

---

## Orientalism and De-Orientalism in Contemporary Latin America: Reading César Aira

---

CHISU TERESA KO  
URSINUS COLLEGE

### Abstract

Scholars of Latin American Orientalism have argued that Orientalism from Latin America, because of its peripheral position, does not harbor imperialist intentions but rather a desire for South-South allegiances. Nonetheless, contemporary depictions of Asia and Asians continue to be deeply stereotyped and Orientalist. This paper examines the functions of the Orientalist imaginary in present-day Latin America, especially as consumers and producers have become aware of Orientalism's discursive power. Analyzing three Asian-themed novels by César Aira, this article argues that there is a momentous convergence of Orientalism and de-Orientalism in contemporary culture which at once dehumanizes and accepts Asia.

### Keywords

De-Orientalism; South-South allegiances; Asians in Latin America; techno-Orientalism

Readers of César Aira's "Asian trilogy,"<sup>1</sup> *Una novela china* (1987), *El pequeño monje budista* (2005), and *El mármol* (2011), cannot be sure whether these novels are offensively Orientalist or rather de-Orientalist critiques of Orientalist discourse. Do the musings about dragons as an emblem of life, the idealization of enlightened Buddhist monks, and the racist diatribe against Chinese immigrants mock Asians or satirize Argentina's racist discourses? Is the repeated use of the pejorative and diminutive *chinito* meant to criticize its real-life use or simply reproduce it?

These questions should not surprise readers of the existing scholarship on Latin American literary Orientalism. Julia Kushigian's seminal proposal that Orientalism in Latin America does not harbor imperialist desires but rather embodies a "spirit of veneration and respect for the Orient" and promotes "blending of oppositions" establishes a certain paradox in its very definition (3). The uncertainty about the Orientalism or de-Orientalism of Aira's three texts—or even of Latin American Orientalism itself—is symptomatic of the shifting meanings of these concepts. What do Orientalism and de-Orientalism mean in twenty-first century Latin America? What are the functions of Orientalist writing and of de-Orientalist criticism today, if Orientalism is what Edward Said characterized as the

imperial West's "limited vocabulary and imagery" of the East and its counterpart is the attempt to uncover the discursive mechanisms of Orientalist imagery (60)?

Understanding contemporary Orientalist discourses and de-Orientalist critiques is especially relevant today if we consider the increasing interest in Asian themes in Latin American cultural production and the equally proliferating scholarship on this topic. Sebastián Borensztein's film *Un cuento chino* (2011), about a recent Chinese arrival to Argentina and his friendship with a local, broke new ground when it became a box office hit throughout Latin America. While the film's focus on an Asian character and topic was a first in mainstream cinema, it also followed a growing trend in Latin American interest in Asia, Asians, and Asian motifs. This trend appears in the popularity of imported Asian cultural products such as K-pop, Japanese comics, and art films as well as Latin American cultural products that reference Asia. Some of these works renew old Orientalist traditions—such as the resurgence of travel chronicles to the so-called Orient (Corona) or the emergence of what Héctor Hoyos (151) calls "the orientalist novel"—while others, like the film *Un cuento chino*, explore issues that had been previously ignored including Asian immigration to Latin America or Asian-Latin American identity.<sup>2</sup>

Héctor Hoyos describes the crop of novels about Asia as a cultural reflection of the intensifying economic exchanges between Asia and Latin America (150). More broadly, the growing role of Asians in Latin American cultural products and national imaginaries results from a newfound discourse of multiculturalism and its embrace of ethno-racial diversity (Ko, "Multicultural Novels" 2). While the increased interest in Asian subjects challenges, in some respects, the marginalizing discourses that preceded them, the persistence of Orientalist and racist images even in well-intentioned representations of Asians remains troubling. *Un cuento chino*, for example, despite its message of cross-cultural friendship, mostly reiterates stereotyped views of Asians as shy, subservient, incomprehensible, foreign and inherently funny while reducing China to a *cuento chino* (in Spanish, a "lie" or an "unbelievable story") (Erausquin; Ko, "Foreigners and Heroes" 281-82). Contemporary cultural products repeat and reinforce received images of Asians—which range from favorable stereotypes to notions of the yellow peril—with concerning frequency, raising the question of what they mean today, especially in Latin American cultures that presumably express a desire for interconnection.

Scholarship on Asians in Latin America has followed the popular interest. Researchers have recently begun to shed more light than ever before on Asian-Latin American communities and on how dominant cultures have imagined Asian peoples, nations, and the very idea of the East.<sup>3</sup> Said's Orientalism—the idea that the Orient is discursively constructed to allow Western imperialist

projects—has been the foremost measure to understand and, at times, challenge representations of the East. The primacy of Said's *Orientalism* as a critical tool—or to borrow Brett Levinson's term, de-Orientalism—is in part a reflection of the insistent (and disappointingly) Orientalist discourses about Asia, and further, an indication that Orientalist attitudes continue to shape the position of Asian descendants in Latin America and its cultural imaginary. So while some scholars assess that the “continuing importance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* lies in the persistence of the concept of the Orient as part of the academic metanarrative of history” (Gran 21), it also hinges on the tenacity of the Orientalist imaginary in cultural products and everyday interactions.

