

## *La Charada China*

It was said that when the Spanish arrived on this island of paradise, that the little apple of death awaited them. It had a pleasant peppery sweetness and was crisp and salty from its saline roots. In the company of tangled mangroves it bordered the sea and greeted any newcomer who thought with arrogance that they could project their knowledge onto this land. It was refreshing until one swallowed it and then swallowed again trying to digest the lie, the greeting of peace that died in the throat. When the men cut branches of this wood to wave away the mosquitoes that were thick upon the skin, the milky sap dripped into their eyes and blistered, blinding them and leaving circular welts the size of coins.

On the private beaches of Casa de Campo (Dominican Republic), I look for these trees, which are sometimes marked in warning with an X or a ring of red paint. But it seems they have all been preemptively removed to protect the delicate tourists and our fragile skin, like the barrier of sculpted rocks carefully arranged in a ring around the designated swimming area of the wild sea. The set is perfect, it was designed by the set designer of Paramount pictures to look like a 15th century Italian villa, where every angle is pre-framed for a selfie shot.

Chinese coolies were brought to the Caribbean since the early 19th century to harvest sugar cane, tobacco and batshit; to make bricks from clay and cement; to mine minerals and metals. The coolie trade was both a continuation of coerced labor and a “solution” to the impending abolition of slavery; poor white farmers who did not benefit in the same way as their rich white plantation neighbors complained that the importation of Chinese workers was “like a dog returning to eats his own vomit”. Like the African and Indigenous slaves, the Chinese also resorted to suicide when they found themselves regularly abused, in virtual enslavement despite their supposedly “free” status due to broken and never ending labor contracts, corporeal punishment, debt-peonage, and sub-standard living conditions.

The most luxurious form of suicide was eating opium, the same resinous drug that politically paved the way for the mass trade in often illegal, unpaid or low-paid Chinese labor. But often these workers simply hung themselves from trees or the eaves of their ramshackle houses. It was said that the “perverse,” “passive,” and “corrupt” nature of the Chinese led them to suicide more quickly than other races. Something about the effeminacy of this “pumpkin-colored” race of “yellow fiends” was linked to a death wish that was associated with a queer sexuality. Because under Catholic Spanish law suicide was a crime, we can trace the rate of Chinese suicides by their regular appearance in criminal statistics. “In 1862, half of the recorded suicides on the island [of Cuba] were Chinese, 173 out of a total of 346. Proportionally the suicide rate for Chinese was one hundred times greater than for whites and fourteen times greater than for slaves.”

To dissuade the Chinese from suicide, the overseers would sometimes mutilate the corpses, dissecting, disemboweling, and desecrating their bodies: “These horrible sights, it is said, took from the Chinese their romantic ideas on the subject of self-destruction.” Even when the bodies of Chinese laborers were not willfully mutilated, they were at best, cast in the side of a ditch. Coolie laborers addressed Chinese officials in the 1873 Chin Lan Pin Commission, sent by the Chinese Imperial court to ascertain the poor working conditions in Cuba. One worker wrote: “We are old and weak and it is only uncertain whether we shall die in a depot or in a

fresh place of service, or cast out as useless by the roadside; but it is certain that for us there will be neither coffin nor grave, and that our bodies will be tossed into a pit, to be burnt with those of horses and oxen and to be afterwards used to refine sugar.” (*Cuba Commission*, 1993, 110).

Fernando Ortiz wrote in the 1940s about the global and hybrid nature of sugar and tobacco production through racialized terms. “Tobacco is dark, ranging from black to mulatto; sugar is light, ranging from mulatto to white. Tobacco does not change its color; it is born dark and dies the color of its race. Sugar changes its coloring; it is born brown and whitens itself; at first it is a syrupy mulatto and in this state pleases the common taste; then it is bleached and refined until it can pass for white, travel all over the world, reach all mouths, and bring a better price, climbing to the top of the social ladder.” This metaphor of racialized class aspirations and consumption was a whiteness that was literally achieved not only through the labor of yellow, brown and black bodies, but through the recycling of the physical bones of Chinese and Indian coolie labor, African and Indigenous slaves who were burned into bone charcoal and used for sugar refining.

There are many ways to die here. I am surrounded by poisonous plants that call to me. The bright pinkish flesh of an ackee fruit bursts open and looks at me longingly with its black seeds like a sheep’s eyes and guaiaba has a texture that makes one want to run your tongue along it. If you leave a glass or even a closed bottle of water out, tiny ants begin a death march and find their way in to drown. They cluster together making a raft of their bodies, holding onto to each other with their mouths, treading water endlessly. The security guards here are young post-teenage men with big guns and shaky egos. Their over-eager and mean-spirited sexuality takes the form of ID checks at gunpoint and apathetic frisking, making clear that your body holds no enticements for them. In the center of town is a church tower that looks uncannily like the one the rich man pushed his already dead wife off of in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and then the ravine below is always an option too. It has a spectacular view.

