Search for Utopia, Desire for the Sublime: Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*

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Cristina García’s 2003 novel *Monkey Hunting* departs significantly from the novelist’s first two highly-praised books, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). Instead of focusing explicitly on Cuban American/Cuban relations and depicting a specifically Cuban diaspora post-1959, *Monkey Hunting* takes place in China, Cuba, the United States, and Vietnam. In just over 250 pages, the novel tells a family history of four generations, covering a time period between a Chinese man’s 1857 migration to Cuba and the middle years of the Vietnam War. It employs third- and first-person points of view, male and female voices, and fragmented sequencing. While García used multiple viewpoints and settings in her first two novels, *Monkey Hunting* expands in ethnic, geographic, and chronological focus. Moreover, *Monkey Hunting* defies tidy genre classification. It blends genres, including the slave narrative, family saga, historical and immigrant fiction, prose, and poetry. The novel’s beginning seems more like a slave narrative than anything else, but as soon as the protagonist Chen Pan escapes from a Cuban sugar plantation, this description becomes insufficient. A helpful family tree signals a family saga, yet the novel’s relative brevity contrasts with celebrated family sagas such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1982). Ethnic mixing in the novel—Chinese and African, Afro-Chinese Cuban and Vietnamese—also impedes neat classification.

Perhaps because of some or all of these issues, *Monkey Hunting* received more mixed reviews than García’s first two novels. While many praised García’s knack for sensuous detail, several reviewers found the novel’s lack of development dissatisfying. Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times Book Review* claims that *Monkey Hunting* “is an honorable attempt to recover ancestral memories. But all her blossoms and incantations and tears don’t quite succeed in making those ancestors live again” (11), and Michiko Kakutani perceives *Monkey Hunting* as lacking “the fierce magic and unexpected humor” (E6) of *Dreaming in Cuban* and calls the novel’s beginning “workmanlike.” An additional review claims that “García leaves too much story unexplored. The book is succinct at the expense of the fine characterizations and plot developments that grace García’s previous works . . . this novel whets, but doesn’t sate, the appetite”
(González O2F). Another states, “the novel jumps abruptly” and “reads jerkily” (Cobb E3). Carlo Wolff, meanwhile, views “character development” as García’s greatest weakness (E10), and Anne Stephenson believes that the “novel seems unfinished” (E4).

Rather than evaluating the novel according to a realist paradigm, as these reviewers do, I analyze how the novel’s compressed aesthetics enact a search for utopia and a desire for the historical sublime. These concerns posit a political perspective different from that of 1960s radicalism and post-1960s multiculturalism. Thus, my reading of *Monkey Hunting* adds further support to Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez’s argument about post-sixties Latino/a literature as a whole: “rather than turning away from politics, contemporary Latino/a writers are renewing that [Civil Rights] political tradition by engaging with the triumphs and defeats of the past, formulating political projects that will mark our future horizons in substantial and creative ways” (7). My analysis highlights how *Monkey Hunting* adds to this thread in contemporary Latino/a literature. The novel’s search for utopia and its desire for the historical sublime advance a creative political project that criticizes top-down government programs, including Castro’s application of communism and, to a lesser extent, the US version of free-market capitalism. I focus on utopia and the historical sublime to show the narrowness of negative evaluations of *Monkey Hunting* and to uncover continuities in vision among García’s first three novels.

The utopian impulses of *Monkey Hunting* derive from a recuperation of historical horrors that suggest parallels with the contemporary world. These recuperations encourage readers to imagine a society significantly different from the present and the past. García’s vision overlaps with Ruth Behar’s belief that the imaginative limits of seeing Cuba “as either a utopia or a backward police state . . . since the revolution” create “little room for a more nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and in the diaspora give meaning to their lives, their identity, and their culture in the aftermath of a battle that has split the nation at the root” (2). García’s fiction coincides with a time when Cuba’s future possibly remains more in doubt than it has for over fifty years: what will happen to Cuba after Castro’s application of communism loses its hold? Will US free-market capitalism consume alternative imaginings of Cuba’s economic and cultural future?

When I use the term “utopia,” I am not referring to a static, perfect place, nor am I using a secret code for socialism or the free market. Instead, I agree with Fredric Jameson, who argues that utopian visions attempt to imagine a society “radically different” (*Postmodernism* 339) from the present. According to Jameson, utopia should not be conceived of as a place or
a predetermined end, but as a process in line with the demanding dialectical thinking of both Hegel and Marx. The “Utopian idea,” Jameson writes in *Marxism and Form*, “keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is” (111). Some readers might object to my application and definition of utopia by claiming that *Monkey Hunting* focuses on the significance of luck more than on imagining a qualitatively different society. Moreover, the novel’s dominant mood is sadness, so how could one describe it as utopian? My purpose, however, is not to classify the novel as utopian fiction, but to identify utopian strains that help illuminate García’s fictional interventions. García’s search for utopia underscores the nightmares of history—especially those tied to totalitarian communism and free-market capitalism—while simultaneously positing history and utopia as beyond representation but nonetheless desirable.