Research on Latin America's literary Orientalism has been particularly prolific, covering a wide range of authors and periods, from José Vasconcelos to Jorge Luis Borges and *modernismo* to contemporary literature.<sup>4</sup> This scholarship as a whole has raised some important points about Latin American Orientalism. First, scholars agree that Latin American imagination about the East has historically been intertwined with global Orientalisms. But despite borrowing heavily from the Orientalist tradition of the West, there is a strong tendency among scholars to contend that Latin American Orientalisms “evinced their own logic” and therefore cannot be equated to Western Orientalism (Klengel and Ortiz Wallner 15). Building on Kushigian's notion that Orientalism in Latin American literature is not an imperialist exercise but rather a desire for interconnection, recent scholars have considered it a way to engage “imperialist fantasy without reproducing its ideology of cultural superiority” (Hoyos 166), a form of exploration of South-South connections (Álvaro Fernández Bravo, Koichi Hagimoto, Ignacio López-Calvo, Araceli Tinajero), or a challenge to the hegemony of the West (Francine Masiello, Mariano Siskind). However, some scholars like Laura Torres-Rodríguez question this critical tendency, asking “why the term Orientalism is retained, even if it denotes a relationship that exceeds the parameters introduced by Said” (80). Scholars have also pointed out that authors and readers alike have become increasingly familiar not only with Asia and Asians—through direct contact or the global circulation of cultural products (Fernández Bravo 60; Hoyos 166)—but also with the Saidian notion of Orientalism. As a result, some recent literary works with Asian themes appear to be highly self-aware of their own Orientalism or to even parody Orientalist writing (Holmes 71-72).

In a broader theoretical context, de-Orientalism as a critical approach has been widely polemical and Said's *Orientalism* “has been attacked, defended, rebutted and restituted with no apparent end” since its publication (Elmarzafy and Bernard 2). As a result, Said claims that *Orientalism* has become “several different books” in an almost “Borgesian way” (330). Graham Huggan identifies three broad patterns in the myriad of critical responses to the de-Orientalist method presented in

*Orientalism*. First, that Orientalism has lost its critical strength as the broad use of the term “risks emptying out an already mythologized category of the Orient, and turning Orientalism into a codeword for virtually any kind of Othering process” (Huggan 125-126). Second, quoting James Clifford, Huggan lists the conscious or inadvertent mimicry of the very “essentializing discourse it attacks” (126). And finally, accusations that Said’s *Orientalism* reproduces the “self-authorizing maneuvers” and “transhistorical and cultural generalizations” of classical Orientalism itself (Huggan 126). But the thorniest and most unrelenting question in regards to the de-Orientalist method has been one that Said himself had posed: “what of some alternative to Orientalism? Is this book an argument only *against* something, and not *for* something positive?” (325). Critics have also argued that de-Orientalism’s lack of alternative is problematic. Levinson wonders what lies beyond the endless task of unearthing “an already unearthed eurocentrism” (*Ends of Literature* 127). Rey Chow acknowledges that “continually problematizing the presumption of stable identities” is an important de-Orientalist charge but calls for the need to examine “what else there is to learn beyond destabilized identities themselves” (75).

At this juncture of ambivalence and uncertainty, this article poses some critical questions regarding Orientalism and de-Orientalism in present-day Latin America. First, how can we understand the persistence of Orientalist imaginary today when, according to scholars, Latin America’s attitude towards the East does not harbor imperialist intentions? Second, what is the point of the Orientalist imaginary in a context in which both producers and consumers have become aware of the mechanisms of Orientalism? Third, what would be the critical significance of de-Orientalism—or the task of unearthing and opposing Orientalist thought— today, four decades after the publication of Said’s seminal book? In sum, how can we make sense of the seemingly unending cycle of Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing when authors, readers, and critics alike have become highly aware of the mechanisms and limitations of both Orientalist and de-Orientalist operations?

I address the questions I pose in the context of Aira’s “Asian” trilogy. Aira’s prolific literary production—tallying 70 novels—has challenged the boundaries of both literary canon and literary criticism. Dierdra Reber indicates that a critical consensus has emerged which considers the whole of Aira’s work as an artistic procedure (rather than a product) “that wagers everything in its fight against the normative currents of perfective canonization” (374). Sandra Contreras argues that Aira’s dissident literature is not a mere parody of traditional narrative forms (107). Instead, she posits, it is an “ejercicio transcendental” that attempts to recuperate the “relato en su ‘estado puro’” and reveal its fundamentally repetitive nature (106). In addition to the commentary on narrative’s formal and

abstract aspects, however, Reber underscores the importance of examining the representations of contemporary culture and the “political dimensions” of Aira’s works (374-75). She contends that while Aira’s texts “may not explicitly insert themselves into a recognizable or realistic rendition of everyday life, they nevertheless unmistakably ground themselves in the fact of global culture in the local Argentine context” (375). The novels we examine here exemplify Reber’s arguments: they are both an inquiry on narrative (specifically, the possibilities and limitations of Orientalist narrative) and a rendering of Orientalism’s political and real-life dimensions globally and locally.

*Una novela china*, *El pequeño monje budista*, and *El mármol* each takes us through different phases of Orientalism that Said described: invention, confrontation, and sympathetic identification (Said 116-20). But unlike classic Orientalists, Aira’s contemporary writings bear a self-awareness of their own Orientalism, and, the author’s attempts to de-Orientalize them, however unsuccessful, mark the texts. The novels, then, serve a triple function: as Orientalist texts, as de-Orientalist projects, and as meta-critiques of both Orientalism and de-Orientalism. I argue that these novels reveal a momentous convergence of Orientalism and de-Orientalism in contemporary culture, much as Levinson warned in his 1997 essay “The Death of the Critique of Eurocentrism: Latin Americanism as a Global Praxis/Poiesis.” The merging of these previously opposing impulses re-signify each of these operations while continuing to marginalize the East. If for Said, the critical labor of de-Orientalism was not a mere denunciation of Orientalist representations but rather a fundamentally postmodern destabilization of fixed identities and metanarratives, de-Orientalism at the wake of an increased awareness of Orientalism incites a search for a “true” and fixed, albeit anti-Orientalist, identity. Propelled by a rejection of Orientalism, Aira’s novels search for the possibilities of a real or non-Orientalist representation of Asia and Asians. In the process, however, they find themselves in an inseparable and cyclical operation of Orientalism and de-Orientalism which at once de-humanizes and accepts Asia. While scholars are right in asserting Latin American Orientalism’s unique qualities to arrest Eurocentrism, Aira demonstrates that it does so by subjecting the archetypal “Orient” to a repeated process of Orientalism and de-Orientalism. I argue, then, that contemporary forms of Latin American Orientalism may allow some South-South connections between two Orientalized subjects, but they also solidify the East’s instrumentalized and Orientalized position.

