

The New Face of the Apocalypse in Mexican Orientalism: From Sánchez Echenique's *El ombligo del dragón* to Rivera Garza's *Verde Shanghai*

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Abstract

While Orientalism, the representation, has been under attack for its critical approach since the eighteenth century, its survival as field of study and narrative strategy to the present day speaks to its potentiality, diversity and openness. This article argues that Hispanic Orientalism, in general, and Mexican Orientalism, in particular, persist because of their interplay of political, cultural and symbolic landscapes framed by the Apocalypse. In this light, narratives of the end of time, new beginnings and cyclical events interact across cultural boundaries and competing traditions. Multiplicities survive over the power of a singular Western story because they blur the logics of identity, and displace chaos and disruptive end points by engaging dialog as an opening to a new beginning. This article analyzes two Mexican novels of the twenty-first century, Ximena Sánchez Echenique's *El ombligo del dragón* (2007) and Cristina Rivera Garza's *Verde Shanghai* (2011). These works fulfill a self-Orientalist model that reopens taboo subjects of race, illness, and mental stability in apocalyptic transformations that simultaneously engage, engross, reject and adapt to the Other. Both novels redeploy Chinese culture, mythological figures, life philosophies and science from within Mexican culture, ultimately providing a mirror to the fears and hopes of the society in which they are generated. In effect, these uniquely Mexican narratives establish a dialog on the creation of civilization, the final judgment, and the future foretold that supplants geographic, environmental, national and disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords

Self-Orientalism; Apocalypse; Othering, origins of Orientalism; contestatory strategy; dialogism

Orientalism Revisited

In 1973, the International Congress of Orientalists voted to reject the term “Orientalism” and its professional title “Orientalist,” which after 100 years were considered long-lived from the British and French perspectives. For some, the field was neither specific enough to their discipline nor the region they researched, while for others Orientalism posed a threat because they feared Christian missionaries were ultimately out to destroy Islam and reinforce the primacy of Christianity (Lewis 2000: 254-255).¹ Edward Said's response to the consequences of this radically transformative debate and disavowal, I assert, was his compelling *Orientalism* (1979), where he unpacks the Orient as “almost” a place of European invention. Through the lens of Western colonialism and as a precursor to postcolonial paradigms, *Orientalism* ignites debate by framing irreducible binary oppositions in an emerging critique

of globalization and neoliberal capitalism during the late 70s (Steger 36). Ultimately, Said's exceedingly polemical analysis of the West's power to produce knowledge and control flows of information, representation, and public opinion, what he termed "intellectual smugness," does not terminate debate but registers a pivotal impact on contemporary, postcolonial and neocolonial thinking. Given its success and intrinsic ambivalence, *Orientalism* does not produce the ending expected because it explodes on a scene primed for political change, and links questions of race, hatred, sexuality and power to the field in the guise of otherness.² Over three decades of debate with Said's text produces a corpus of critical literature that rails against Said's idiosyncratic, uneven, flawed work on the one hand, and claims a brilliant, cogent, eloquent critique of colonialism on the other. However, stridently specialists and critics may have called for the demise of Orientalism, the field does not disappear as the vote in 1973 or Said's provocative rhetoric and logic of domination might have signaled.

Although Orientalism, the field, and *Orientalism*, the text, for a growing majority had become for decades synonymous with the problematizing of the colonial gaze and something, therefore, to be assiduously challenged, an insistent counter-narrative had been discreetly emerging for centuries that argued a particular relational and fluid logic of discourse and coexistence. Its dialog in social practice exhibited the potential to engage Others through intercultural openness. Furthermore, its flourishing, emblematic, alternative narratives were compelling and persistent because of their interplay of political, cultural, and symbolic landscapes. A culture of engagement of this nature potentially maps a multiplicity of diverse contact points spread out over time and space, and that is certainly true in this case. What is unique here, nevertheless, is that the engagement focuses consistently and surprisingly upon the reappearance of one point apparent since ancient times: the threat of the Apocalypse. Why intersecting yet competing cultures turn to each other to help explain the end of the world even as they are circulating and testing their emerging philosophic dogma and boundaries, is vital to this study. Importantly, the End paradigm lends authority, credence and respect for competing perspectives in developing apocalyptic narratives and rituals, evolving from the oral tradition of Zoroastrian teachings, Buddhist contemplative philosophy, and Jewish, Muslim and Christian ideologies since the Middle Ages that persist. The objective of the End paradigm in this orientalist context is not to predict the annihilation of the world or the complete destruction of life through the ultimate clash of opposing forces. This trope, rather, in what I will define and explore later as "self-Orientalist" counter-narratives, brokers bold agencies, multiplicities, and narrative complexities that intentionally deepen and strengthen the relationships in which they are located. Furthermore, it blurs the logics of identification to destabilize sites of power located in insider/outsider and global/local paradigms. The

intent of self-Orientalism in Spanish and Latin American literature, film, paintings and graphic images is to reconceive apocalyptic mysteries, displace chaotic and disruptive end points, and engage fluid potential because intercultural openness and respect for other ways of thinking make viable and inevitable a new beginning.