**The Historical Sublime and Utopia**

*Monkey Hunting* exemplifies the characteristics of the metahistorical romance. Amy J. Elias argues that the historical novel has changed significantly since World War II: opposed to realist and modernist historical novels, postmodern historical fiction, generally speaking, can be classified as metahistorical romance, a genre that interrogates the construction of history. Such interrogation produces a desire for the sublime, “the space of the chaotic . . . the terrifying past.” Metahistorical romances assume that “history is sublime because it is both unknowable and unrepresentable in discourse” (42). Or to put it differently, the historical sublime is “a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached in attempts to understand human origins and the meaning of lived existence” (xviii). Metahistorical romance novels “criticize, undermine, complicate, or try to position themselves against the precepts of Enlightenment modernity” (ix). In opposition to both traditional historiography and the realist novel, metahistorical romances shift “from belief in empirical history to a reconsideration of the historical sublime” (xi).

In García’s work, the evocation of history’s essential unknowability is not a relinquishing of historicization, nor is it primarily an invitation to consume the past as a commodity like any other capitalist production; instead, her evocation of the sublime is utopian because it reimagines and reconstructs history to argue that the future is not predetermined. Along with other examples of metahistorical romance such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), García’s *Monkey Hunting* depicts history as sublime—
both unknowable and terrifying—within “the context of the political” (Elias 61). The novel uses postmodern techniques “to defamiliarize history” (141) and to encourage readers “to think about history in new ways” (46). This new way, in the case of García, involves using the past to imagine a Cuban and US future not beholden to the extremes of totalitarian communism or free-market US capitalism.

This meaning of the historical sublime opposes watered-down and monovocal versions of the past. By evoking the historical sublime, García challenges a particular version of the exiled Cubans’ nostalgia, “a hopelessly idealized addiction to the redemptive promise of return” (Ortíz 63). García’s critique of nostalgia, as Dalia Kandiyoti shows in her analysis of *The Agüero Sisters*, is not against all forms, but against codified nostalgia in particular. Codified nostalgia, as opposed to nostalgia of personal mourning and loss, depicts history as static, as unmediated by language and subjectivity; it romanticizes or idealizes the past (often in line with conservative political visions) as it simultaneously represses unpleasant antagonisms that shape history. The relationships among utopia, the sublime, and exile nostalgia provide a conceptual framework for understanding García’s project in *Monkey Hunting*.

**Form, History, and Utopian Politics**

The polyvocal, nonlinear form of *Monkey Hunting* suggests that history, since it can be communicated only through discourse, is not attainable; however, history’s essential unknowability does not mean that we simply abandon reconstructing and recovering the past. As Elias demonstrates, metahistorical romances both deconstruct and construct history. While they expose the constructed nature of history—the fact that the past must always be mediated by language and the subjectivity of the historian—they also evoke a sublime past that complicates Jameson’s claim that “History is what hurts” (*Political* 102). In metahistorical romances, history “move[s] in different directions to stop that hurt from hurting” (Elias 61). The appeal to the historical sublime in *Monkey Hunting* and García’s first two novels attempts to heal the pain of generational trauma that has followed the Cuban Revolution.

The mix of third- and first-person points of view in *Monkey Hunting* stresses that access to history is always perceptual and mediated. The novel switches back and forth between third-person limited, when we get Chen Pan or Domingo Chen’s perspective, and first-person singular, when we get Chen Fang’s perspective. The juxtaposition of first- and third-person points of view enacts a dialectic between the particular and the universal, out of which emerges a more nuanced vision of reality (versus traditional
search for utopia

historiography). Regarding the significance of point of view in her fiction, Garcia acknowledges distrust of the omniscient voice: “you need several people, at minimum, to even begin to approach something resembling the truth . . . Ambiguity is generally more honest” (“Conversation” 265). This appreciation for ambiguity is missing from Castro’s rhetoric—“Everything within the Revolution, nothing outside of the Revolution” (Behar 219)—and the stances of some right-wing, anti-Castro Cuban Americans, who protested Nelson Mandela in 1994 after he praised Castro’s opposition to apartheid (Olson and Olson 107).

The multiple voices of Monkey Hunting counter authoritarian regimes that demand obedience to monological visions of the world. Under authoritarian regimes, schools, for example, become sites not for liberation and the nurturing of potential, but for the dissemination of absolutist views. While fighting in the Vietnam War, exile Domingo Chen remembers that his teachers in Cuba “had asked everyone in school to pray to God for ice cream. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday they’d prayed. Then on Friday, the teachers had encouraged them: ‘Now pray to El Commandante and his great humanitarian revolution for ice cream.’ A half hour later, the assistant principal arrived carrying two huge buckets of vanilla” (210-11). This scene insists that monologic discourse almost surely results in the circulation of a manipulative cause-and-effect logic. It shows that the power of the state rests in part, as Althusser would put it, on the mobilization of its ideological apparatuses, including education. Monkey Hunting argues that controlling dissent is easiest when monologism becomes the dominant discourse that defines a society. The novel’s polyvocal aesthetics, then, are inseparable from its antitotalitarian politics.