### **Aira’s Asian Trilogy and Orientalism**

*Una novela china* follows the life of Lu Hsin as it intersects with the landmarks of modern Chinese history—from the Long March to the Great Leap. Lu Hsin appears to lead an unremarkable existence

in his remote mountainous village but a closer look reveals a life far from the ordinary. For example, despite his humble background he turns out to be exceptional at everything he does—from hydraulic engineering to journalism—and his most important and secret life project is to marry the exotic girl that he has adopted from a marginalized ethnic group. The characteristic tensions of Aira's narratives—between ordinary and extraordinary, quotidian and historical, real and absurd—merge in this novel with the fundamental question of whether or not to be Orientalist.

Critics have noted that Aira's short novels tend to loosely weave absurd events and accelerate into an even more absurd conclusion (Lanctot 146). Hoyos also points to Aira's frequent "recourse to nonsense" to challenge literary conventions (151). Although *Una novela china* does pursue absurdity and nonsense in order to destabilize the fairy tale genre, as Hoyos indicates (152), it nonetheless stays away from the extremes to oscillate delicately between verisimilitude and absurdity, and compliance and iconoclasm. In this way, *Una novela china* undertakes an important Saidian dilemma: if Orientalism is both an inaccurate and imperialist discourse on the other, "how does one represent other cultures? What is another culture?" (Said 325). Said himself did not have an obvious response to these questions or to the criticism that de-Orientalism fails to provide an alternative system. Instead, he underlined the "importance of *oppositional* critical consciousness" (326) and urged mindfulness about the real and political consequences of Orientalist imagination (96).

We can read *Una novela china* as an exercise in addressing the possibilities of representation of others. Unlike the two other novels discussed here, it does not have an explicit Western protagonist or narrator. But the Western gaze nonetheless appears throughout. The title, for instance, is not only a variation of the pejorative expression *cuento chino* but also indicates something that only a presumptuous outsider could imagine: a singular and reductive "Chinese novel." Such a designation places both author and reader outside China or the novel itself, establishing the "exteriority" upon which Said wrote "Orientalism is premised" (20). Moreover, commonplace stereotypes constantly interrupt the details of Lu Hsin's everyday life through precious Chinese porcelain objects, tea rituals, landscape paintings, the Great Wall, Maoist state programs, and dragons. These images pervade the text as a reminder that the Orient is an invention of the West and that the West's authorship and authority spill over into the narrative despite the writer's best intentions. So although Aira displaces the West from the plot, and the Western narrator from the narrative, they return to displace China itself, creating a representation of the Orient that conforms to what Said describes: "a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as 'the Orient'" (21).

Ironically, the novel's Orientalism and its failed attempt to portray a presumably real China is its way of challenging Orientalism as a system of knowledge. When Lu Hsin goes to see a play featuring very realistic dragons, the narrator states:

cuando una fantasía se ha repetido tanto que el sentimiento de irrealidad ha llegado a embotarse, es preciso despertar a la gente. Y no se la despierta convenciéndola de una vez por todas de lo que ya está convencido, esto es, de que lo fantástico no es real, sino todo lo contrario: poniéndole el dragón bajo las narices en todo su esplendor flamígero. (Aira, *Una novela china* 167)

The dragon that awakens the viewer is a stand-in for Aira's China. As Orientalist visions of China—a series of literal “*idées reçues*”—become not only knowledge but also the only available knowledge through reproduction and repetition (Said 94), Aira concocts an oblique attempt at realism to remind us of its fictionality. This sort of *de-Orientalist Orientalism* warns us about the “limited vocabulary and imagery” that Orientalism imposes but also about the crisis of de-Orientalism as it relies on its very object of opposition (Said 60).

Levinson cautioned against the impending convergence of Orientalism and de-Orientalism. According to him, “[o]ne cannot be at all sure . . . that this critical response to Orientalism actually avoids participating in the very discourse that it contests” due to de-Orientalism’s pursuit of the “ontology of the other and cultural difference” (20-21). Even if Said did not make such assumptions, Levinson adds, Latin American scholarship “presupposes an authentic Other who preexists an inauthentic Othering” (21). The slippage of de-Orientalism, then, is that it “wants to rescue Otherness from its false, Western representations when, in fact, the present and future status of Latin American studies hinges on another task entirely, a deconstructive task: that of detaching the Other from truth” (Levinson 22). Said would agree with Levinson when he states that he does not intend to “suggest that there is such a thing as a real or true Orient” nor a “necessary privilege of an “insider” perspective over an “outsider” one” (Said 322). At the same time, however, he cautions that “it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality” (5).

Aira's two other novels pick up on the momentous convergence of de-Orientalism and Orientalism or the slippage “between the ontological and the cultural, the essential and the existential—between a reading that posits Third World inhabitants as Other (an ontological statement) and one that studies the way that, at a specific historical moment, particular discourses and peoples have fabricated this Otherness (a cultural statement)” (Levinson 21). Both *El pequeño monje budista* and *El mármol* portray and satirize the search for an anti-Orientalist and presumably true Asia, ultimately

revealing the current inseparability of Orientalist and de-Orientalist operations. At the same time, if *Una novela china* dialogued with the Orientalist images of an “archetypal China,” the more recent novels tap into the tropes of contemporary techno-Orientalism in which the West’s desire and fear of technological domination lead to an imagination of Asia and Asians in “hypo- or hypertechnological terms” (Roh, Huang and Niu 2).