Reimagining Orientalism for the 21st Century:

Why Orientalism now? What may Orientalism offer in the 21st century in the face of dire apocalyptic messages and deteriorating political, cultural, and social metanarratives? Arguably, the continuing expansion of area studies in our institutions of higher learning maximizes similarities (Global Islamic Studies) and ignores difference (Global Studies), is inward-looking, self-reflective, and ubiquitous (e.g., Jewish Studies, East Asian Studies, Hispanic Studies), and devises research that reinforces spatial, linguistic, and ideological structural barriers (Armenian Studies implies *not* Turkish Studies). The openness of Orientalism, in contrast, crosses borders in time and space without limiting the capacity for self-reflection with respect to the Other. Rather than leading with cultural self-regard and redundancy, Orientalism engenders cultural open-endedness and reflection through dialog. It may reimagine and redefine the space for the relationship between East and West, engaging the specificity of the Other regardless of provenance. Facing the Other, Orientalism's promise as cultural marker, geopolitical force, dialog, and symbol of our humanity, advances a formula that privileges proximity, coexistence, engagement, intentionality and relationship. Moreover, Orientalism endures because of its complexity, inclusivity and sites of possibility. It calls for dialog and political action because it is where race, oppression, sexism, classism, and marginalization intersect as critical lived experience within the sites of resistance. It imagines ways of thinking about the Other and modes of political action that connect historical subjects in centers and peripheries transnationally. Orientalism inscribes, to paraphrase Chandra Mohanty, analytical methods for the space of relations between the self-fashioned center and the periphery, and the periphery whose boundedness triggers a response to the center (42). It serves a necessary function at the relational crossroads of intersecting philosophic and cultural traditions during periods of apocalyptic cultural crisis, such as the one in which we are presently living marked by Middle Eastern civil wars, sub-Saharan economic calamities, military expansionism, refugee flight, and disruptive climate change.³ Understanding the extent to which political and economic stakeholders in the East and West shaped and continue to shape cultural and moral economies, sheds new light on the intersection of gender, sexuality, social class, politics, family,

religious beliefs, mysticism, magic, fear and hatred, particularly when explored in Spanish and Spanish-American Orientalist traditions.

Rejecting Orientalism as a master signifier moves it beyond an invisibility that obliges all other signifiers to refer back to it in hierarchical opposition and reduce multiplicities to a flattened image or single story.⁴ Unlike racial and feminist discourses that challenge Western cultural patriarchy and its repressive conceptual framework from within, Said's flattened figure of Western exploitation has yet to imagine a similar contestatory space from within which to challenge oppression and representation. What is missing is Foucault's recognition that discourse inscribes space for counter discourse, made comprehensible through repeated and regular communications between and among Others. What is also missing is the recognition that Modernity (capitalism, colonialism, the first World-System) is not contemporary with European world hegemony, given the fact that Europe only becomes a "center" after becoming "modern" (Dussel "Transmodernidad" 16), requiring a broader understanding of Orientalist history and positionality. Said's portrait argues, "a despotic Orientalism, the malformed creation of Western romantics, masochistic explorers, ardent imperialists, and text-driven university dons" (Varisco 5), diminishing the concept and strategy to a perverse, singular misrepresentation of the Orient. In effect, it does not offer theoretical space for the relationship nor probe the actual production of their subjectivities (Prakash 207). Omitted from this formula importantly is the concept that there is more than one conceptualization of Orientalism and not all Orientalisms are created equal. Fundamentally, all Orientalisms do leave behind questions, paradoxes, ambiguities, unrealized goals, and mysteries that encourage dialog. As Said later in his career advances, Orientalism continues to thrive as a beginning, a site of rupture, instability, and discontinuity for the purpose of grasping the whole project (1985: 41), rather than as a stagnant ending to cultural debate. Because Orientalism opens a space to reconfigure the Orient and the intellectual exercise of power in Othering, grasping that site of rupture is fundamental. It enables us to confirm Said's Orientalist mark on discourses as broad as race, religious, literary, socio-economic, postcolonial and cultural studies, while necessarily and profoundly changing the way we engage the Other.