García also negates communist totalitarianism in her depictions of Chen Fang, granddaughter of Chen Pan. Chen Fang works as a teacher in China and has no place within the communist regime during the Cultural Revolution because she believes in teaching critical thinking and foreign writers. Authorities charge her with “working for French intelligence” and “engaging in decadent behavior with the enemy” (229). Any voice contrary to Mao’s Little Red Book must be silenced. The ethos of the Revolution allows Chen Fang’s own students to “beat [her] with sticks” (228) with impunity, while the student who supports her is “sent to a labor camp in Manchuria. No one knows what has become of her” (230). Chen Fang mourns the cultural and educational losses following the Revolution, and thus supports the novel’s negation of absolutist, totalitarian visions and policies. Chen Fang states, “The new generation, I fear, is largely without history or culture, boys and girls weaned only on slogans. Guns have taken the place of intellect. In the old days, it was not unusual for millers to blind the mules they used to turn their grindstones. Is this what we have
become? A country of blind mules?” (227-28). She continues, “I miss our old language, its capacity for subtlety and consolation” (228).

This portrait of the imprisoned and tortured Chen Fang functions as a negation advocating the need to imagine a future beyond unyielding, top-down systems that rely on people’s internalization of slogans for purposes of control. The text suggests that in place of obedience to extreme political and economic systems such as those enforced through the Cultural Revolution, we must work toward a future that values both subtlety and consolation. *Monkey Hunting* supports Domingo’s father’s interpretation of the Cuban revolution as applying generally to all twentieth-century grand narratives: “Papi had insisted that the Revolution couldn’t work because it focused solely on ideas, not people” (154).

García’s search for utopia also shows, through negation, that the dangers of authoritarian, monological systems are not limited to communist states. She criticizes the US military and its imperial and fervently anticommunist designs in scenes where Domingo Chen is stationed in Vietnam from 1968 to 1970. Domingo is marginalized by the pro-Castro side of his family—“When his mother had learned that Domingo was in Vietnam fighting for the Americans, she’d stopped writing him altogether” (154)—as well as by US institutions. During a night watch, monkeys attack Domingo, but his major refuses to believe his story; nonetheless, “Domingo knew that the monkeys were real. He knew this because . . . the monkeys had scratched and bitten him so badly, his arms looked like ripped sleeves (119).” Certainly, this scene highlights a problem with official, monological representations of events. Dominant representations—in this case, those twisted by the US military—disguise the actuality of things, according to García, who privileges Domingo’s narrative over that of the US military. García condemns the narrowness of the military’s vision, whose officers “assumed that any experience could be summed up with a handful of right-angled nouns” (118). García’s polyvocal and imaginative historicism saves Domingo’s truth from oblivion while it also challenges an important upholder of US hegemony. More generally, *Monkey Hunting* argues for the need to recuperate the testimonials of people who have been historically marginalized by institutions of power.

García’s utopian vision emphasizes that rearticulating and recovering particular patterns and traces of the past is essential to moving beyond totalitarian communism and western imperialism. This point supports one of Elias’s premises concerning the metahistorical romance genre, which “allows that the past may shape the present, but asserts that all we can know are its traces, and that all attempts to construct historical narrative are culturally contaminated. History is sublime, impossible to articulate, outside of representation, and as such leads to ethical action in the present” (97).
While Elias’s argument here jumps from the sublime to ethical actions, it usefully describes the uncertain relationship between the past and the present. In place of historical (and future) certainty, we have “powerful [sublime] traces” that can inspire utopian projects such as García’s. Like other metahistorical romance writers, García seems to yearn for a stable epistemological basis from which to understand the past and present, yet she operates from a premise of fluidity: “If only everything could stop, remain fixed and knowable for an hour. Instead, everything race[s] forward, unrelentingly, like a river, never settled or certain” (*Monkey Hunting* 212).

Chen Pan’s relationship with his father best illustrates how “traces” from the past influence the present in ways that can inspire the ability to overcome traumatic history and move the present in utopian directions. Chen Pan’s notions of heroism come mainly from his father, a poet who consistently failed the imperial examinations. This influence is evident when Chen Pan travels under miserable ship conditions from China to Cuba. He thinks about the sort of life he wants to live—resigned and passive or engaged: “Chen Pan knew that he didn’t want to fade away slowly . . . he would rather live in a blaze of courage and flame like Li Kuang, the ferocious warrior who’d battled the Huns, or the heroes in the stories his father had recounted to him” (10). During the voyage Chen Pan carries with him a “tattered book of poems, a last gift from his father” (12). Thirty years later, Chen Pan still recites “his father’s poems in Chinese” with “passion” (125). These stories and poems live as traces that affect Chen Pan’s actions and beliefs. In *Monkey Hunting*, personal traces in the form of memories shape political actions and attitudes as much as ideologies and laws do. Physical objects also produce salutary effects in the lives of Chen Fang and Domingo Chen, who possess Chen Pan’s photograph and spectacles respectively. García implies that these historical traces invite the imagination to search for possibilities outside the rigidity of top-down political, economic, social, and cultural systems.