*El pequeño monje budista* is about a French photographer, ironically named Napoleon Chirac, who travels to South Korea hoping to capture an authentic image of this nation inaccessible to the ordinary Westerner and even to modern South Koreans themselves. He hopes to find such an unmediated space in Buddhist monasteries but fears falling into tacky tourist traps or emitting the exoticizing gaze of the elite Western photographer. He meets his ideal guide, the tiny Buddhist monk of the title, who appears to fully understand his vision throughout their absurd but exotic journey. Their adventures confirm Korea as Napoleon has read in the Western Orientalist archive: a land of ancient traditions, bewitched mountains, and Buddhist monks as wise as they are tiny. Napoleon also gets glimpses of Korea’s impressive technological advances—at once admirable and troublesome—but tries to ignore them. The servile monk seems to exist for the sole purpose of satisfying Napoleon’s thirst for the exotic and the conclusion shows that he is. We discover that the monk is not human but a 3D animated product designed to cater to Westerners’ Orientalist fantasies. The perfect lighting that had implausibly lasted all day and the mystic Buddhist rituals had been entirely staged for Napoleon’s camera.

Throughout the odd pair’s adventures, there are signs that South Korea does not conform to Napoleon’s Orientalist expectations. For example, he discovers that the Buddhist monks, when unobserved, eat French fries, drink coke, and dance to loud K-pop. The final reveal creates a twofold disappointment for Napoleon. First, it dashes his expectations of a fully traditional Orient. Said describes this kind of sentiment, calling it common among Western visitors to believe that “new, misunderstanding dis-Orientalists,” have betrayed the old and true Orient (104). His second disappointment, of course, is that he had photographed a myth. Napoleon’s anti-Orientalist mission and his search for authenticity reveal only Korea’s unreality and its people’s inhumanity, or at the very least, his own incapacity to encounter a real Korea and Koreans.

The third novel, *El mármol* (2011), explores an Orient that has infiltrated Argentina in the form of Chinese immigrants and their ever-multiplying grocery stores, rendering them no longer distant, attractive, or exquisite.<sup>5</sup> The narrator and protagonist is a middle-aged Argentine man, once well-off but now fallen on hard times, who visits a Chinese-owned supermarket and gets embroiled in an

absurdist adventure through the Chinese underworld in Buenos Aires. His counterpart, Jonathan, is a badly dressed Chinese youth whose broken Spanish and unrefined manners repel the protagonist. The first-person narration deliberately relinquishes its credibility throughout the novel, not only through the use of the absurd that characterizes Aira's work, but also because of the narrator's utter inability to understand Jonathan and his "habla atropellada" (*El mármol* 59). In this way the entire narrative—both the narrator's sentiments and the plot—are tentative, making even the simplest of interactions and actions dubious (e.g., "El chino: "quince". (O decía otra cosa?)" (21), "me decía, creo, que teníamos que ir" (58)). The narrator's assertion that "a los occidentales todos los chinos nos parecen iguales" also magnifies his confusion throughout (66). As soon as he steps into the sub-world of Chinese immigrants he loses all sense of space and reality, unable to distinguish between supermarkets, people, languages, and worlds:

A los chinos de los supermercados . . . [n]o se les entendía nada. Aun cuando el que los interrogara tuviera mejor oído que yo para descifrar el mensaje a través de sus gruesas deformaciones idiomáticas, creo que no habría sacado nada en limpio. Pues no solo eran lenguas distintitas, sino que esas lenguas eran expresión de diagramas distintos del mundo. (31)

Even when he meets a young Chinese man whose Spanish he could readily understand, he explains, "Estos dos ejemplares de adolescente oriental eran opuestos, pero yo seguía sin entenderlos, a uno por bruto, al otro por demasiado fino" (94). The story follows the narrator's gradual solution of the Chinese riddle he finds himself in using as clues the knickknacks he got from the Chinese grocer instead of change. This is a playful reference to the fact that Argentine retailers frequently don't have change and the stereotype of Chinese grocers as sneaky. He eventually learns—or imagines, since nothing is certain—that a stone toad he happened to have in his garden was the key to the riddle. Jonathan needed him because a group of Chinese businessmen had offered a grocery store as a reward to anyone who brought them the stone toad. Despite his disdain for the Chinese, and his absolute confusion, the narrator follows Jonathan and even begins to daydream about being the owner of a *chino* (in Argentina, a synonym for grocery store).

As in *El pequeño monje budista*, we learn that the Asian characters are not human. The businessmen turn out to be aliens, Martians disguised as Chinese, who needed the stone to reconstruct their spaceship and return to their planet. Ironically, just as the main character discovers that the Chinese are extraterrestrials, he realizes something about their humanity:

Tuve un pensamiento en cierto modo premonitorio: ellos también eran seres humanos. Mi distracción anterior podía provenir, culpable, de haber estado pensando en todos ellos solo como chinos. Es asombrosos cómo aun alguien más o menos culto, de izquierda, puede caer en las trampas del racismo, que muchas veces, si no siempre, es cuestión de palabras. Pero tampoco se pueden reprimir las impresiones que brotan naturalmente de la realidad. Después de todo, estos chinos eran chinos. (Aira, *El mármol* 93)

We can see that despite the narrator's growing sympathy toward the Chinese, and in particular toward Jonathan, with whom he now identifies, the narrator cannot escape his racist and Orientalist thinking. As Said pointed out, "no matter how much a single Oriental can escape the fences placed around him, he is *first* an Oriental, second a human being, and *last* again an Oriental" (101).