To regenerate or add to Said's Orientalist project and renegotiate it in the Hispanic World, for example, would be to imagine a role for Others in centers and peripheries that engage in dialog, resist, and speak for themselves, with and through Others. It would persistently rethink and reimagine oppositional West/ East, us/them, white/non-white, Christianity/Islam and non-Christian identities. It would contest intellectual smugness in order to reflect a new beginning in a dynamic, hybrid, multicultural, complex, perhaps chaotic multi-perspective reality. It would facilitate a self-Orientalist

strategy to intentionally negotiate agency through simultaneity, intersectionality, reciprocity and multiplicities, thereby challenging oppressive, stagnant hierarchies. As we move beyond binary oppositions to a model of openness, much Orientalist, feminist and post-colonial analysis points toward the value of situated, contestatory discourse (Ashcroft Griffiths, Tiffin, eds.; Bhabha 1994, 2005; Breckenridge and van der Veer, eds.; Chakrabarti; Chatterjee; Dussel 2009; Klegel; Mignolo 2000, 2008; Ong; Prakash; Rabinow; Robbins; Turner 1978, 1994, 2000). Parallel explorations of gender, as tied to social norms, and social transformation (Butler 7), and race, as aligned with connections, commonalities, and shared values (Mohanty 224), support interconnected open frameworks. Numerous critics (Lowe, R. Lewis, Peirce, Roberts) demonstrating how women's cultural production has always been based on inherently conflicting and unstable positions, for example, explode the specificity of the female gaze in reimagined Orientalist spaces.⁵ Lewis and Peirce, furthermore, directly confront and reconfigure the harem's subtext as a place of political agency and cultural production. In so doing, they and others (Lowe, Kushigian 2016, Doniger, Nagy-Zekmi, Roberts, Spivak 2008, Zoepf) reconceive the debate by rereading the East as a space of political agency and cultural transformation, contesting the power of the single story through alternative macronarratives.⁶ Openness to alternative narratives facilitates a critical space that stimulates connections and cross-cultural adaptations throughout moments of cultural crisis. Orientalism in this standard is a more nuanced, hence more complex and dynamic reading of the intersectionality of social identities and systematic oppression through race, gender, culture, ethnicity, economics, geography and sexuality (Lowe, Kushigian 1991, Peirce, R. Lewis 1996, 2004, Mokyr).

Origins of Hispanic Orientalism, Cultural Crisis and Self-Orientalism:

Hispanic Orientalism is a deep, unremitting conversation sustained perpetually and spatially, reaching across time, more than a millennium, and space, from the land of the Israelites, Mesopotamia, the Saudi Arabian to the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, the Roman Empire, from the Philippines across China, Tibet and Japan, Northern and Central Africa, to stretch across the Atlantic to a New World. It is founded on mutual relations among cultures and a reciprocal gaze, which, being incomplete, opens to negotiation, compromise, insistence, and change. It chooses simply not to victimize and "normalize" the East, nor desensitize the West to the devastation occasioned by conquest and colonization. Because merchants, warriors, trades and craftspeople, emissaries, and political refugees comprised of Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Mesopotamians, Greeks, Visigoths, Romans, Muslims from north Africa, and Jews from the land of Israel, reached, settled, or conquered what the Romans

referred to as Hispania, certain Eastern cultures left insistent and indelible traces on the Iberian Peninsula and a Spanish empire on which the sun never set. Hispanic Orientalism builds on slippages, arbitrariness, and hybridity, which are strategies of subversion that interrupt authority and demand a dialogic openness to the Other through competing cultural systems. It is rooted in some of the earliest modes of competition and coexistence with the Other as they negotiate religious rites, holidays, celebrations, language barriers, market exchanges, social rites of construction, bathing, working, eating, drinking, sexual relations, marriage, battle, poetry, folklore, and everyday greetings, permitting faith and reason to flourish in their respective domains (Alfonso X el Sabio, Castro, Goytisolo, Menocal, Rubenstein, Taboada).

I argue self-Orientalism as a contestatory, dialogic strategy that unpacks unique cultural practices, and demonstrates how radically different but complicit resistance narratives may be with respect to the dominant discourse. As a model, it addresses the dominant discourse, negotiates meaning, and engenders an alternative logic for reading agency in seemingly stagnant cultural and conceptual frameworks. It morphs race, ethnicity and geography into unstable, contestatory discourses during periods of cultural crisis, characterized by the chaos of authority, slippage of meaning, and unpredictability of representation. It demonstrates how people negotiate their place/space as part of something larger: a political network, legal entity, moral people, religious body, ethnic family, racial group, cultural community, or national society. It thrives on productive, cultural tensions in hybrid, multicultural settings. Self-Orientalism encourages responses between and among peripheries and centers that illuminate each other as part and parcel of alternative macronarratives.