In addition to stories and poems, the actions of Chen Pan’s father remain a significant trace throughout Chen Pan’s life: they provide memories that inspire Chen Pan’s own heroic acts. When Chen Pan was a child, bandits murdered his father “for protesting the rape of the water-carrier’s daughter” (18). Afterwards, the village celebrates his heroism, while his wife, Chen Pan’s mother, draws the following lesson, which she teaches her sons: “Avert your eyes to the sorrows of others and keep your own plates full!” (19). This sentiment follows the advice that Domingo receives from his father: “Don’t watch with interest the suffering of others” (151). Chen Pan, however, manages to do both—participate in lessening the sorrows of others while securing his own sustenance. We see this, for example, when
Chen Pan saves Count de Santovenia “from a bandit’s assault.” Out of gratitude, the count obtains Chen Pan’s “Letter of Domicile, which guaranteed his freedom. Then with the count’s support and the money Chen Pan won playing botón, he’d opened his shop” (64). Thus, the father’s supposed “useless ways” help secure Chen Pan’s livelihood and joy.

Even though Chen Pan becomes a successful businessman, he does not bow to the free market as he does to the Buddha; he is a capitalist—quite a creative one—but he also believes in fighting against injustice regardless of the race, gender, or class status of victims. For example, Chen Pan risks his life to deliver “machetes to Commander Sian . . . in 1868” during the Ten Years’ War for independence (247). Through the actions and reflections of Chen Pan, García inserts into historical narrative the Chinese contributions to anticolonial struggles in Cuba. Coupled with this is a critique indicting Cuba for its racism against the Chinese:

Chen Pan knew it was only a matter of time before the Chinese no longer would be welcomed in Cuba. In times of economic necessity, they were usually the first scapegoats. This infuriated Chen Pan because thousands of Chinos had fought hard for the country’s independence. During the Ten Years’ War they’d taken up machetes, fought under Calixto García, Napoleón Arango, all the great leaders. (246)

Moreover, Chen Pan’s experiences working side by side with black slaves sensitize his understanding of the racial problems haunting Cuba after its independence from Spain. The train scene from Santiago to Havana with Chen Pan and his grandson Meng occurs during the 1912 “race war.” Regarding the fears of the elites and the violence of the blacks, Chen Pan “wanted to explain . . . that los negros were protesting for their right to form a political party, that they would pay for their protesting with their lives and the lives of many innocent others. . . . Revolutions never took place sitting quietly under a mango tree. Men grew tired of tolerating misery, of waiting for better days” (193-94). Chen Pan’s political activism, his outrage against injustice, and his business savvy hint toward imagining a future that embraces fluid identities and affiliations; at the same time, in such a future, group solidarity can be usefully mobilized to combat oppression.

The depiction of the relationship between identity formation and history in Monkey Hunting calls into question the grand, progressive narratives of both the Cuban Revolution and American democracy. García’s search for utopia is situated against a teleological vision of history where the future is destiny. Her search, thereby, conforms with another important characteristic of the metahistorical romance—the premise that conceptualizes “History as planar” and discards the “notion of historical progress.”
In place of progress, metahistorical romances employ “the operation of deferral” (Elias 97), destabilizing borders and binaries. The polyvocal and fragmented narrative of *Monkey Hunting* suggests that reality is connected in time and space; however, claims to linear progress and historical destiny should be regarded with deep suspicion. To express this suspicion, the novel’s structure works in circular fashion, not chronologically, and across planes, not lines. An understanding of García’s use of historical events can be difficult because she often encapsulates them in dense and concise imagery, yet these glimpses are telling: the circular, planar structure of the novel functions as an imaginative apparatus that refuses to be complicit with teleological ideology. The planar structure’s defamiliarizing effect suggests that the way we historicize the past influences our ability to imagine the future.

The structure of *Monkey Hunting* insists on the operation of deferral in place of linear, progressive history. This deferral, according to Elias, involves an “endlessly repeated movement toward the historical sublime/History” which “inverts the relation between subject and object, center and border, Self and Other” (202). The novel’s interrogation of borders recalls Gloria Anzaldúa’s project in *Borderlands*, where she writes, “rigidity means death.” Anzaldúa proposes a paradigm shift from western thinking to “divergent thinking . . . toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (79). The novel’s focus on a family legacy across colonial borders and historical eras participates in the border crossings and deconstruction of binaries Anzaldúa advocates. Concrete details approach the historical sublime at the same time the minimalist style defers the apprehension of history. As Elias notes, “the postmodernist metahistorical imagination seems to approach traumatic colonial history as if it needed to make moral sense of it but also as if it realized that history was incomprehensible and forever out of cognitive reach” (203).

Overall, the condensed, concise, and imagistic aesthetics of *Monkey Hunting*, where a tumultuous and complex historical situation might receive a few sentences, pushes readers toward awareness of their own subjectivities—the effect of their experiences in time and space on perception. García’s fragmented form, which encompasses several major historical events and multiple points of view and languages, paradoxically stresses the living quality of history, the traces that form patterns persisting in people’s minds. García often resists detailed characterization (for better or worse); instead, she imprints the shadows of characters on our consciousness, a strategy that follows postmodern historiography, valuing histories (construction) while exposing the trouble with History (deconstruction). Recognizing that we cannot escape history’s traces though we cannot return to the past, García’s formal strategies intervene during a
historical moment when the near-future of Cuba and Cuban-US relations remain uncertain. García’s novels emerge out of an era of neoliberal dominance when Margaret Thatcher’s refusal to acknowledge alternatives to free-market capitalism threatens to stymie the imagining of alternative futures and the recovery of underrecorded histories.