Aira also explores how contemporary anxieties about Asia's economic and technological powers reflect the unrelenting position of the Oriental. Scholars have pointed out that if traditional Orientalism "arrests Asia in traditional, and often premodern imagery" (Roh, Huang and Niu 3), techno-Orientalism "contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive and futurized Asia to further affirm the West's centrality" (7). In *El mármol*, a French diplomat in a black bulletproof car rescues Napoleon Chirac just as he begins to suspect that the monk might not be real. The diplomat warns his compatriot of the dangers of these 3D characters on the loose hunting for unsuspecting European and North American tourists ever since those countries blocked their entry at customs. Meanwhile, the virtual monk attempts to head home (a T.V. screen somewhere across the forest). He wants desperately to catch a show about Korea's latest technological invention, a device that identifies the exact location of women's clitoris. But he has strayed too far. He tries as hard as he can, with his short legs, to get home but he is exhausted. And as if he were running out of power, he begins to dim as his "resplendor debilísimo" gets engulfed in the immense darkness of the woods as the novel concludes (Aira, *El pequeño monje* 96-97). New discourses of techno-Orientalism cure and replace Napoleon's classical Orientalism (of Buddhist riddles and mystic mountainscapes). Regardless, the switch salvages his humanity and humanism. According to Roh, Huang, and Niu, techno-Orientalism exoticizes the technology that it attributes to Asia but it also "dismisses . . . Eastern modernity as both process and product of dehumanization" and "should that modernity ever transition to hypermodernity (and threat), its dehumanizing means and ends reaffirm the West's monopoly over liberal humanism" (223).

The Chinese-Martians of *El mármol* who had invaded Buenos Aires with their vulgar manners and ugly supermarkets, or their futuristic spaceships, return to their planet with a big explosion. They leave no trace behind except for Jonathan, “más incomprendible que nunca” and still with his “malos modales” (Aira, *El mármol* 142). But this no longer bothers the narrator since he has regained his own humanity by accepting the inhumanity of the technologically advanced Chinese-Martians or the sub-humanity of the immigrant Jonathan. The premodern (Jonathan, the “bruto”) and the dangerously hypermodern (the extraterrestrial) alike turn out to be disastrous; only the liberal humanism of the narrator’s Western subjectivity can salvage either one (Roh, Huang and Niu 14). As the narrator helps heal a wounded Jonathan, he pronounces: “Yo ya estaba curtido: lo aceptaba tal cual era” (143).

### **De-Orientalist Orientalism**

Aira’s three novels are at once Orientalist, de-Orientalist, and critical of de-Orientalism. Certainly, through parody and overblown stereotypes, Aira criticizes a deficient but persistent Orientalist imagery imposed by a long history of Western power. Even when his narrators try to approach a true Orient, it does not exceed a set of images that scholarship identifies as Oriental exoticism, despotism, sensuality, backwardness, and hypertechnology (Roh, Huang and Niu 2; Said 203). In acknowledging this limitation, Aira raises questions about the usefulness of de-Orientalism. Dismantling or resisting Orientalism, his novels reveal, triggers a search for a “true” Korea or the “real” Chinese, which can never be attained. Notwithstanding these oppositional positions, the novels can also be read as Orientalist texts themselves because of their tiresome insistence on Orientalist and belittling portrayals of Asia, and their final reduction of Asians not only as “Orientals” but as non-humans.

Questioning both Orientalism and its antidote, Aira’s three novels examine the changing functions of these discourses. Although current forms of Orientalism perpetuate an existing relation of domination, they no longer constitute an unquestioned system of knowledge about the so-called East. According to Said, in the nineteenth century, the mere use of the word “Oriental” was “sufficient for the reader to identify a body of information about the Orient” which was both “morally neutral and objectively valid” (205). Today, the same word suggests to the reader a racist and discursive product resulting from Western power. Exoticizing China as the land of dragons, searching for a fetishized Buddhist essence in Korea, or ridiculing migrant *chinos* is always within an arm’s reach of self-awareness, cynicism, and rejection. And this implied rejection triggers the de-Orientalist search for truth: if Orientalist representations are not true, then what is? Neither Said, Levinson, nor Aira advocate for a “true” representation of the East. This does not suggest, however, that a real

correspondence to the Orient (Said 5) or “Other sites of enunciation” do not exist (Levinson 26). The question is not whether they exist (for Levinson, “[o]bviously they do”) but rather “whether those subaltern loci can be transferred to the domain of knowledge or discourse” (26).

Hoyos observes that, in *Una novela china*, Aira shows the multipolarity of Orientalism which “takes place in a broader canvas that includes Eurocentrism and occidentalism; he emphasizes, even in his distinctly comical register, that in a globalizing world, simple dialectics of center and periphery must make way for truly multipolar modes of thinking” (153). Taken as a whole, the three novels literally try out different modes of Orientalism. *Una novela china* presents an exotic Oriental fable purely imagined by an absent but universal Western narrator. *El pequeño monje budista* inserts a Westerner who aspires to be anti-Orientalist—but is fundamentally Napoleonic—in modern Korea. *El mármol* examines the Third-World Orientalism of a broke Argentine as he wrestles with the arrival of Chinese immigrants who threaten his country’s Europeanness and perceived order. But in all this multipolarity—the apparent shifting of positions, places, temporalities, and points of views—the subject position of the Argentine author is a common denominator. The hidden question is whether the Orientalism Argentines, or Latin Americans in general, propagate is authoritative, given their status as not-quite West. What is Orientalism from a Latin American perspective, given it is subaltern and itself Orientalized? As Ignacio López-Calvo asks: “Can we speak about orientalist discourse when the exoticist gaze comes from formerly colonized countries? Can a text be considered orientalist if it exoticizes the other without an obvious idealization of self?” (*One World Periphery* 1). Moreover, what is the appeal of Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing today when the mechanisms and limitations of both Orientalist and de-Orientalist operations have been revealed? As mentioned earlier, Latin America’s own Orientalized position has led scholars to ascribe to it a unique, benign, or even contestatory Orientalism. López-Calvo locates in Latin American Orientalisms a general lack of “an ethnocentric process of self-idealization or an attempt to demonstrate cultural, ontological, or racial superiority” in contrast to the imperialistic Orientalism Said describes (5).