We read these macronarratives as translations or traces of selves and evidence of transculturation that has evolved beyond contact and contamination.⁷ Here political agendas do battle with but also accede to the intellectual power of the Other. Centuries later, transporting the Other to the New World on the other side of the Atlantic, Indigenous Americans and slaves replace Muslim and Oriental Others in Spanish Christian imaginaries (Nagy-Zekmi, Hu-DeHart, González-Echevarría, Majid). The works produced evolve into a tool for dialog, resistance, prophecy and eschatology in the evangelical project of the New World that stimulates a reciprocal view of world history and human destiny through an adaptive model of the Other. Furthermore, as the notion of eschatology is not even ostensibly Christian, it provides a format to investigate how earlier intercultural models outperformed or distinguished themselves from current apocalyptic trends. The historicizing of the ancient and indigenous nonhistorical, cyclical nature of the cosmos into a concept that “aims at the foregathering of the future,” the arrival at a time of restoration, restitution, and unending

welfare, demonstrates how competing, concurrent traditions intersect effectively and enlighten each other in reciprocal fashion (Kadir), perpetually intersecting across time and space. This positionality even offers conflicts and crises within dizzying contact zones that collapse, for example, Christian, Jews, and Moors with Aztec, Mayan, and Incan notions of the cosmos, and the beginning and end of time. They are distilled, unified and/or contested through their practice of cleanliness, Islamic jurisprudence drafted into the *Requerimiento* (Seed), slave festivals transported from Spain to the colonies, allegiance to Saints (Santiago Matamoros transformed into Mataindios and Matagringos [Taboada 2004, 2006]), and the syncretizing of the iconic figures of Inti Raymi and Saint John, or Huitzilopochtli and Christ, through Aztec, Incan and Christian festivals. When we re-inscribe the Orientalist debate within those momentous phases of *cultural crises*, a deeper discourse emerges where invasion and empire building and religious wars and philosophical, gender, racial, ethnic, and social ruptures inspire complex cultural debates, transitional moments and unstable identities.

A Self-Orientalist Model: Negotiating the Apocalypse

Thanks to openness, the fusion of cultures and compelling models of endings and beginnings derived from foreign imports, apocalyptic narratives impact each other as they develop in site specific ways throughout Spain and the New World. The apocalyptic scheme, having evolved in varying philosophies and religions simultaneously but also over time in response to the Other, establishes a dialog on the creation of civilization, the final judgment, and the future foretold. It hopes to imprint an undeniable spin on impending events that signals knowledge of and borrowing from other cultures. The End paradigm, essentially, provides a mirror into societies' innate fears and aspirations. These archetypes are laid out in utopian dreams or dystopian nightmares with prospects for regressive or progressive futures, which even include non-human forms such as nuclear war and the Global warming debate.

The End paradigm symbolizes a transgression of religious, social, and cultural norms prefigured in pre-Columbian cosmologies, and produces a model that focuses on the ultimate battle between good and evil. Two Mexican novels of the twenty-first century, Ximena Sánchez Echenique's *El ombligo del dragón* (2007) and Cristina Rivera Garza's *Verde Shanghai* (2011) fulfill a self-Orientalist model that reopens taboo subjects of race, illness, and mental stability in apocalyptic transformations that simultaneously engage, engross, reject and adapt to the Other. Both novels redeploy Chinese culture, mythological figures, life philosophies and science from within Mexican culture. Sánchez Echenique's *El ombligo del dragón* wades into a mythological battle where good and evil, race and non-

color, and cultural Mexico and cultural China collide and fuse. The protagonist is a biologist and mother of a newborn son, Elio, whose father, Ermilo, is researching the albino crocodile in China, having promised to return before the birth of the baby. Ermilo does not return to Mexico but sends in his place an ivory figure of the albino crocodile he is studying. The figure is accompanied by a note that curiously does not make mention of his son, but rather focuses on his excitement over bonding with the animal of study. The note implores the protagonist not to investigate the crocodile's provenance. However, attempting to decipher the power of the creature over her husband, Elio's mother obsesses both intellectually and emotionally over the figure looking for cultural guidance from an older indigenous servant. As it symbolizes a mutant power over her child, the protagonist turns it into the key to reuniting with the baby's father and solving the newly created genetic mystery that causes the pigment to leave the child's skin and hair. In effect, the crocodile symbolizes a twenty-first century view of the apocalypse magnified through genetic mutations.

The End paradigm is dialogued through competing narratives of Chinese and Amerindian mythologies that mark beginning points, fuse and complement each other, to the point where they are inseparable and improved through contact: Landscape imaginaries of Yunnan Province are understood more perfectly in Aztec fields. In other words, is it Eloy, the Mexican geneticist about to make a genetic breakthrough on the albino crocodile in Tali, Yunnan Province, in the Garden of the Marvelous Celestial Flowers, or is it the Chinese myth of creation of life out of death that has the ability to fashion an albino crocodile to extract life and color from everything with which it comes into contact including the written word, thousands of miles away in Mexico? With the collapse of ethical codes, is the biting, wry neoliberal critique focused on Mexican or Chinese *maquilas* (23) that take advantage of the cheap labor supplied by underage poor, young women? Is this an exacerbating appraisal of globalization, poverty and disease seen through the ironic lens of a poor young Mexican beggar in the capital who is characterized as a "productive" global consumer in Reeboks, or that of the Asian kids who make them in equally deplorable conditions (29)?