Utopia and Identity

As with history, traces are essential to Garcia’s exploration of identity. Her attention to the traces that shape identity rejects doctrines of fixity—black-and-white views of the world—that include Castro’s homophobic policies and former President George W. Bush’s divisive rhetoric, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”13 According to the novel, identities, like historical narratives, are more a part of culture than nature.14 And just as history is sublime, unattainable, yet desirable, identity cannot be pinned down: it is fluid, rooted in, but not determined by culture. Race, language, class, geography, and gender matter, but they compound in complex and confounding ways that defy essentialist classification. Monkey Hunting, like Donna J. Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” seems more interested in a politics of affinity than identification because affinity rejects the “myth of original unity” and is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, [and] intimacy” (151). This articulation of identity, Haraway’s and García’s, is ultimately a utopian gesture imagining a world of greater possibility and compassion.

This vision of the connection between identity and utopia—especially as it pertains to gender and sexuality—is clearly explored in García’s portrayal of Chen Pan’s granddaughter, Chen Fang. Chen Fang’s characterization implies, as Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble, that gender and sexuality are performances—constructs that becomes naturalized through repetition. Chen Fang is the daughter of Lorenzo Chen, a successful herbalist and son of Lucrecia and Chen Pan. Lorenzo leaves China permanently when Chen Fang is four months old. When she is born, the third consecutive daughter, her mother worries that Lorenzo will renege on his promise “to build a new well for the village” (89). Consequently, the mother tells Lorenzo that Chen Fang is a boy, persuading Lorenzo to send money for Chen Fang to go to school, where she excels. Not only Chen Fang and her family are involved in the performance: “Every villager went along with the deceit. . . . Mother dressed me as a boy, treated me as a boy, and soon everyone seemed to forget that I was a girl” (89-90). When money from Cuba runs dry, however, Chen Fang must come home and “become a woman,” which is “not easy.” Her experiences teach her that “there is no harder work than being a woman. I know this because
I pretended to be a boy for so long. This is what men do: pretend to be men, hide their weaknesses at all costs. . . . For women there are no such blusterings, only work” (96). Chen Fang’s characterization interrogates restrictive, anti-utopian gender norms.

The portrayal of Chen Fang’s sexual attraction to women further deconstructs binaries. As a female teacher in Shanghai, she has an affair with Dauphine, the wife of a powerful French capitalist: “Behind her fragrant embankment of candles, I knew only the wrinkled petals of Dauphine’s eyelids, the caress of her knowing fingers, the easy laugh of her rapture. With every embrace, a tide of blood rose between us” (143). Furthermore, García’s portrayal of Chen Fang continues the novelist’s project of inserting women’s voices into historical narratives. As García expressed in an interview, “traditional history, the way it has been written, interpreted and recorded, obviates women and the evolution of home, family, and society, and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men” (“And There” 610). The lives of women, in contrast, provide undiscovered, potentially utopian material. The dismantling of flawed and debilitating notions of gender in both historical writings and within society at large remains a significant part of García’s search for utopia.

As with Chen Fang, García’s characterization of Chen Pan presents identity as fluid, multiple, compounded, and, to a significant extent, chosen. Throughout the novel, Chen Pan deals with some basic questions: Am I Chinese? Am I Cuban? His answers resist simplistic classification and demonstrate the flexibility of identity constructions. Confusion concerning identity in the novel first affects Chen Pan on the ship to Cuba, where the narrator asks a quintessential question about exile: “Who was he now without his country?” (21). Moreover, Chen Pan’s connection to China becomes further eroded on the sugar plantation, where the overseer, in fear of rebellion, forbids any sort of communication during work time: “For Chen Pan, the silence was worse than the sting of the whip. He felt his unspoken words festering inside him, ordinary words like ‘sun’ and ‘face’ and ‘tree.’ Or snatches of poems he longed to shout out loud” (27-28). Following the profound displacement that working on a plantation exacerbates, Chen Pan exemplifies the resiliency of people who can adapt, assimilate, and choose who they are regardless of origins and physical markers. He functions as a role model for moving society in utopian directions.

Chen Pan learns to embrace new possibilities following the rejection of codified nostalgia. After escaping the plantation and living in the forest as a runaway, he cuts his queue, a definite signifier of Chineseness, and stops “dreaming of returning to his village.” When he reaches Havana, “he knew
it was where he belonged” (62). Unlike his Chinese friends, Chen Pan "wasn’t the least bit nostalgic” (81). This portrayal suggests similarities between Chen Pan’s Chinese male companions and many post-Revolution Cubans living in exile in the United States and elsewhere. The gossipy Chinese men wallow in nostalgia and agree that “Only in China . . . was life lived properly” (83). They have an “inflated regard . . . of the old ways” (174). Especially through overt references to nostalgia, García uses Chen Pan to suggest that exile status should not mean the end of utopian strivings.