Concerning the Argentine case in specific, Francine Masiello views its Orientalism as a way to arrest “the paradigm of North/South flows that traditionally have ordered the Argentine’s imagined map” (145). In other words, Argentine writers use the trope of the Orient not to acquire authority, but rather to challenge existing authority and power structures. For Masiello, then, the trope of the Orient launches Argentine literature onto the various deconstructive tasks of postmodernity. Graciela Montaldo reads Aira’s parodic exoticism as an exercise to overcome the limitations of twentieth-century Argentine literature—namely, its solipsistic and referential tendencies. The exotic fable of *Una*

*novela china*, according to Montaldo, “le otorga a la literatura argentina el atisbo de nueva dimensión: reconocer la existencia de lo ajeno” and reinstates fiction’s fundamental function not to “desentrañar una *verdad*” but rather to “crear nuevas imposturas” (112). Amanda Holmes maintains that Aira’s exoticism “does not make fun of China itself, but rather of Orientalism” (80) emphasizing “the concept of perspective, rather than the idea of a strange and marvelous place” (78). Holmes argues that *Una novela china* is an exercise in understanding the function of perception and “the importance of the viewer’s gaze” in artistic creation (83). Hoyos agrees that Aira’s “nonsensical provocation” exposes the contradiction and superficiality of the “exoticist gaze” rather than concealing it. He adds that this form of Orientalism is “a point of departure for creativity: all that primitivism meant for surrealism without the ideological superiority, without the teleology, a meeting of have-nots in Green Mountains [China] and the have-nots in Coronel Pringles [Argentina]” (155).

The scholarship mentioned above views contemporary Latin American Orientalism—such as Aira’s—as the opposite of Western Orientalism: its goal is to challenge modernity’s ideas of truth, subjectivity, authority, and literary convention rather than to assert them. They argue that in doing so they create political allegiances with other Orientalized peoples rather than dominating them. In short, Latin American literature resorts to the language of Orientalism in order to de-Orientalize. However, to simply talk about a *de-Orientalist Orientalism* in contemporary Latin American literature overlooks some fundamental questions. Why rely on an Orientalist imagery that hinges so heavily on the West’s imperialist projects if de-Orientalism is the ultimate purpose? Is it acceptable to instrumentalize the East or to reinforce a deeply racist and Orientalist set of images as long as a novel appears to have a de-Orientalist goal? Is there a point at which parodical or satirical renderings of Orientalism cease to be critical? Hoyos justifies the use of stereotypes about Asia as a lack of precedent: “Latin American fiction knows that oriental stereotypes are not the Orient, but it does not quite have a developed imaginary to replace them (166).” He continues, optimistically, that the “present juncture is rich in possibilities, as exoticism still drives the literary imagination forward, while its more undesirable aspects appear less taxing” (166). For Hoyos, despite their stereotypes and Orientalist images, Latin American novels about Asian subjects attempt to explore “different modes of cross-cultural representation” at a moment in which “globalization has brought about phenomena such as interconnectedness without strong cultural bonds, abundant yet scattered information, and a growing curiosity unmatched by first-hand experience” (166). Fernández Bravo attributes to Aira’s stereotyping of China a nearly deconstructive function (65-67). According to him, these recurrent stereotypes, by

virtue of their “condición iterativa,” dismantle essentialisms and expose “no solo la condición artificial del sujeto que simula representar, sino la de quien se vale de él para mirar el mundo” (67).

But Aira’s trilogy hints that it does not want readers to normalize the use of stereotypes as critique or an Orientalism with anti-Orientalist intentions and a de-Orientalism entirely dependent on its antithesis. Instead, it ridicules the cyclical pattern in which fiction Orientalizes in order to de-Orientalize, and de-Orientalizes in order to Orientalize, suggesting that there is a threshold in which iterative stereotyping or parodic Orientalism ceases to be critical. *El mármol* begins with the narrator wondering why he is sitting on a slab of cold marble with his pants down. The novel reconstructs the narrator’s memory of his baffling interactions with the Chinese. By the end of the novel we learn that the narrator saves Jonathan, the Chinese adolescent who lures him into the strange world of Chinese-Martians, and also the entire human race, from a supposed apocalypse. While he is happy to have overcome his Eurocentrism he fears that something fundamental might have changed through his reformed attitude toward racial others. When he pulls down his pants to check on his genitals, he is relieved that his masculinity is intact. Then he sits down on a cold slab of marble with his pants still down remitting the reader to the very beginning of the novel in which he was asking himself why he is in this position. In this way, the narrator’s transformation and his newfound bond with the Chinese are rendered useless as the circular narrative structure triggers the exact same narrative and diatribe against the same group.

De-Orientalism might reveal the historic misrepresentations of the Orient and attempt to defy the core ideas of modernity. But it also triggers a demand for the impossible emergence of an authentic, properly represented or representable subject. In doing so, says Levinson, de-Orientalism holds on to the notion of the subject, reconstructing, “despite its intentions, modernity’s crumbling ground” (31). The demand for such an essential Oriental subject ultimately betrays de-Orientalism’s argument that the Orient is a discursively “constituted entity” (Said 326). The convergence of Orientalism and de-Orientalism today, then, solidifies a form of marginalization that oscillates between continued misrepresentation and the search for an unfeasible true subject, modernity and postmodernity, hypotechnology and hypertechnology, mystic Buddhist monk and 3D animation, or unwelcome *chinos* and aliens. Even if parodic Orientalism—fairly common today and as embodied in Aira’s novels—opens up the possibilities of de-Orientalist critiques, its routine repetition, lack of alternative, and structural circularity wear away its subversive effects, if they ever existed.