The rhetorical mechanism is a fascinating cultural conversation that is inextricable from its Other, covering the East in the West, the West in the East, Mexico in race, poetry, mixtures, admixtures, codes and science. Furthermore, its Other is contemporaneous with the self throughout time but also locked into its present moment in Mexico's cultural fabric that intentionally interweaves Asia but also North America by way of "españolish" (English interjected into Spanish text) through cultural icons *lost in translation* and globalized marketing tools ("made in") that exploit and erase borders and national identities. The protagonist's need to decipher cultural and genetic phenomena leads to

an unraveling of the DNA double helix and narrative models that mutate at will and without logic. Following a rhetorical model revolutionized by Julio Cortázar, Sánchez Echenique frees the reader to approach the text alternating dominant “x” chromosome chapters with “y” chromosome chapters in a variety of different combinations organically. That is, formulas mutate and chapters stand independently without the scaffolding of a narrative progression in chronological time. It poses a challenge, therefore, not to the reader’s ability to make narrative sense of the plotline by replicating the author’s intention, but to an ability to grasp complex polemics and genetic clues about the nature of existence dispersed throughout the narrative. These clues offer insight into how other cultures, species, and classifications face apocalyptic endings and mutate or endure distinction. They also suggest those in-between territories between being solely one thing or another that produce interaction and debate:

Lo relevante es que el periodo cretácico, que comprendió la etapa de mayor desarrollo de los dinosaurios, finalizó hace 60 millones de años con su extinción masiva. Aun así, la anatomía del hombre actual sigue guardando semejanzas con la de un cocodrilo. La agresividad aniquila y no sólo eso. En exceso la territorialidad conduce al racismo, la ritualización a la intolerancia, el sometimiento a la dictadura. ¿Pero se tiene noción de que todas estas actitudes pueden tener una explicación biológica? La utilidad de los impulsos generados por el Complejo R es incuestionable; pero, ¿acaso los genes nos traicionan? De hecho, existen lastres de la herencia que lejos de garantizar nuestra pervivencia pueden orillarnos a la autodestrucción. (40)

The guide to evading self-destruction appears to be in the blending of and critical reflection on culture, accomplished through a self-orientalist emptying out of the framing “European racial civilizing matrix” (López Beltrán) for Mexican society. By unpacking unique cultural practices that demonstrate how radically different but complicit Mexican resistance narratives may be with Chinese, Japanese, or Muslim counter-narratives, the mestizo as ideological national icon takes on new meaning.

In general, self-Orientalist readings of messianic, apocalyptic tropes engage animating questions for future generations to address regarding insider/outsider, self/Other, and local/global relationships. In this light, self-Orientalist apocalyptic narratives enliven works from the 10th century through the 21st century, from graphic arts to the written word. Responding to the chaos of the clashes of race, social class and politics, Sánchez Echenique turns to scientific discourse to contest race, color

and even 19th-century pigmentocracy as majority, organizing, regulatory ideals. Referring to Tali, China, the narrative voice connects with the familiar:

Al ver las imágenes, descubro que ir a Tali equivale a conocer un pueblo perdido de los que abundan aquí. Cualquiera familiarizado con el amuzgo o el otomí sabe que el español que hablamos ahora mismo contrasta con las lenguas autóctonas tanto como lo haría con el mandarín. También nosotros somos extranjeros cuando caminamos por las calles de adoquín y tierra que conducen a una pirámide o a una catedral colonial. Aunque a mis comensales les ha dado por pensar que China es una tierra más exótica que la que de vez en cuando se les cuele por las uñas. (61)

What the narrator refers to cleverly as “un ligero malentendido entre los genes” (58) generates a favoring of the exploration of the mestizo nation through science rather than through skin color to explore uniformity and difference. It also suggests discourse as cultural value where the confrontation, unhinging and unsettling of differences may produce misunderstandings that inhere a continued impetus onward toward a discovery revealing human nature.⁸

