

Book Review

*Afro-Asian Connections in Latin America and the Caribbean.*  
Edited by Luisa Marcela Ossa and Debbie Lee-DiStefano

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**A** *fro-Asian Connections in Latin America and the Caribbean* is an eye-opening volume that challenges established paradigms of national and religious identities in Peru, Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Trinidad. This collection of essays, co-edited by Luisa Marcela Ossa and Debbie Lee-DiStefano, expands on current notions of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) by focusing on the personal and communal bonds that were forged between subjects of African and Asian descent from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. As Lisa Yun reminds us in her introduction, in spite of the increasing number of publications on Afro-Asian connected histories in Latin America and the Caribbean, “these interethnic connections are still largely unacknowledged or obscured” (xii). The editors of this volume and their contributors not only succeed in bridging this gap in scholarship with thematically compelling material, but they do so with intellectual rigor and purpose.

The book comprises nine essays clustered in three sections. Each of the three sections begins with a prelude by Kathleen Lopez that underlines the common *motifs* connecting the essays in the respective section. The first part, “Identity and National Discourses,” contains essays by Debbie Lee-DiStefano, Mey-Yen Moriuchi, and Malathi Iyengar. In “Afro and Chinese Depictions in Peruvian Social Discourse at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” Lee-DiStefano proposes that while José Carlos Mariátegui’s discourse of Peruvian *mestizaje* attempted to redeem the debased condition of native Peruvians, it did so by deriding Black and Chinese Peruvians. Lee-DiStefano points out that Black and Chinese Peruvians complicated the merits of *mestizaje* because, according to Mariátegui, neither group had anything to contribute to the formation of nationality in terms of cultural values or progressive energies.

In “Locating Chinese Culture and Aesthetics in the Art of Wifredo Lam,” Moriuchi draws our attention to Chinese

influences in Cuban art and culture. She examines the case of the Afro-Chinese Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, whose work has been recognized in intellectual circles for its synthesis of European cubism, surrealism, and Afro-Cuban religious practices, but not for its Chinese-Cuban aesthetics. Moriuchi rereads Lam’s works, such as *The Jungle*, *Tropic*, *The Eternal Presence*, among others, in the context of Lam’s upbringing in the Chinese community of Sagua la Grande, with an artistically inclined Chinese father, and demonstrates that Lam’s Chinese-Cuban context is key in understanding his artistic productions. Iyengar’s essay also draws attention to unrecognized Asian influences in the Caribbean. Her “Afro-Asian-Caribbean Connections in Transnational Circulation, *The Harlem Ashram as Chronotope*,” shows that the history of Puerto Rico’s independence movement cannot be fully appreciated without the consideration of the anti-colonial activism that resulted in the diasporic political confluences of the Harlem Ashram.

The second part of the collection, “Contact Zones, Solidarity, and Syncretism,” begins with Zelideth María Rivas’ “Merging the Transpacific with the Transatlantic: *Afro-Asia in Japanese Brazilian Narrative*.” Rivas traces the genealogy of interracial intimacies between Afro-Brazilians and Japanese Brazilians in fictional narratives written both in Portuguese and Japanese between 1950 and 2011. She finds in these literary works “interactions, trysts, friendships, and love that are ostensibly absent from historical narratives,” but that are more mimetic of Brazil’s complex multi-racial communities (96). Indeed, interactions between people of African descent and of Asian descent tend to be discussed as asides or as exceptional instances that do not warrant inclusion in national histories. Luisa Marcela Ossa’s “Parallels and Intersections: Afro-Chinese Relationships and Spiritual Connections in *Monkey Hunting* and *Como un mensajero tuyo*” makes a convincing argument for examining the experiences of the Chinese, Blacks, and of their progeny as integral to Cuban Society. Ossa, more specifically, examines the spiritual beliefs shared by the African slaves who practiced Lukumí

(Santería) and the coolies who followed Chinese beliefs in Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting* and in Mayra Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo*.