Lucrecia Chen perhaps most compellingly illustrates the syncretism, which can foster utopian visions, available to people within multicultural environments. She especially complicates notions of racial identity because she chooses to identify herself not as African or Cuban but as Chinese. With Lucrecia Chen, García provides a fairly straightforward description of the book’s attitude toward identity as a whole: “Sometimes Lucrecia questioned the origin of her birth, but she didn’t question who she’d become. . . . She was thirty-six years old and the wife of Chen Pan, mother of his children. She was Chinese in her liver, Chinese in her heart” (138). While identity is never stable in the novel, it nonetheless can be known viscerally. Lucrecia’s choice to be Chinese certainly destabilizes external, essentialized identity. Furthermore, unlike her son Desiderio, who “despised everything Chinese” (198), Lucrecia’s choice is not the result of any internalized racial shame. Through Lucrecia, García highlights the possibilities that emerge from realizing the fluidity of identity. Lucrecia’s mother’s African sayings remain traces that still come to her, while she combines African, Buddhist, and Catholic religious views to make sense of her world.16

In contrast to Lucrecia’s successful amalgamation of identity possibilities, Domingo Chen and his father Pipo, both Cuban exiles, struggle to belong in the hustle and bustle of New York City in the 1960s. Their stories counter popular immigration success narratives as well as Castro’s own narrative of utopian equality, signifying García’s demythologizing of each grand narrative in search of a more viable and compassionate alternative. The Castro regime is clearly denounced in scenes that show the torture Pipo suffers for not embracing the Revolution (112-14). This trauma carries over to New York, where Pipo’s life is limited to working for low pay, living in a cramped apartment, and suffering from depression, possibly caused by posttraumatic stress disorder. US soil will not sustain him—he eventually commits suicide by jumping in front of a subway train—as Cuban soil fails to support the “chrysanthemums” Chen Pan’s great-aunt “had in China” (78). The novel highlights the difficulty and uncertainty of transplantation. New York City does not embrace the world’s tired, poor,
and huddled masses yearning to be free. Rather, in New York City, “it [is] always cheaper to kill something than to save it” (59). Nonetheless, difficult transplantation creates utopian possibilities by fostering linguistic adaptation and innovation: Domingo’s Cuban, Chinese, and African backgrounds influence his performance of English, which he gives “an unusual cadence. He’d add a brush of the guiro here, the pa-pa-pá of the bongos there, the happy clatter of timbales” (54). His various inheritances compound to create a new and interesting English that symbolically suggests alternatives to the status quo.

Neoliberalism, Nostalgia, and Reification

The novel’s search for utopia through a critique of both communist totalitarianism and capitalism can reasonably be seen as a search for alternatives to neoliberalism, which David Harvey describes as “practices that [argue] that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). The global trend toward neoliberalism, which gained significant momentum under the regimes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, connects with debates concerning Cuba’s economic and political future.

In terms of political parallels, García’s historical portrayal of Chinese servitude functions symbolically in at least two ways. First, it combats nostalgic visions of pre-Castro Cuba (or, in fact, any place motivated by the accumulation of private property) as a paradise. Second, it suggests an analogy between the brutalities of Cuban sugar plantations and the profit-seeking methods of global, neoliberal capitalism—exercised, for example, on outsourced workers in the developing world.

The first few scenes of the novel take place in China and Cuba in 1857 and expose the ruthlessness of economic and political systems dedicated to profit. Floods and violence have caused Chen Pan to move from the country to the city. We know nothing about Chen Pan’s family situation, but evidence of colonial contact invades the text early. “Bedraggled men” load “British ships,” “foreign sailors” guard Amoy’s port, and Chen Pan smokes opium at a tavern (4). The opening pages anticipate a more thorough critique of imperialism while they also eschew any attempt at objectivity—the thin description implies the futility of attempting to recapture the wholeness of the past.

García begins her critique of nostalgia in this first chapter, suggesting a connection between mid-nineteenth-century China and pre-Castro Cuba. Foreign presences reveal the context—the Second Opium War (1856-1860)—where Britain, the US, and France waged war against the
Chinese government. The western powers demanded more opportunities to trade in China in conjunction with an elimination of duties on foreign imports. The Chinese government, however, was unable to provide much resistance to western encroachment because of its preoccupation combating rebel forces in the Taiping Rebellion. Representations of imperialism in China parallel pre-Castro Cuba, where US capitalists controlled Cuba’s economy while the US government supported the oppressive dictator, Batista, for much of the first half of the twentieth century. The military collaborated with capitalists to loot Cuba’s treasury, to remove its democratically elected leaders, and to control its lands for US fruit and tobacco industries. Thus, imperial and capitalist encroachment contributed to the unstable economic conditions that allowed Castro to seize power (Gonzalez 63-66).

García’s critique of pre-Castro Cuba as a paradise is most pointed in her descriptions of slavery in Cuba. The novel exposes the logistics of the “yellow” or “coolie” trade, terms historians have used to indicate parallels between Chinese oppression in the new world and the slave trade. *Monkey Hunting* uncovers the following components and effects of the “yellow trade”: the recruitment process—the methods used by agents to encourage, con, and force Chinese men to leave their homes and families; the “push” forces within China that fostered desperation and, consequently, migration; the sometimes unbearable conditions aboard the ships that took Chinese men to Cuba; and the violence and terror of enslavement on a sugar plantation. García’s depiction of the yellow trade follows the conventions of slave narratives, most notably those that describe the Middle Passage, as Ylce Irizarry observes (García, “Interview” 181). Chen Pan works at the plantation *La Amada*, the Beloved, which is possibly an allusion to Toni Morrison’s prizewinning novel. García’s rendering of the yellow trade enacts a desire for the sublime, the unknowable and terrifying past; this search deromanticizes both Cuban history and the material gains—sugar, specifically—of capitalism.