Travelling to China to locate Ermilo with sister-in-law, Mariana, cousin Julio, and baby Elio in tow, the group finds that Ermilo has discovered the genetic inhibitor he was seeking, with a variety of scientific, political and economic ramifications. While plotting to get him out of the country, they are informed that Ermilo has been taken to Hong Kong by a group of Chinese businessmen to patent his discovery. When they do find him, the formula is gone and with it the nature of the enzymes in the inhibitor, that is, the solution to the baby’s genetic mutation. While the chromosomes of the infant could potentially be read, one would need a patent recognized in the global marketplace to interpret the evidence, so the negotiation of cultures must redirect and redeploy to address an omniscient, global, neoliberal undercurrent. My analysis of the novel as a self-Orientalist work concurs with Valeria Luiselli’s interpretation framed by the female protagonist’s intimate mythology of a sculpted universe, which renders some articles weightless and others as heavy as lead, leaving them difficult to hold onto ultimately. The self-Orientalist strategy, furthermore, turns othering into an exercise that explores how competing Chinese cultures through mythology, environment, science, and familial bonds address the apocalyptic fear of extinction, and exacts a price to be paid for adherence to the flattened, single story. The integral, unstable quality of the narrative contests implacable viewpoints from culture and the curiously systematic field of science, forcing an openness to our predictions of the future and the universe. The narrative ends when the family returns to Mexico with Elio and the persistent mystery

of the albino crocodile intact. The power of an apocalyptic ending to “spread” albinism and erase words from all printed matter is always with them, and serves as impetus to engage a “new beginning.”

Another seamless Mexican exploration of the self in the Other and the Other in the self is Rivera Garza’s *Verde Shanghai*. Unlike a stagnant, stable and flat view of the Orient as interpreted through traditional Mexican Orientalism, this novel exudes full movement, ambiguity and uncertainty. Visually, it reinvests in openness and invites us in like the painting “Geisha” of the young Mexican artist Yishai Jusidman, where the open symbol of the geisha is turned into a pretext for a series of investigations and experiments with monochromatic painting. Rather than referencing cultures and traditions of the Far East, the intent of the exercise is to find a utopian space that exists outside of history and specific cultural references. In this manner, we are called to the space of imaginative freedom opened by the artist and the terrain with open symbols about to be filled with significance (Gallo). This potential for meaning thrives, I argue, on self-Orientalism, and questions the intractability of the oppositional structures Mexico/China, China/Mexico, unpacking and fusing cultural practices of race, social class and family. It rereads the Hispanic World as a way out of intellectual smugness through their complicities and pluralities. In essence, one is not in the real or the imaginary, neither within or outside a Chinese restaurant (the Verde Shanghai), but on a symbolic plane, a threshold, a frontier (Sabugal).

Verde Shanghai rivals Rivera Garza’s first novel, *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999), described by Carlos Fuentes as “one of the most perturbing and beautiful novels ever written in Mexico” (qtd. in Samuelson 135). While *Nadie me verá llorar* combines historical documents and fictionalized accounts exploring madness and mental illness around the period of the Mexican Revolution, *Verde Shanghai* explores the same themes in cultural eruptions that fuse and confuse identity globally. In both, the author writes at “escape velocity, each time breaking free of the pull of past work and routines of writing to offer up a completely new text which challenges us to reengage with her work and vision” (Samuelson 136). The agency of the protagonist, Marina, explores multiple realities and central and peripheral identities, passing through the site of Verde Shanghai as the location through which truth and deceit flow, becoming and disavowing her Other self, Xian. As the author asserts in a talk titled, “Escribir en comunidad en tiempos de violencia” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLvxdWVGIVw), she chooses to explore the poetic within a post-production, fictionalized politic (for example, political activism in Oaxaca and agricultural production). Perennially working with the language of “Others,” Rivera Garza explores that tension through Marina’s multiple personalities that blend, oppose, and negotiate cultural interstices. She intentionally couches racial and social hesitations and doubts

revealed through narrative descriptions, intercalated letters, short stories, messages, newspaper articles, and other formulas.

Here is Rivera Garza's public debate about gender and race that unsettles schemes of national identity by incorporating warrior empires of Mexico, China and the United States, in the negotiation of Taoist and Aztec mythologies, and in the cultural anthropology of sexuality, food, drink and endings. The novel opposes the lives and mental health of two versions of the same protagonist: Marina Espinosa, dedicated to a bourgeois, ritualistic domestic life as the wife of a wealthy, prominent physician, and Xian, her more free and mysterious alter ego. Given to tedium and disgust with her husband's perverse sexual moirés, such as photographing her nude in the throes of a devastating fever, Marina abandons her comfortable home after suffering an automobile accident. She establishes herself as Xian after Xi'an, the capital of the Chinese empire on various occasions for over one thousand years, or the Taoist symbol of Xian, which symbolizes immortality. She settles into a cheap hotel where she begins to write, drink, experiment with drugs and her sexuality. What Rivera Garza experiments with is a narrative that confronts the apocalypse of sanity, "el sentido de la bifurcación" (61), but not the opposition of insurmountable dichotomies. It is, rather, the location in "la Gran Ciudad" where urban cultures transgress boundaries in the Verde Shanghai: "El Barrio Chino. Tan pequeño que casi no merecía nombre de barrio, pero tan real que había sobrevivido con ese título a través del siglo" (70).