Most interestingly, Aira’s narrators demonstrate how the ever-present (even if veiled) subject position of an Orientalized Latin America is most fitting for the simultaneous projection of

Orientalism and de-Orientalism. Aira's exoticism, according to Montaldo, undercuts the "self-referentiality" of Argentine literature and rids it from the burden of "truth" (107). But it does so by deploying the cycle of Orientalism and de-Orientalism, burdening the Orient with the task of truth. In other words, by simultaneously Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing Asian subjects, the novels defy the language of empire that Orientalizes the non-West (including Latin America) without falling into the actual trap of de-Orientalizing Latin America or Argentina. Such a de-Orientalization would be both impossible and self-essentializing. Instead, Aira de-Orientalizes Argentine literature and unburdens it from the weight of Orientalism, modernity, and truth by transferring it elsewhere, mainly on what the West has called the "Orient."

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to make sense of the seemingly unending cycle of Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing in contemporary Latin American culture when all parties involved—producers, consumers, critics—have become aware of the inner workings and limitations of both Orientalist and de-Orientalist operations. Aira's Asian trilogy gives us an indication of the possible appeal of Orientalist imagery in twenty-first century Latin America. As scholars of Latin American Orientalism have suggested, Aira confirms that an Orientalism produced from the periphery is, at its core, anti- or de-Orientalist. Notwithstanding the contestatory impulses and intentions of such de-Orientalist Orientalism, we analyze Aira's three novels in light of Levinson's critique of de-Orientalism in which he identifies the eventual convergence of Orientalism and de-Orientalism. According to Levinson, the impulse to refute, deny, or reject Orientalism invariably slips into a search for an essential Oriental subject, itself an act of Orientalism. Aira's fiction, and the meta-critique inscribed in it, illustrate both the compliant and subversive aspects of Orientalism and de-Orientalism, earnest Orientalism and parodic Orientalism, and classic and techno-Orientalism. But ultimately, Aira shows, or meekly parodies, the continued supremacy of the West and its winning humanism.

Through the use of techno-Orientalist tropes, especially, Aira's works explore the possibilities of a post-Orientalist era (not literally a state of overcoming Orientalism but a moment in which covert Orientalist discourses have been revealed). When the broader culture favors Asia's presumed technological advances and new media creates new possibilities of communication, techno-Orientalism may add a "wrinkle to the critical commonplace that Orientalism...produces and reproduces an oppositional East to cement Western hegemony" (Roh, Huang and Niu 8). Pairing it with parodic Orientalism, Aira examines how he can undertake critique with this new form of

Orientalist imaginary. He succeeds in lifting some misunderstandings and misconceptions in *El pequeño monje budista* and *El mármol*. Napoleon understands that his anti-Orientalist pursuit of a real and local truth was itself Orientalist while the racist narrator accepts the migrant *chino*, broken Spanish and all. But by exemplifying both Asians as non- or sub-human, these representations turn out to be examples of what Masanori Oda terms “contacts without encounter” (qtd. in Roh, Huang and Niu 10) in which “technology comes to mediate ‘contact’ between East and West through techno-Orientalist discourses” that is ultimately vacuous (10).

Latin American Orientalism, as scholars have asserted, can be exceptional in its desire to subvert Western Orientalism or Eurocentrism. But despite having historically created South-South bridges and connections, as existing scholarship traces, it is important to question whether these new forms of Orientalist writing continue to fulfill such purpose. Is it really possible, at this point in history, to appropriate the Orientalist vocabulary *sans* its ideological and political implications? After plenty of parodies of Orientalism, can additional parody serve a subversive purpose? Does parodical Orientalism, de-Orientalist Orientalism, or the cycle of Orientalizing to de-Orientalize and vice-versa imply that there is no other way of representing Asia (or marginalized others) outside the Orientalist paradigm? Aira’s oblique attempt to arrest the dominant discourses of the West for and from Latin America by Orientalizing/de-Orientalizing the archetype of the “Orient”—distant and imagined—is symptomatic of the contemporary dilemma of a lack of alternatives. Such a discourse perhaps allows some superficial South-South “contacts” today. But it also creates and solidifies a South-Orient relation between (an albeit peripheral) South and an “Orient” that is maneuvered, instrumentalized, imagined, and Orientalized or de-Orientalized at will. Whether explicit imperialism is at stake or not, it is hard to imagine such an Orientalism is purely benign or allied.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Álvaro Fernández Bravo identifies an “Asian corpus” in Aira’s extensive literary production. He cites Sandra Contreras’s observation that Aira’s work should be categorized in subgroups (55).

<sup>2</sup> See Erausquin for an analysis of the representation of Chinese immigration in *Un cuento chino*. See Ko (“Between Foreigners and Heroes”) for an analysis of three recent Argentine films that portray Asians as mediators of a new national narrative.

<sup>3</sup> For the most recent interdisciplinary edited volumes see Camayd-Freixas and Rivas and Lee-DiStefano.

<sup>4</sup> See Kushigian’s seminal work on Hispanic Orientalism with a special focus on Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, and Severo Sarduy. For a long-term examination of Orientalism in Argentine literature, see Gasquet. For a study of Orientalism in Hispanic *modernismo*, see Tinajero (2003). Recent edited volumes that examine Orientalism in the broadest spectrum of Latin American literary and cultural production include López-Calvo (2007, 2010, 2012) and Tinajero (2014). Klengel and Ortiz Wallner expand the existing scholarship by examining cultural exchanges between India and Latin America.