The manipulative nature of the recruitment process shares similarities with the rhetoric of the American dream. The recruiter, a shadowy man wearing a “Western-style suit” tells Chen Pan “How the drinking water in Cuba was so rich with minerals that a man had twice his ordinary strength (and could stay erect for days). That the Cuban women were eager and plentiful, much lovelier than the Emperor’s concubines. That even the river fish jumped, unbidden, into frying pans.” The effectiveness of this rhetoric depends on the bleakness of the listener’s circumstances. Chen Pan, who cannot imagine a prosperous future in China, concludes, “If all went well [in Cuba] . . . he could return home a wealthy man . . . he’d build a splendid house by the river, huge and on stilts, better than any in his
village’s memory” (5). Like the exiles of Castro’s revolution, however, Chen Pan never returns to his native country.

García’s illumination of the conditions on the ships that transported Chinese “recruits” from China to Cuba evokes the human costs of profit-obsessed enterprises: “the ship . . . was outfitted like a prison, with irons and grates,” and the “recruits were kept belowdecks, like animals in a pen. The shortest among them couldn’t stand upright. Soon Chen Pan’s neck ached from stooping” (8). The narrator continues to describe the suicides, the illnesses, and the beatings that happened during Chen Pan’s three-month voyage. When Chen Pan arrives in Cuba, he becomes an object of a slave auction:

The men were ordered to peel off their filthy rags and were given fresh clothes to present themselves to the Cubans. But there was no mistaking their wretchedness: bones jutted from their cheeks; sores cankered their flesh . . . . The recruits were rounded up in groups of sixty . . . then parcelled out in smaller groups to the waiting landowners . . . . A dozen Cubans on horseback, armed with whips, led the men like a herd of cattle to the barracón to be sold. Inside, Chen Pan was forced to strip and be examined for strength, like horses or oxen that were for sale in the country districts of China. (20-21)

The novel’s portrayal of Chinese and African enslavement on a sugar plantation rejects the myth of pre-Castro Cuba as prelapsarian paradise. García blurs the distinction between slavery and indentured servitude, the official status of Chinese laborers. Chen Pan and the other Chinese are “thrown together with slaves from Africa, given a flat, straight blade to cut the sugarcane” (22). The working and living conditions are miserable: “Blisters sprouted like toadstools on his palms. Nets of iridescent flies settled on his skin as he worked, as he inhaled again and again the yellow-green fumes of the cane” (22-23). The narrator adds, “From his first hour in the fields, it was clear to Chen Pan that he was in Cuba not as a hired worker but as a slave, no different from the Africans . . . he’d been tricked into signing his life away” (24, emphasis added).

*Monkey Hunting* depicts nostalgia as the imagining of a reified past that ignores the nightmares of history. García challenges this nostalgia regarding pre-Castro Cuba through appeals to the sublime that expose the reification of commodities. Reification involves obliterating consumers’ consciousness of production conditions. Jameson describes the effects of reification as follows:

[It suggests the kind of guilt people are freed from if they are able not to remember the work that went into their toys and furnishings. Indeed, the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative
silence all around you, is to forget about those innumerable others for a while; you don’t want to have to think about Third World women every time you pull yourself up to your word processor, or all the other lower-class people with their lower-class lives when you decide to use or consume your other luxury products. (**Postmodernism** 314-15)

*Monkey Hunting* intervenes in this veiling function of commodification through vivid descriptions of sugar cultivation and harvesting. These descriptions function much like the uncovering of the drudgery that produces an object such as the cheerful Sun Maid raisins box that Helena María Viramontes evokes in her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which portrays migrant work in the Southwest. García’s exposure of reification in *Monkey Hunting* shows that despite the pleasant “endless, swaying green” of the sugar fields, it took a “mountain of corpses” to make them possible (190). García further reveals the relationship between capitalist prosperity and global horror when Chen Fang mentions that World War I shortages helped to boost Cuba’s sugar economy (141). These moments, which portray history as ultimately sublime, illustrate that utopian visions require recognition of the concrete realities of material production.

Like *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*, *Monkey Hunting* explores the traumas that violent histories have created, how “every person carrie[s] the scars of each year in his body like a thick-trunked tree” (**Monkey Hunting** 162); however, *Monkey Hunting* delves further into the past than García’s earlier works. This movement back in time and the concomitant expansion in geographic focus perform work not so much on the past as on the present and the future. García’s evident interest in utopia—one that rejects grand historical narratives and teleology—and the sublime advances a political worldview at odds with both 1960s nationalist radicalism and assimilationist, pro-market, multicultural platforms. The minimalist aesthetics that cause the novel to read like a series of prose poems emphasize its epistemological and political beliefs and values. Therefore, reading through a lens that focuses on the novel’s utopian and sublime elements challenges the narrowness of reviews that lament the book’s lack of development. Within the context of our neoliberal moment, when the imagination struggles to think beyond the dictates of the free market, García’s depictions of compounded identities and the vitality, yet inaccessibility, of history simultaneously enact a desire for the sublime and the utopian. Desire for the sublime negates romanticized versions of both pre-Castro Cuba and democratic, capitalist America. From these negations, García’s search for utopia attempts to imagine a world not wrecked by profit motives and totalitarian ideologies. Instead, she hints at the possibilities that can follow the dismantling of binary thinking and
rigid adherence to political, racial, national, and gender ideologies. As the novel engages with the question, “where did history go . . . if it could not be retold,” (144) it recognizes, in its search forward, that “Nothing lost will come back with the rain, but many of us now long for the cleansing waters of mutual understanding and forgiveness.”

