirá. Tráelo para que no te ensuciens. No viene a morir: viene ya muerto” (28). Concerned for her daughter's well being after her session with Calazán, Aida's mother decides to take her to consult Yuan Pei Fu. Consistent with Baltar Rodríguez' assertion that Chinese *babalawos* or “*brujos*” are considered the most powerful in Cuban society, Aida states, “—Calazán no puede hacer más —insistió mi madre—. Y lo que no puede la *nganga* negra, siempre lo ha podido la *nganga*” (38).<sup>4</sup> Aida herself later describes Yuan Pei Fu as “el brujo mayor” (38). During their visit with Yuan Pei Fu, not only does he confirm Calazán's prediction, but he also provides additional information, “—Ese hombre ya está en Cuba —anunció Yuan Pei Fu, su voz saliendo de un lugar remoto, no de su boca ni de su garganta, sino de lo algo, de la neblina o desde el cielo raso—. Lo estoy viendo hace días” (41). This scene reinforces Calazán's prediction and makes it seem as though Caruso coming into Aida's life is inevitable.

The previous scenes show that both Calazán and Yuan Pei Fu are able to predict the future. In addition to divination, the novel presents other similarities between Santería and religious beliefs with Chinese origins. Both *babalawos* recognize that their religious practices have elements in common. Aida tells Enriqueta, “los santos son iguales en todas partes, son los mismos en China que en Guinea. A esa conclusión llegaron José de Calazán y Yuan Pei Fu, el día que mi madre los juntó para que conversaran” (39-40). Concerning Yuan Pei Fu she states, “en su vejez se había dedicado a cultivar la virtud: la virtud de los negros mezclada con la virtud de los dragones. El resultado de esas dos virtudes era un guerrero envuelto en humo: Sanfancón” (38).

The syncretism of Santería and some Chinese religious practices is something that, if we examine these cosmologies in more detail, is not so difficult to understand. Although one cannot speak of a sole “Chinese religion,” if we study some religious traditions common to China we can observe similarities between these practices and Santería. Divination, polytheism and the veneration of ancestors, and the belief that a person's spirit “lives on” after the death of the physical body are all found in both Santería and a number of religious belief systems common to China. For example, scholars such as Daniel L. Overmyer have pointed to the commonalities between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Overmyer et al. 314-315). According to Overmyer, “Popular religious practices and beliefs were shared in common by a wide range of the population of traditional China, and continue to be carried out today both on the mainland and in overseas Chinese communities” (315). In reference to the relationship between Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, Overmyer goes on to explain that:

At the most self-consciously literate levels distinctions between traditions can be made, but in ordinary practice they can be difficult to discern. Ethical values first advocated by Confucius and his followers can be found in all other traditions, and annual festivals came to be shared by all who could afford to participate, as were divination, funeral rituals, *feng-shui* (geomancy) and veneration of ancestors. (315)

Though it is not an area of focus in this essay, it is also worth noting that in both Santería and in China the use of plants for medicinal purposes (as well as to harm) is also common.

Divination, for example, is a very important aspect of Santería. However, predicting the future and divination are also seen in religions practiced in China, as indicated by Overmyer. Furthermore, in his essay, “Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions,” Robert Eno discusses some of the first religious traditions that were documented in writing in China. These writings belong to the Shang dynasty. Though there is not complete agreement on the dates of the Shang dynasty, they are generally credited with ruling from around 1766 B.C. until 1122 B.C. This group was known as seers. In the description of the Shang provided by Eno, similarities between their belief system and Santería are visible. Not only did they believe in divination, but they also believed in and worshipped many spirits, as is the case in Santería. In his description of the customs of the Shang, Eno discusses how the King had his own group of seers. According to Eno, “a small group of diviners in the service of the king employed specialized techniques to communicate with a complex world of spirits” (41). Here we can see that the veneration of numerous spirits and divination are not only a part of Santería, but also of belief systems that have existed for centuries in China. In *Los Chinos de Cuba*, José Baltar Rodríguez also points out that polytheistic religions have existed historically in China. According to Baltar Rodríguez, “Se conoce que, [. . .] la música y la danza jugaron un importante papel en la realización de los cultos a los antepasados y espíritus” (119). The information provided by Baltar Rodríguez points out that in addition to polytheism and the veneration of ancestors, these Chinese religious traditions have something else in common with Santería: music and dance. In Santería,