<sup>5</sup> Chinese immigrants constitute the fourth largest immigrant group in Argentina today and is among the fastest growing groups. Grocery stores have become a niche occupation for this group throughout the country. In one estimate, they own nearly 80% of small grocery stores in Argentina (Federación de Empleados y Servicios 17).

## Works Cited

- Aira, César. *El mármol*. La Bestia Equilátera, 2011.
- . *El pequeño monje budista*. Mansalva, 2005.
- . *Una novela china*. 1987. Debolsillo, 2005.
- Attwell, David, Ziad Elmarsafy, and Anna Bernard, editors. *Debating Orientalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Borensztein, Sebastián, director. *Un cuento chino*. Pampa Films, 2011.
- Camayd-Freixas, Erik, editor. *Orientalism and Identity in Latin America: Fashioning Self and Other from the (Post)Colonial Margin*. U of Arizona P, 2013.
- Chow, Rey. *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading*. Indiana UP, 1998.
- Corona, Ignacio. "Orientalismo Updated: La emergencia de una modernidad asiática en la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea." Conference Paper. Latin American Studies Association International Congress. Caribe Hilton. San Juan, Puerto Rico. 30 May 2015.
- Elmarsafy, Ziad, and Anna Bernard. "Orientalism: Legacies of a Performance." Attwell, Elmarsafy, and Bernard, pp. 1–17.
- Erausquin, Estela. "Los inmigrantes en el cine argentino. Panorama general y estudio de un caso actual: Un cuento chino, 2011." *Amérique Latine Histoire et Mémoire. Les Cahiers ALHIM*, 23, 2012. journals.openedition.org/alhim/4264. Accessed 7 August 2016.
- Federación Argentina de Empleados de Comercios y Servicios. *Informe: Relevamiento sobre supermercados en Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Secretaría de Estudios y Estadísticas, 2001. www.faecys.org.ar/Informe\_Supermercados.pdf. Accessed 10 Aug. 2016.
- Fernández Bravo, Álvaro. "Apropiaciones de la cultura china en la literatura sudamericana contemporánea: Contribución para un mapa tentativo a partir de obras de César Aira, Bernardo Carvalho y Siu Kam Wen." *452° F*, vol. 13, 2015, pp. 50–70. Web. Accessed 28 July 2016.
- Gasquet, Axel. *Oriente al sur: el orientalismo literario argentino de Esteban Echeverría a Roberto Arlt*. Eudeba, 2007.
- Gran, Peter. "Orientalism's Contribution to World History and Middle Eastern History 35 Years Later." Attwell, Elmarsafy, and Bernard, pp. 18–37.
- Holmes, Amanda. "China in Argentine Exotismo: Contemporary Inventions of the Orient." *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 85, no.1, 2008, pp. 71–83.
- Hoyos, Héctor. "Three Visions of China in the Contemporary Latin American Novel." *One World Periphery Reads the Other Knowing the "Oriental" in the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula*, edited by Ignacio López-Calvo, Cambridge Scholars, 2010, pp. 150–171.
- Huggan, Graham. "(Not) Reading Orientalism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 36, no.3, 2005, pp. 124–136.
- Klengel, Susanne, and Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, editors. *Sur – South: Poetics and Politics of Thinking Latin America/India*. Iberoamericana, 2016.
- Ko, Chisu Teresa. "Between Foreigners and Heroes: Asian-Argentines in a Multicultural Nation." *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*, edited by Paulina L Alberto and Eduardo Elena, Cambridge UP, 2016, pp. 268–288.
- . "'Argentina te incluye': Asians in Argentina's Multicultural Novels." *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2015, 1–13.
- Kushigian, Julia A. *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy*. U of New Mexico P, 1991.
- Lanctot, Brendan. "César Aira, inversionista o, la crisis de la nueva narrativa argentina." *Cuaderno internacional de estudios humanísticos y literatura*, vol. 14, 2010, pp. 145–55.

- Levinson, Brett. "The Death of the Critique of Eurocentrism: Latin Americanism as a Global Praxis/Poiesis." Camayd-Freixas, pp. 19-34.
- . *The Ends of Literature: The Latin American 'Boom' in the Neoliberal Marketplace*. Stanford UP, 2001.
- López-Calvo, Ignacio, editor. *Alternative Orientalisms in Latin America and beyond*. Cambridge Scholars, 2007.
- , editor. *One World Periphery Reads the Other: Knowing the "Oriental" in the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula*. Cambridge Scholars, 2010.
- , editor. *Peripheral Transmodernities: South-to-South Intercultural Dialogues between the Luso-Hispanic World and "the Orient."* Cambridge Scholars, 2012.
- Masiello, Francine. *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Duke UP, 2001.
- Montaldo, Graciela. "Un argumento contraborgiano en la literatura argentina de los años '80 (sobre C. Aira, A. Laiseca Y Copi)." *Hispanérica: Revista de literatura*, vol. 55, 1990, pp. 105–12.
- Reber, Dierdra. "Cure for the Capitalist Headache: Affect and Fantastic Consumption in César Aira's Argentine 'Baghdad.'" *MLN*, vol. 122, no. 2, 2007, pp. 371–99.
- Rivas, Zelideth María, and Debbie Lee-DiStefano, editors. *Imagining Asia in the Americas*. Rutgers UP, 2016.
- Roh, David S., Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, editors. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. Rutgers UP, 2015.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.
- Siskind, Mariano. *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*. Northwestern UP, 2014.
- Tinajero, Araceli. *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano*. Purdue UP, 2003.
- , editor. *Orientalisms of the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian World*. Escribana Books, 2014.
- Torres-Rodríguez, Laura J. "Orientalizing Mexico: Estudios Indostánicos and the Place of India in José Vasconcelos's *La Raza Cósmica*." *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2015, pp. 77–91.