El Barrio Chino, an island within an island, decenters yet recognizes China as a site of power, demonstrating cultural elisions and the unpredictability of representation. Chinatowns tend toward microcosms of the originating culture but located throughout the Americas in urban centers, they bend toward cultural fusions. In effect, Eng Menéndez argues, they are a sophisticated reaction to marginalization and a form of ethno-cultural resistance (136). Consequently, Chinatowns emerge as provocative sites to explore how cultural and neoliberal fusions shape urban landscapes quite often seen by outsiders in their reduction as cultural enclaves. The economic value of packaging culture, diversity, and multiculturalism, nevertheless, transcends the original exclusion/inclusion logic of the enclave and affords a negotiation of the apocalypse. Just as Marina produces an alter ego for herself, her search for a mate conjures her alter mate in Chiang Wei. The depression and desolation created by the rain storms are mirrored in the nature of the bird that does not fly away and Marina's avoidance of Chiang's interrogating eyes: "tal vez ahora la ciudad sí perecerá—murmuró Chiang con más alegría que pesar. El dejo de la esperanza colándose por la orilla dentada de sus palabras. —¿Qué?—preguntó Marina. —El fin del mundo—empezó Chiang, pero luego desistió—" (276). Through her entrance into

the Barrio Chino, Marina discovers that as a baby she was betrothed to Chiang Wei, as was the custom in a Chinese cultural universe that supersedes geographic boundaries. Marina's liberation through a manuscript that she writes and revises alone includes Chiang as yet one more persecutor who forces others toward an emptiness outside of themselves. Ultimately abducted and forced to return to her husband's side, the unhinging of Marina's self continues beyond her husband's control and a return to the familiar and the end of the novel:

Esto es la luz. Ésta es mi mano izquierda. Iba a continuar cuando pensó en el rostro que nunca vio. El rostro que no vería más. El rostro de una muerta. Se detuvo. Sintió miedo. Cerró los ojos. Luego volvió a colocar su cabeza frente a la ventana abierta, sobre ella. Abrió los ojos de improviso. Esto es, se dijo. Y se hundió en el otro rostro. Ahora. Y se dejó ir bajo su marea. . . . Uno nunca sabe qué sucede después. (315)

In open dialog with the Other, Marina ventures to inhabit the mental state of Xian in a fluid interanimation of personalities and plot strategies that refuses to recognize an end point. The apocalyptic endings represented by the death of numerous characters, the scourge of the drug world and a persistent psychosis opens to potential new combinations charged with future and unhampered by Marina's physical confinement to her husband's home.

In conclusion, tormenting Endings, fresh beginnings, paradise and hell in the present, salvation, redemption, renovation, cosmic reconstruction, cosmologies of final events, cyclical destruction, calamities, and the Day of Judgment all invoke the apocalyptic tradition, which from the medieval period forward cuts across religious, social, ethnic, racial, geographic and gender divides. Furthermore, the apocalypse creates a stage on which gender, religious and social class norms may be equalized. The End and New paradigms of the trope of the apocalypse have been debated for centuries, implicating primarily the forces of good and evil, utopian dreams and nightmares, and creation and destruction in a final battle. They ultimately provide a mirror to the fears and hopes of the societies in which they are generated and housed. Importantly, these philosophic traditions and conversations across time reflect the anxieties and dreams of societies in cultural crisis that are historically imbedded in dialogs with disparate, wide-ranging, competing and conflicting religions, societies, and aspirations. This cultural borrowing constructs unpredictable power relations, impels action, and measures how effectively the world unfolds, duplicates, and reflects itself when it is never fully concluded. As explored in two superb examples of Mexican Orientalism, *El ombligo del dragón* and *Verde Shanghai*, the apocalyptic tradition evolves and seeks resolution to the philosophic conundrum

of life and death, dialoguing with, rubbing off on, frightening, reflecting, and endlessly inspiring the Other.

Notes

¹ The first “International Congress of Orientalists” took place in 1873. After the vote taken one hundred years later, they renamed the organization the “International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa.” The most recent publication of the conference proceedings appears to be from 1981.

² See my analysis of the roots of Orientalism in the Hispanic tradition that contests the Saidian flattened image by grounding a formula for 1) openness in a relationship in a constant state of flux and renovation that does not present a complete or closed image, imbued with 2) a polyglot nature evidenced in its cultural and creative consciousness owing to a history of cultural and military invasions and coexistence, and envisioned through 3) a persistent dialog or openness with the East that celebrates difference and whose effect is to bring the Other closer (*Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition* 14).