music and dance are also used in ceremonies and to communicate with *orishas*. Marta Moreno Vega, who in the book *The Altar of my Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería* gives her personal account of her life as a practitioner of Santería, explains the importance of music to the Santería religion. According to Moreno Vega, “Our music traces its origins to West Africa and carries sacred meaning and soul-spirit. It is a conduit that calls down and internalizes spiritual energy for divine celebration, healing, and communication with the metaphysical world” (76).

As described above, veneration of the dead as well as the ability to communicate with those who have passed is an important dimension of Santería as well as of many Chinese belief systems. All of these belief systems share ideas of life and death being cyclical, and that the death of the physical does not lead to the death of the person’s spirit or soul. The ability to communicate with ancestors that have died is important to *Como un mensajero tuyo*’s story line, especially when Enrico Caruso dies. In the introduction to *The Cuba Commission Report*, Denise Helly explains that many Cantonese that went to Cuba believed that, “the spirit of a person, detached from the body at death, carries on an autonomous and human existence. . .” (19). Those who practice Santería hold similar beliefs. According to Moreno Vega, followers of the Santería religion believe that the spirits of their ancestors are always present, “We believe our ancestors live among us and must be honored daily before our altars” (17). She goes on to say, “The omnipresence of ancestral spirits helps guide our daily lives, allowing the ancestors to share their wisdom with us” (17).

The idea shared by practitioners of Santería as well as many Chinese that the human spirit lives on after death is one that becomes very relevant when Caruso dies in the novel. In the novel, Aida recalls the events of the night of August first when Enriqueta was five months old. Aida says that that night Enriqueta was very restless until around 2 am. She and her mother Domitila were also restless and could not fall asleep even after Enriqueta had fallen asleep. They decide to have some coffee and talk. While having their coffee and chatting they hear footsteps. They look outside to see who it could be at that hour, and they see the blurry figure of a man. They stop hearing the footsteps but still see the man moving. Aida turns to look at her mother, and when they look out on the street again the figure is gone, but the footsteps start up again until they seem to stop in front of their house. Aida is convinced it is Caruso, “Es Enrico –le dije a mi madre” (245). Enriqueta then awakens crying, but in a manner very different from the norm. Aida tells Enriqueta, “Tú te despertaste y empezaste a llorar. No era un llanto por hambre, ni llanto para que te cogiera en brazos. Era otra cosa, no lo podíamos comprender, como si te doliera algo por dentro. Tenías tan sólo cinco meses, pero llorabas como una persona mayor” (245). Two days later, Aida reads in the newspaper that Caruso died in Naples. When she accounts for the time difference, she realizes that the time of his death coincides with the moment she and her mother heard the footsteps and saw the mysterious figure (245). A few days later Aida takes Enriqueta to see Calazán. During the visit she asks him about the footsteps they heard the night Caruso died:

Mi padrino respondió que, en el momento en que alguien muere sin arreglar sus cuentas, un mensajero del alma sale del lugar de la muerte y vuela hacia el lugar de su destino. El lugar de su último destino era mi casa, lo había sido desde siempre. Las almas tienen sus viajes contados, y ese mensajero suyo había venido a verte, Enriqueta, a despedirse de nosotras dos, con pena y con amor. (245)

