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In Another Moment: Exploring Chineseness as Caribbean Diasporic Identity

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There is a dynamic in Stuart Hall's now seminal essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that always arrests my attention; Hall invites us to notice Asians in the Caribbean at the same time as he asks us to ignore their presence. Hall reminds us, that "you *can* find 'Asia' by sailing west if you know where to look" (237), but then insists on collapsing, "for the moment, the many other cultural 'presences' which constitute the complexity of Caribbean identity (Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, etc.)" (240). Of course, Hall goes on to argue for an understanding of Caribbean diasporic identities that are intrinsically fluid – that live with and through, "not despite" difference" (244) – a definition of identity that does appear to make room for moments where the difference of Asianness might be "uncollapsed." But Asianness, or more specifically for the purposes of this collection, Chineseness, remains largely relegated to the realm of silences and suppressions or gestured to as merely an element of the greater "cut and mix" that comprises Caribbeanness.

The essays in this collection seek to disrupt our comfort with this tendency to remain in the moment where Chineseness is "collapsed" into Caribbeanness; to encourage readers to not only *see* Caribbean Chineseness, but to look at it more closely. They are inspired by a graduate class in which students were challenged to think deeply about how Chineseness as a cultural identity is negotiated within the scope of the Caribbean by asking questions such as: when is Chineseness invoked and for what reasons? Is Chineseness as a Caribbean identity significant solely in terms of marking out diversity and creolism? Does exploring Chineseness in the Caribbean provide us with any further insights about how diasporic and Caribbean cultural identities are formed and articulated? In other words, what happens when we dare to "un-cut" and "un-mix" Chineseness in the Caribbean?

Although many of the essays in this collection use Chineseness as an entry point into the texts under study, they soon reveal the impossibility of any clean "un-cutting" or "un-mixing" of Chineseness from larger concepts of Caribbean diasporic identities. In Claire Farley's "Man-Woman Business": Empowerment and Liberation in Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*," for example, "man-woman business" is read as the lens through which Nunez explores the violent legacy of colonialism in Trinidad. The article posits that when anti-colonial ideas of liberation are not divested of the "desire for power," Caribbean people find themselves trapped in a cycle of vengeance and violence that mirrors the systems and machinations of colonialism. Questions of complicity concerning oppression and violence are central to the experience of all the characters in the novel, not the least of whom are Tong Lee and the Chinaman. The centrality of these two Chinese characters (along with other Asians) within the novel unsettles any easy

understanding of Caribbean colonial systems as being simply framed on a Black/White binary at the same time as it signals the incubating role of the colonial system for all diasporic identities within the Caribbean.

Farley's reading of *Bruised Hibiscus* suggests the significance of the return to the mother figure as a way of counteracting the patriarchal violence inherent to the colonial system. In "Replacing the Mother, Reclaiming the Daughter: Silence and Othermothers in Elizabeth Nunez' *Bruised Hibiscus* and Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*", Shelli E. Homer explores the intersection of mothering, violence, and colonial trauma in a more explicit fashion. The article argues that in both *Bruised Hibiscus* and Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, "othered mothers" reclaim Caribbean space and transform it into a motherland through historical revision and recovery. In *The Pagoda*, this process involves reconciling the estranged worlds of the motherland (China) and the homeland (Jamaica). Reclaiming Chineseness as an ethnic identity is integral to Lowe's ability to claim Jamaica as homeland and to reconcile with her daughter by conveying the fullness of Lowe's experience in all of its dimensions.

Like *Bruised Hibiscus*, Kerry Young's *Pao* is explored in two different ways in this collection. Both readings focus on the birth of Pao's multi-racial granddaughter towards the conclusion of the novel as a key moment in summing up the novel's overall message. Dennis Hogan's "And that is not how Jamaica is": Cultural Creolization, Optimism, and National Identity" argues that while *Pao* is situated within the nation building phase of pre- and postcolonial period of Jamaican politics, a period in which ideas of creole Caribbean identities became enshrined in the national consciousness, the novel problematizes rather than celebrates an easy "multiculturalist optimism." Pao's experiences, his choices and his personal philosophies and ambitions consistently disrupt categorization that would fix him in stable and static understandings of identity, suggesting that diasporic subjectivities occur in moments of "mutual dependence and mutual implication" rather than in any inflexibly coherent concept of the Self. Similarly, while Pao greets his granddaughter's birth as a symbol of a new multi-racial Jamaica, the readers' increasing distrust of Pao's easy philosophizing forces them to also think through the limitations and possibilities of what a truly creole identity – one that would consider class as well as race as a factor of creolism – might look like in Jamaica.