³ In point of fact, *Orientalism’s* broad if not deep applicability across disparate fields reaches a public enticed by political and cultural payoff. Many apply Said’s sweeping theory to a host of genres and media across the board, to all those eroticized, racialized, sexualized, and politicized Others at times without distinction. But Said succeeds in inspiring a nascent postcolonial debate on race, sexuality, ethnicity, power and religion, even though he may not have had the postcolonial tools of arbitrariness, ambivalence and disruption at his disposal that Spivak, Bhabha and others have (Chakrabarti 12). By politicizing an “antiquated” field of study of diminishing multicultural interest, Said makes astonishing inroads in debates of prejudice, hatred, and fear, which undermine the works in which they are housed. I am indebted to his monumental work whose repercussions are felt across time and disciplinary modes of inquiry. With his framework, we can reimagine Orientalism’s potential and, aided by the lens of the Apocalypse refined in the work of Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson, imagine endings and new beginnings.

⁴ The collapsing of Orientalism into discursive formations that include “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1979: 3), diminishes a multifaceted, culturally inflected discourse by privileging a repurposed, political agenda, having “less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (Said 12). To make a powerful statement credible about colonial discourse and the tension between its synchronic view of domination and its diachronic view of history (“Orientalist reality is both antihuman and persistent” 44), Said locks the East away in a structure that offers no movement beyond its comparatively inadequate position, a non-place that emphasizes what it is not and cannot be (“if the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to note how in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction” 42). Consequently, even as Said asserts the West’s role as dominant cultural translator and authority, he flattens out the story of the East. This is a hollowing out of a potentially rich counter-narrative by ironically stressing the power and danger of the single, Western story. Through his example, he tells the story of the East only from the West’s point of view, unintentionally robbing nations of people of their dignity and making the recognition of their equal humanity difficult, as filtered through the lens of the danger of the single story exposed by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

⁵ Peirce addresses the private yet civically regulated hierarchical space of the imperial harem, a source of economic power for many women (6), and Roberts investigates the reality of harem as social space and source of feminine fantasy (181). A Western corollary in social order and hierarchy is the Mexican, seventeenth-century convent explored in Sor Juana’s autobiographical *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (see Kushigian’s “*El Primero sueño de Las mil y una noches*: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, orientalista”).

⁶ In similar interdisciplinary mode, economist Joel Mokyr frames his study of the origins of the modern economy in the sixteenth century as a culture of growth rooted in openness, arguing that all individuals have cultural beliefs they are socialized with and cultural characteristics they “choose” or acquire through association with others. This he terms “choice-based cultural evolution,” making societies more competitive, creating better incentives (increasing the positive and reducing the negative) to produce intellectual innovation and diminish “taboo” topics in order to stimulate growth.

⁷ For Spanish, Arabic is the second most influential language after Latin, owing more than four thousand words to an Arabic origin. Many of the words can be attributed to their greatest usages at the time as military terms and instruments of battle, or agricultural products and their systemic uses. Moorish Spain is known for its Arabic epic narratives sung as “villancicos” using some lyrical couplets in Latin that reproduce a hybrid culture. Perhaps this amalgam is forged through a gathering of Indian mathematics and Greek science and philosophy, to which they put their own seal (Lapesa 97, 99).

⁸ It is a cultural approach to genetics similar to the one explored by Carlos López Beltrán, a Mexican historian of science, whose contribution to a collection of essays *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation and Science in Latin America*, illuminates the complex role of race and *mestizaje* in the understanding of Mexican identity and genomic science. Race science often shrouds racism beginning with asymmetrical power and sexual relations between Indian women, black slaves and white Spanish conquerors, racial *castas* or admixtures becoming the organizing principal around regulatory ideals. Recognizing that fact, pioneering work in Mexican genetics in the 20th century conducted by León de Garay, Rubén Lisker and Rocío

Vargas used molecular markers to quantify European, Amerindian, and African components of admixtures in order to locate and evaluate local mutations with possible pathological and ethnic importance (91). The founding of the federal government's INMEGEN in 2004 seemed to point toward valuable discoveries in the Human Genome Project from the perspective of Mexican biomedicine, but often skewed the results in the study of Mexican mestizos and Zapotec Amerindians for nationalistic reasons rather than for scientific ones. By positioning itself to conduct a more pragmatic view of population genomics, the authors of *Mestizo Genomics* argue, it can complete a sorting of the genome of the Amerindian subject (105). Subsequently, the project may ultimately aid in comprehending and tolerating "otherness" at all ends of the spectrum and not just at the extremes of the population mix, allowing legitimate space in the Mexican psyche for foreigners and those of different ethnic backgrounds including Asians (Lomnitz referenced in López Beltrán et al 88).

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