As a final example of the syncretism between Santería and Chinese belief systems, we have the case of the deity mentioned by Aida, Sanfancón. Previously, I discussed how Aida claims that Yuan Pei Fu dedicated his later years to combining Santería with religious beliefs from China. She says that one of the results of his work is the deity Sanfancón. Earlier in this essay, I described how Yuan Pei Fu was in charge of bringing the image of Kuan Kong to Cuba from China. Kuan Kong is commonly described as the Chinese god of war. This figure is extremely important in regards to the syncretism of Santería and Chinese practices. It is the fusion of Kuan Kong and the orisha Changó that leads to the creation of the deity Sanfancón, revered by some practitioners of Santería, as well as of those of the previously mentioned “brujería china.” According to Baltar Rodríguez Sanfancón came to be due to the:

sincretismo entre el oricha Shangó y un ancestro venerado por los chinos, al que denominan Kuan Kong. El culto al ancestro Kuan Kong, fue muy extendido entre los chinos, ya que en Cuba fue convertido en el protector de todos los inmigrantes, constituyendo el factor ideológico que aglutinó a los fundadores de las primeras sociedades chinas en La Habana. (179)

During the year 220 in China, the Han dynasty had divided into factions that were fighting over power. However, the warrior Kuan Kong remained loyal to the emperor. According to Baltar Rodríguez, “. . . la fama de Kuan Yu por su valor, la fidelidad a los principios del juramento y sus cualidades de gran guerrero trascendió a su muerte (es decapitado por los enemigos del Emperador), luego de la cual fue convertido en Kuan Kong, es decir, el ancestro

venerado Kuan" (181). The similarities between Kuan Kong and Changó allows for the syncretism of the two. They are both warriors, considered gods of war. They are also both associated with the color red. Sanfancón, the fusion of Kuan Kong and Shango, is a deity that seems to be exclusive to Cuba. Baltar Rodríguez refers to him as a "ser mítico cubano" (182) and explains that Sanfancón is not known in China (182).

Throughout the novel, there are references to Sanfancón. A number of characters worship this deity. It is very clear that Sanfancón is very important to Chinese Cubans and that even those who are not Chinese are aware of his importance as a deity. Aida on multiple occasions prays to and makes offerings to Sanfancón who she refers to in one instance as "el Changó de los Chinos" (p.184).

Despite the harmony between Africans, mulattoes and Chinese visible through religious syncretism, considerable discrimination and tension exist between these groups. The complexities, conflicts and even contradictions in relationships between people of these different ethnic backgrounds are particularly evident through two of the novel's main characters, Domitila and Aida. Domitila has a great deal of prejudice toward Chinese people and at times seems to even despise them. Yet she seems to only be involved with Chinese men and not men of other ethnic backgrounds. Aida, who is Domitila's daughter and a Chinese mulatta, struggles with how she perceives herself ethnically and as an individual in general, versus how society at large sees her.

Domitila's marriage to Noro Cheng is by all accounts one void of love, at least on her part. She is very cold toward him and limits their interactions. Once we become aware of the circumstances behind the marriage, her coldness and resentment toward him are understandable. According to Aida, "Pienso que mi madre nunca quiso a Noro Cheng, su esposo. Lo conoció cuando él era ya bastante viejo, y ella sólo tenía dieciséis años. Como su propia madre tenía tantos años, y de su padre no había quedado rastro, tan pronto el chino se ofreció para llevársela, se la entregaron con la ropa puesta" (30-31). Aida recalls what her mother told her about her marriage to Noro Cheng:

Un chino, según decía mi madre, era lo peor con lo que se podía casar una mujer, pero lo único a lo que podía aspirar una muchacha como ella, pobrecita y con el pelo duro. Al principio, aquel chino casi no le hablaba, y las pocas veces que lo hacía, mi madre apenas podía entenderlo. Después de algunos años, cuando ella ya creía que su marido, de puro viejo, no le podía hacer hijos, le creció el vientre y yo les vine al mundo. O al menos, eso fue lo que me hicieron creer durante mucho tiempo. (31)