Kristine Wilson's "A Cloak That Looks like Help": US Intervention and the Neoliberal Turn in Kerry Young's *Pao*" reads *Pao* as a critique of external and internal constraints that prevented a radical restructuring of Jamaican society during the period around independence. Pao exemplifies the tension between

revolutionary ideals and self-serving actions. As with Hogan's piece, the birth of Pao's granddaughter and the emphasis on her blurred bloodline at the end of the novel is read as a significant gesture towards the direction of Jamaica's future. For Wilson, the blurred bloodlines of Pao's daughter suggests Jamaica's need to move towards an equally blurred, less binarist approach to navigating its political terrain than that employed by previous generations.

Reading the body of Pao's granddaughter as the site on which various political and social ambitions are written prefigures the focus of the remaining three articles in this collection. Tao Goffe's "007 versus the Darker Races" situates Ian Fleming's novel *Dr. No* and subsequent film adaptation within the context of mid-20th century decolonization and, more specifically, the emergence of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Asianism at this time. These movements were perceived as very real threats to a world order dominated by Europe. The mixed-race bodies of Dr. No and of his Afro-Chinese henchman physically manifest this fear. Tzarina Prater's "'Look Pon Likkle Chiney Gal': Tessanne Chin, *The Voice*, and Digital Caribbean Subjects" places the Chinese Caribbean body in a more contemporary context as it explores the participation of Jamaican Chinese singer Tessanne Chin in season five of the American televised music competition, *The Voice*. The article recognizes that throughout the show, Tessanne Chin was positioned at the intersection of two converging discourses. On the one hand, the American gaze, as manifested through the way in which Tessanne Chin was presented to the audience through the song choices provided to her and the reactions of the show's judges re-fetishized Chin as an exotic other within the narrative lexicon of American discourses of Jamaica and of female sexuality. On the other hand, however, Chin's presence on the show provided members of the Caribbean diaspora with an important opportunity to re-inscribe and renegotiate Caribbean diasporic subjectivities. Caribbean peoples throughout the diaspora used the internet to respond to the television show's portrayal of Tessanne Chin, and by returning the gaze in this fashion, asserted their presence as global participants in the digital sphere and challenged mythologies of Caribbean subjecthood.

In a similar fashion, Julie Morrissey's "'Talking Back' in Post-Colonial Discourse in Staceyann Chin's *The Other Side of Paradise*" argues that the Chinese body, or in this case, the mixed-race Chinese body, is disruptive in terms of Caribbean narratives of identity. However, while the televised music-competition format of *The Voice* left Tessanne Chin fixed as the subject of the gaze (both Caribbean and American), the memoir format of *The Other Side of Paradise* allows Staceyann Chin to participate in a process of self-representation. Morrissey argues that Chin writes herself into Jamaican subjecthood by employing both primary and secondary discourse. The participatory voice that Chin creates in the memoir

emerges from the process of both finding a voice with which to speak and of finding a speech that can be heard by other Jamaicans. Thus, Chin's memoir is an important means of modifying, as opposed to departing from, the spaces within which Jamaican subjecthood has traditionally been articulated.

The final two pieces of this collection turn from academic to more creative exercises. Willi Chen's piece is an excerpt from a forthcoming novel. Even though the excerpt begins with the return to Trinidad of a Chinese son who had been sent to China, there are no simple ethno-racial identifications within the world that Chen presents. Identities and identifications are fleeting and shift with individual desires, ambitions, and concerns. In a deeply personal piece, Janice Lowe Shinebourne's reflects on how the tension between her Chinese and Indian ancestry has manifested itself in her work. Like so many of the more academic pieces in this collection, Shinebourne works to dismantle ideas of Caribbean identity that are based on static conceptions of ethnicity or homelands, choosing, rather, to focus on the significance of the common experience of exploitation and struggle as the womb within which Caribbeanness is formed.

Together, the essays in this special edition of *Anthurium* suggest that the moment of collapsing Chinese identity in Caribbean spaces is passed. They also reveal that to look more closely at Chineseness in the Caribbean means neither a debilitating fragmentation of a Caribbean sense of self nor a limitation of Chineseness to fetishized makers of Caribbean creole identity. Instead, exploring Caribbean Chineseness returns us to the familiar territory of Hall's *Terra Incognita* – albeit one in which some of its silences have been broken – and only enriches our understanding of the ways in which Caribbean diasporic identities are truly lived through difference.

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