Similar to the role of the Chinese coolies, the role of the Indian indentured laborers who participated in anti-colonial movements in the British Caribbean has been overlooked. Linda Aïnouche addresses this gap by examining the impact of Hinduism in the development of Rastafari practices in the 1930s in Jamaica, where thousands of Indian indentured laborers were forced to migrate (1845-1917). Aïnouche's essay challenges readers to further explore the Afro-Indian convergences in Jamaican cultural practices, such as Rastafari, which in the national imaginary is "purely" African. Aïnouche highlights, in particular, the influence that Indians had in Rastafari's conceptualization of personal divinity, its natural diet, its use of cannabis in rituals, and the styling of Rasta hair into dreadlocks.

Part III of Ossa and Lee-DiStefano's volume, "Bodies, Genders, and Identities," opens with Dania Abreu-Torres' "Body of Reconciliation: Aida Petrinera Cheng's Journey in *Como un mensajero tuyo*." Abreu-Torres delves for the second time in the volume into Montero's novel, but her focus is on the subversive figuring of the *mulata-china*, a stereotypically fetishized body in Cuban and Caribbean cultures. Abreu-Torres reads Montero's *mulata-china*—Aida—as a subject who resists fetishization. According to Abreu-Torres, Aida is aware of her own historicity as an Afro-Chinese subject and has the agency to construct her own history. Like Abreu-Torres, Anne-Marie Lee-Loy discusses literary responses to racialized stereotypes. Lee-Loy's focus, however, is on Asian men. In "I Am [sic] Like One of those Women: Chinese Masculinity as Feminist Strategy in Three West Indian Novels," Lee-Loy analyzes alternative models of Asian masculinity in the works of Kerry Young, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, and Elizabeth Nuñez. In these three novels—located in Jamaica and Trinidad—, Chinese men are feminized and androgenized, not for the purpose of perpetuating Western stereotypes, but as a means of arguing for the viability of a non-western type of masculinity that is not defined in terms of violence, oppression, and hegemonic power.

The last essay of the volume follows the others in this collection in showing how literary and cultural practices can be utilized to unsettle notions of East Asians as passive and marginal to the construction of national identity and personhood. More specifically, Martin A. Tsang sheds light on how mixed Afro-Chinese Cuban women have embraced their Chineseness to respond to dominant notions of Chinese *mulataje* as negative and superficial. In "*La Mulata Achinada: Bodies, Gender, and Authority in Afro-Chinese Religion in Cuba*," Tsang surveys representations of Afro-Chinese Cubans in the context of Lukumí practices in a diverse range of sources; among them, literary texts, anthropological studies, theoretical texts, performative arts, and field work. He argues that

in Cuban spiritual practices, the Chinese and racially mixed Chinese-Cubans may function as conduits of supernatural power that sort out social and religious conflicts. Tsang ultimately proposes that the Afro-Chinese in Cuba have been intrinsic in defining current practices of Lukumí religion. As many other authors in this collection, Tsang believes that the legacy of the Chinese presence in Cuba should not be treated as discretionary, but rather as central to the formation of Cuban identity.

Ossa and Lee-DiStefano have produced an excellent book that contributes to the fields of Latin American Studies, Caribbean Studies, Global Studies, Race and Ethnic Studies, and Religious Studies. The essays in this collection should be accessible to undergraduate students with little experience in the specific fields, but should also be useful to more seasoned scholars who might appreciate the exceptional close readings and the more field-specialized bibliography. I myself read this book in sequence, from beginning to end, not by intention, but simply because I could not put it down once I started. The intermingling of more strictly literary essays with essays that used a diverse range of sources had the effect of staving off the kind of fatigue readers often experience when reading multi-authored collections. As a reader, I particularly appreciated the care and effort the editors have placed in controlling for evenness in the quality of research, style, and organization of each essay. All of the contributors clearly articulated the purpose of their essays early on, provided context for better understanding the period they examined as well as their sources, and stated their findings and their implications upon closing.

The only minor observation I would make regards the confusing use of the term "syncretism" in the collection. The term appears in the heading of Part II ("Contact Zones, Solidarity, and Syncretism"), even though Moriuchi and Ossa highlight in their essays its problematic use in the context of Cuban religious practices and, instead, recognize the merits of using Martin Tang's concept "interdiasporic cross-fertilization" (47, 127). This detail, however, is incidental and should not detract from the quality of this highly readable volume that sheds a bright light on the impact of Afro-Asian connections in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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