This statement is important for a number of reasons. First, because Domitila acknowledges the discrimination she herself faces because of her ethnicity and economic class. On the other hand, though she herself is marginalized because of her ethnicity and economic class, this does not stop her from demeaning Chinese people, who are also victims of discrimination in Cuban society. And while she may have legitimate reasons to dislike Noro Cheng, since she appears to have been forced to marry him against her will, this does not justify her apparent disdain for all Chinese people. Furthermore, despite the derogatory fashion in which she generally expresses herself about Chinese people, later in the novel we discover that Yuan Pei Fu is actually Aida's biological father. This suggests that while married to Noro Cheng she had an affair with Yuan Pei Fu, another Chinese man. A conversation that Domitila and Aida have the night of Caruso's death suggests that the affair started before she married Noro Cheng, and that her marriage to Noro Cheng was an arrangement to which the three of them agreed (244). More interesting still is the fact that after Noro Cheng's death, when one would assume she was free to choose a mate, she again chooses to become involved with another Chinese man. Aida describes what happened after Noro Cheng's death, "creo que en algún momento se enredó con otro chino. . . . Nunca vivieron juntos, pero la gente murmuraba. . ." (31).

Domitila and Yuan Pei Fu seem to maintain some sort of relationship and a mutual respect throughout their lives. She often meets with him and seeks his counsel. Furthermore, it seems that Yuan Pei Fu, Domitila and Noro Cheng all know that Aida is Yuan Pei Fu's daughter and they agree that Noro Cheng will raise her. This is suggested by the fact that Yuan Pei Fu seems to provide financial support for the three. While conversing the night of Caruso's death, Aida asks her mother why she chose to live in a house on a street named "Amargura": "Me respondió que ella no había escogido nada, que allí la llevó a vivir Noro Cheng cuando se casaron, porque ésa era la casa que había comprado para ellos Yuan Pei Fu. Era la primera vez que me hablaba de esa extraña componenda entre un chino que le había querido y otro chino que nada más se limitó a acompañarla" (244).

The complexities of Domitila's relationships with Chinese men suggest she is conflicted. Either because of her relationship with Noro Cheng, the general societal discrimination toward Chinese or possibly both, she seems to have many negative feelings toward Chinese people. However, her multiple relationships with Chinese men

indicate that she also feels some degree of attraction toward Chinese men. Despite all of the negative and discriminatory attitudes she expresses about Chinese people, when Noro Cheng dies and one might consider her free to choose another mate of a different ethnicity, she again becomes involved with a Chinese man. It could be said that her relationship with Chinese people is one of love/hate or attraction/repulsion.

Aida, Domitila's daughter, describes herself as a "chinita amulatada" (209). Her mother is a mulatta and her father Chinese. During the majority of the novel, she believes her father is Noro Cheng. As discussed previously, Domitila, was married to Noro Cheng. He raised Aida as his own daughter and she was very attached to him as a child. However, as an adult she discovers that her biological father is actually the *babalawo* Yuan Pei Fu. As was explained earlier, because of the marginalization of all of the above groups in Cuban society, relationships and marriages between Chinese men and mulatta and black women were common in Cuba. Although Aida refers to herself as a "chinita amulatada" (209), as a child everyone calls her "chinita." This fact is important for a number of reasons: First, because it bothers Aida's mother a great deal when people call her daughter chinita. Aida says:

A mi madre no le gustaba que me dijera así, saltaba siempre muy ofendida y decía que su hija se llamaba Aida. Luego me consolaba, más bien se consolaba ella, diciéndome que con el tiempo la gente me llamaría por mi nombre. Pero con el tiempo fue peor y las dos nos resignamos, o hicimos como que nos resignábamos: lo chino era lo primero que veían las personas. (30)