In the Caribbean, porcelain domestic objects were prized as they were in Europe. Kept safe from the humidity and the fumbling hands of clumsy slaves and servants, porcelain was carefully cherished and kept in locked cabinets. With the increasing ease and reach of transatlantic commercial trade in the 19th century, delicate shipments of family china-soup tureens, plates and cups became less rare and cheaper imitations of porcelain became more accessible across class lines.<sup>i</sup> In Cuba, the Santeria practice emerged where the treasured china cabinet became a ritual altar, and the soup tureen or *sopera*, became a place to house the spirit of a god.

The preciousness of the porcelain object in one context as a class status symbol and as a mysterious and difficult to replicate ceramic material translated into magical, spiritual significance. The presence of Chinese labor subsumed itself into an object that could uphold the superiority of whiteness on the one hand, while containing an African-diasporic syncretic deity within. Lydia Cabrera (1985, 33) writes that “far from being limited to the replacement

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<sup>i</sup> “White Cubans remember the *sopera* as a cherished object of Cuban middle and upper-class domestic life. The *sopera*... [was] saturated with the meanings of domestic well-being and social class status. ...With the increasing diversity and reach of transatlantic commercial nineteenth-century trade, imitations, often of less elaborate materials and design, were disseminated widely across class lines. David Brown, *Santeria Enthroned* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 253.

of earthenware pots beside Santeria altars with “China,” that is, with vases made of Chinese porcelain, “Chinese magic” rapidly acquired a reputation among African slaves and their Spanish masters as “the worst and most powerful of all.”<sup>ii</sup>

But this so-called “Chinese magic” drew from hybrid sources: Spanish loteria cards strongly influenced la charada china, and the Yoruban deity Shango was syncretized with the Chinese ancestor Kuan Yu creating a new Caribbean spiritual figure by the name of Sanfancon who melded the magical, religious and cultural histories from at least three migrations—Spanish, African and Chinese. Indeed it is hard to parse the exact sources for all the mythologies referenced in Caribbean Chinese magical practices. As the Santeria phrase goes, “In the dark, all cats are mulatto.”

(False “subtitles” appearing over a speech given by an animatronic figure of DR resistance leader Manolo Tavarez Justo at the Museum of Resistance in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.)

*I want to take another look at the ocean, behold the vastness of tears from half a lifetime  
I want to climb another mountain, try to call back the soul that I've lost  
I want to touch the sky, feel that blueness so light But I can't do any of this, so I'm leaving this world  
Everyone who's heard of me  
Shouldn't be surprised at my leaving  
Even less should you sigh or grieve  
I was fine when I came, and fine when I left.*

-Xu Lizhi, 30 September 2014<sup>iii</sup>  
(poet and worker at the FoxConn factory in Shenzhen, China).

Xu Lizhi's death was one of many suicides in reaction to FoxConn's labor abuses, drawing international criticism. In reaction, FoxConn installed nets to prevent workers from throwing themselves off of factory buildings and added a “suicide clause” to their workers' contracts, relieving FoxConn from financial and legal responsibility.

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<sup>ii</sup> It is likely that the Chinese also brought their long history of medicine, knowledge of plants and poisons, along with their history, myths, and religious beliefs.

<sup>iii</sup> Xu Lizhi, 30 September 2014, “On My Deathbed,” The lines of these poems were written by Xu Lizhi, a worker who committed suicide in reaction to the harsh working conditions at Foxconn (a Chinese factory producing electronics, including Apple iphones and tablets). Lizhi's death was one of the several suicides that occurred in a compact period of time resulting in international attention to Foxconn's poor working conditions which had caused many workers to calculate that the life insurance their families could collect from the factory was preferable to a life working at Foxconn. Many workers also later used the threat of suicide as a bargaining tactic, threatening to jump off of the roof of the building en masse if not granted higher wages. This “bad press” resulted in a revision to FoxConn's contracts to include an infamous suicide clause. This clause outlined that workers who died on the factory premises due to suicide could not collect life insurance and that workers agreed beforehand not to commit suicide nor to use the threat of it as a bargaining tactic. Foxconn also installed nets outside of the high factory windows to catch any workers who threw themselves off of the building. Xu Lizhi's words are cited here as a contemporary link to the 19th century history of Chinese coolie labor and marks the ongoing poor labor conditions and the use of suicide as a form of desperate resistance.

La Charada China is a gambling game with magical significance and animal symbolism drawn from a host of sources—Chinese, African, Indigenous and European—a typical Caribbean syncretic conglomerate where origins are murky, impure and hard to trace. In the 19th century, la charada china was an event that brought the Chinese coolie laborers together in communities of hope and chance, though it later developed problems of internal corruption and racketeering. While no single laborer had a chance at earning enough money in the system of debt that was stacked against them, a pool of money created by everyone's earnings put together and redistributed to one lucky winner would enable that person to return to the homeland, to die and be buried rather than used to refine sugar cane, or to stay in the Caribbean to open a store and settle down.

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Credits: This video was shot on my iPhone mostly in the Dominican Republic, with exception of the found footage from Tate and Lyle's 1950 film, *From Cane to Cube* showing the process of sugar production and made public on YouTube by Periscope Film LLC archive, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3x0\\_YmRBUU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3x0_YmRBUU)>.

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