Notes

I thank Kathryn Hume for her invaluable suggestions on all drafts of this article. I am also grateful to Jane Juffer, Irma Lopez, Katherine Joslin, and the editors and anonymous reviewers at MELUS for their helpful critiques.

1. On García’s exploration of the familial ramifications of the Cuban Revolution and the role of this theme in relation to Cuban American literature more generally, see Katherine B. Payant and Ruth Behar. Also see Isabel Alvarez Borland, whose study on the Cuban American literary tradition documents the significance of reconciliation among Cuban American writers (61).

2. Marta Lysik makes a very interesting case for the novel as a transnational neo-slave narrative. She argues that Monkey Hunting “follows multiple trajectories and brings to the foreground various forms of slavery: chattel system in Cuba, forced marriages, foot binding and cross-dressing in pre-Cultural Revolution China, and prostitution during the Vietnam war” (276).

3. Criticism of the novel includes Lysik; Xiomara Campilongo, who examines how García “pays tribute to the Chinese heritage in Cuba” (114); and Marta Caminero-Santangelo, who focuses on the interrelations among violence, hybridity, and power, noting that García challenges a “vision of national unity by narrating a prerevolutionary Cuban nation that was already multiethnic, multiracial, and irretrievably conflicted and divided from within” (95).

4. For examples of García’s explicit engagement with luck in Monkey Hunting, see pages 4, 12, 13, 89, 104, 108, 123, 133, 151, and 178. García explores this idea even more fully in her most recent novel, A Handbook to Luck (2007).

5. On the ways that Dreaming in Cuban challenges History with a capital “H,” see Andrea O’Reilly Herrera’s “Women and the Revolution in Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban.”

6. It is worth emphasizing, however, as Herrera and others demonstrate in Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced, that this community is more heterogeneous than it is often portrayed.

7. On García’s treatment of nostalgia—especially its relationship to globalization and commodification—see Elena Machado Sáez.

8. Regarding the title, García states, “It’s a bit of an homage to the Chinese myth of the monkey king, a picaresque tale about a brilliant monkey who did everything possible to ensure his immortality. He became such a nuisance that the gods finally complained directly to the Buddha, who had him sealed under a mountain for five hundred years” (“Conversation” 260). A tracing of the monkey imagery in
the novel (33, 65, 145) suggests political overtones that García’s comments do not acknowledge. Generally, monkeys signify wasteful consumption and exploitation associated with imperial regimes.

9. Chen Fang also teaches her students about Li Kuang to try to awaken them to the brutality of the Cultural Revolution (227).

10. Chen Pan prices everything he sees in preparation for possible future deliveries to his store, the Lucky Find. He also has a knack for gauging the desires of his international clientele: his assistant complains that “nothing at the Lucky Find had a fixed price,” to which Chen Pan responds, “The price is what the customer needs to pay!” (73).

11. As Campilongo argues, “Monkey Hunting is a fictional attempt to acknowledge and validate the Chinese presence [in Cuba]” (122).

12. For more on this history, see Aline Helg.

13. See Susana Peña. Behar also writes, “nothing has ever seemed to threaten the [communist] utopia of new men more terribly than homosexuality” (12).

14. My interpretation differs somewhat from García’s own sense of identity in the novel. In an interview published at the end of Monkey Hunting, García states, “I thought it would be interesting to explore the notion of identity traveling through the flesh, a concept I came across in the poetry of the Brazilian writer Carlos Drummond de Andrade. What do we inherit, not just physically, but emotionally, psychologically, temperamentally? Does the past suffuse the present like a kind of water table?” (“Conversation” 260-61).

15. This quote reminds me of Pilar’s remarks in Dreaming in Cuban: “If it were up to me, I’d record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don’t I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what’s important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I’ve learned that’s important I’ve learned on my own or from my grandmother” (28).

16. Lucrecia Chen shares similarities with the Vietnamese woman, Tham Thanh Lan. In particular, they are both victims of sexual violence and objectification. García seems to suggest that when Domingo marries Tham Thanh Lan, he is, in a sense, marrying his great-grandmother Lucrecia (159).

17. “To Paradise!” is the ironic title of Chapter Two, in which Chen Pan arrives in Cuba as a slave. Dalia Kandiyoti explains, “In Cuban discourses, the codified nostalgia dovetails, of course, with anti-Revolutionary politics that repeatedly construct Cuba before Castro as a prelapsarian paradise” (83).

18. For more on this historical context, see Lynn Pan (43-57) and Denise Helly (3-30) as well as Duvon Clough Corbitt, Kathleen López, and Jack Gray.

19. Helly powerfully documents this history. She includes a collection of oral histories by Chinese workers like Chen Pan.

20. These lines by the Cuban poet Victor Fowler Calzada are quoted in Behar (5).
Works Cited