However, being aware of Domitila's attitudes toward Chinese people it would seem that what most bothers her most is not that they are not calling Aida by her name, but that they are referring to her daughter as a "chinita." In the above segment we can also see that Aida is also bothered by the fact that people call her chinita. However, in contrast to her mother, it seems in her case it bothers her because she feels that is all they see of her. Unlike her mother, she does not seem to dislike or discriminate against those of Chinese descent. For example, after describing the negative way in which her mother describes Chinese people (30) and the cold relationship between her mother and Noro Cheng, she defends the man she thought was her father and states, "De chiquita me apegué mucho a mi papá. No me importaba que fuera chino. . ." (30). Furthermore, she is not afraid to acknowledge her Chinese heritage or her love for Noro Cheng. What seems to bother her is being categorized exclusively as *chinita*.

According to accounts from numerous characters in the novel, Aida in her youth was considered an exceptionally beautiful woman. Despite the fact that most people refer to her as *chinita* and describe her as *china*, interestingly, when it comes to describing her beauty most people then describe what they consider to be both her Chinese and mulatta features. For example, when Enriqueta interviews Pérez Navarro, a reporter who met Aida during her youth, he describes the first time he saw her. He was in a cantina eating when one of the bartenders points Aida out to one of his co-workers and Pérez Navarro turns to look at the woman they are talking about:

'Mira qué china más linda', le dijo a un compañero, 'esa fue la que escondió a Caruso'.  
Me di vuelta y vi una mujer de espaldas. Tenía el pelo chino, oscuro y liso, pero su cuerpo era de mulata. Estoy muy viejo para explicarle por qué ese cuerpo era de mulata, sólo le digo que allí se le notaba el chispazo. (129)

Despite being exceptionally beautiful and drawing a great deal of what many would consider positive attention because of her beauty (which is attributed to her ethnic mix), she is still faces discrimination, as other mulattoes and Chinese. The events surrounding a romantic relationship Aida has before meeting Caruso particularly highlight this point.

Before meeting Caruso, Aida had been married to a man named Baldomero. When Aida and Baldomero met, he was already married to a woman named Ester. Despite the fact that Baldomero is married, he and Aida become romantically involved and Aida eventually gets pregnant. When Ester learns of Aida's pregnancy, she commits suicide:

Poco antes del nacimiento de esta niña, Baldomero se mudó con nosotras. De su vida anterior sólo trajo un retrato, el de su difunta Ester, que, siendo tan fina, tomó un veneno cuando supo que su marido tendría una hija con otra mujer, una costurera mulata a la que para colmo le decían 'la china'. (32)

As we can see in this account that Aida gives us, it seems that though Ester is upset that her husband had an affair and got another woman pregnant, as any wife would be, it appears that what most upsets her is the ethnicity and social class of the other woman. And what bothers her most of all and seems to have factored in to her decision to

commit suicide is the fact that Baldomero's lover is known as 'la china'.

When recounting going to see Caruso perform *Aida* again discusses how she is made to feel uncomfortable because of her ethnicity. According to Aida, "Algunas personas me miraban, les llamaba la atención que una chinita amulatada, sin prendas y sin grandes lujos, ocupara un lugar tan destacado para ver la opera" (209). This excerpt is important for multiple reasons. First it demonstrates that despite the attention and compliments she receives because of her beauty, Aida is still discriminated against for being mulatta and Chinese. The opera is an environment for Cuba's elite, of which Aida is not a part, and therefore she is viewed as not belonging. This scene is also important because in it we see how Aida describes herself ethnically. Though many call her *la china* or *chinita*, and her mother, on the other hand, wants to disassociate her from her Chinese heritage, by describing herself as a "chinita amulatada" Aida recognizes her ethnic mix and claims all parts of her heritage. She resists the classifications that others impose on her and defines herself as she sees fit.

In "Subjetividades diaspóricas," Dolores Alcaide Ramírez notes that Montero's writing generally contains a "racial component" and that the author describes herself as a "mestiza author" (122). Quoting Montero from an interview by Begoña Toral Alemañ she states, "Montero incluye un componente racial en su escritura y se define a sí misma como una 'escritora mestiza': 'Yo siempre he dicho que me considero mestiza, mulata. Soy una escritora mestiza. No soy una escritora blanca puesto que no tengo totalmente una visión occidental, blanca de la vida o de la literatura'" (122). Alcaide Ramírez also explains that Montero's "escritura mestiza" aims to include all of the voices that form part of the Cuban nation, "Montero entiende la 'escritura mestiza' como una escritura que reescribe el concepto de nación para integrar las voces no solamente de minorías reconocidas, como la afro-cubana, sino también de otras de las que pocas veces se habla, como la china" (124). En *Como un mensajero tuyo* the presence and influence of the Chinese in Cuba is quite evident. In the novel we see how the Chinese laborers who first came to Cuba brought along with them their customs and religious practices. Many of these practices eventually combined with those of Santería to create what many call "brujería china". One example of this *brujería china* is the deity Sanfancón, who is venerated by a number of characters in the novel. However, in contrast to the religious syncretism, the novel also shows the conflicts between the different ethnic groups living in Cuba, and particularly highlights the discrimination faced by the Chinese. In the novel we see that Chinese people face discrimination not only from the dominant class, but also from mulattoes and Africans, despite the fact that they are also discriminated against in Cuban society.

In her discussion of *Como un mensajero tuyo*, and focusing particularly on the character of Aida, Alcaide Ramírez states, "Dentro de la 'escritura mestiza' de Montero, se crean personajes profundamente múltiples, con subjetividades diaspóricas, que se mueven entre espacios e identidades, para producir una sociedad pluridimensional" (124). In the novel people generally classify Aida, who is both mulatta and Chinese, as Chinese because of her Chinese features in spite of the fact that she wishes to have the complete person acknowledged. She herself recognizes all of her ethnic heritage and therefore considers herself a "chinita amulatada". Aida chooses to ignore her mother's negative attitudes against Chinese people. She also does not accept that many others try to categorize her as exclusively Chinese. In the essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in which Stuart Hall analyzes issues concerning Caribbean identity, Hall says the following:

The 'New World' presence –America, *Terra Incognita* –is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference, what makes Afro-Caribbean people already people of a diaspora. I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. [. . .]. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference: by *hybridity*. (119-120)

Aida serves as a perfect example of someone who goes against the established concepts of ethnicity in her society. She openly stands for the heterogeneity and diversity of Cuban society and embraces her "hybrid" identity. By choosing to acknowledge and accept all of her ethnic roots, Aida rejects the limitations others try to impose on her and instead, defines and creates her own identity.

## Notes

**1** In the prologue to the critical anthology, *La narrativa de Mayra Montero: Hacia una literatura transnacional caribeña*, Madeline Cámara discusses Montero's background in journalism and her notoriety for blurring the lines between fact and fiction. She specifically points to works by Vitalina Alfonso which explore this aspect of Montero's writing, including the essay "Realidad y ficción en la novelística de Mayra Montero," which is also included in said



anthology.

**2** According to the article “Barrio Chino: Chinatown in the Caribbean” on the website of the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project, a non-profit organization, in 1847 the frigate Oquendo brought the first large group of Chinese laborers to Cuba. The article states that of the 300 that set sail from China, only 206 survived the voyage to Cuba.

**3** Montero utilizes the spelling Cuan Cong in her novel. However, in English the spelling Kuan Kong is commonly used.

**4** In the glossary of *Divine Utterances* Hagedorn defines *nganga* as, “...the spirit of the deceased person with whom the priest of Palo Monte does his work; also refers to the large metal cauldron in which the spirit of the deceased person lives and is fed” (250). She defines *Palo Monte* as, “...Afro-Cuban religion originating from religious practices of Bantu-speaking people of equatorial and southern Africa (‘Congo’), mainly focused on working with spirits of the deceased” (252).

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