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The coolie speaks:: Chinese indentured laborers and African slaves in Cuba

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The Coolie Speaks. Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba. By Lisa Yun. Philadelphi: Temple University Press, 2008. 334pp. _____

Other than Denise Helly's introduction to the 1993 English edition of the testimonial, her book Idéologies et ethnicité: Les Chinois Macao à Cuba, and a chapter in a forthcoming book titled Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture, little critical attention has been paid to one of the most important testimonials in Latin American history: The Cuba Commission Report: a Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba (1874). Lisa Yun's timely and well-written book is undoubtedly the most complete study to date on this jewel for the study of race relations, labor migration, and the international division of labor. Her outstanding analysis of the testimonial is complemented with other testimonies related to the so-called coolie trade in Cuba. In this sense, the book rescues from oblivion the abuses committed against southern Chinese indentured laborers who were, for the most part, taken to Cuba by fraudulent means.

Yun's study begins with an introduction to what she terms "the coolie counternarrative," in which she emphasizes the transnational nature of coolie history and the literary tropes they used in their depositions. She also makes acute remarks about the importance of the contract itself in framing the trade as a "voluntary" movement and in turning these men into "mobile slaves": "I propose, through a presentation of the coolies' historical context and their testimonies, that the coolies of Cuba suggested radical critiques of the contract institution, which was proffered by Enlightenment and

abolitionist philosophers as the guarantor of society” (XVI). Chapter 1 (all the chapters are divided into several subchapters) deals with the historical background of the coolie trade with an emphasis on slavery and a Cuban economy based on sugar. The second chapter focuses on the methodological challenges for reading coolie testimonies, which she presents as a tool for resistance. In turn, Chapters 3 and 4 analyze some of the testimonies themselves, paying particular attention first to the written testimonies that criticize the “perversions of the contract” and the narrative conventions that were used, and then to the verbal testimonies dealing with the topics of race, resistance, and subordination.

While the main focus of the book, as the title indicates, is the story of the coolies as told by themselves, in the last chapter Yun also studies the second-generation perspective through Antonio Chuffat Latour’s work Apunte histórico de los chinos en Cuba (1927). As Yun explains, in this text the author “engaged in a veiled class analysis and seized the opportunity to articulate, for the first time, the overlapping social aspects of the slave, coolie, and merchant” (228). As she had already done in one of her previous articles, Yun sometimes refers to Chuffat Latour as an Afro-Chinese writer, but mostly as a black activist and author who fought for the rights of blacks in Cuba. Yet the long American tradition of considering persons with any known black African ancestry as black may not apply to the perception of Chinese mulattos in Cuba. Rather, it is more probable that the Chinese merchants who sponsored his book did not consider him black but simply a second-generation Chinese. In this context, they plausibly felt comfortable influencing him in his negative views on the afro-Cuban community. Even though Yun is right when she states that Chuffat Latour identified himself as a person of color in several

passages, she fails to point out the instances in which he exalts Sino-Cuban achievements by contrasting them with the perceived failures of blacks, both in civil society and as unarmed mambís during the wars of independence (he describes them as a nuisance to their leaders [63]). In fact, later Chuffat Latour tries to compensate these racist observations by paternalistically stating that blacks were not entirely responsible for their failure, since, in contrast with the coolies who came from China, they were uneducated (needless to say, most of the Chinese coolies who were taken to Cuba were also uneducated peasants). On the other hand, Yun unproblematically accepts the Chinese community's claim that their participation in the wars of independence responded to their Cuban patriotism. Yet while, on the one hand, Chuffat Latour admits in his book that Spaniards would not recruit Chinese because of their inability to communicate in Spanish, on the other, The Cuba Commission Report includes depositions in which the coolies complained about being forced to join the insurrection, with some escaping the mambí army to return to their former jobs.

In the conclusion, Yun links the racial contract that the coolies exposed as “a cloaking institution and as a globalizing legal structure for a new form of slavery” with today's new forms of indenture (230-31). In all, The Coolie Speaks, which includes an interesting addendum with selected petitions, a bibliography, and notes, is a fascinating study that will open the reader's eyes to the true nature of the coolie trade as well as to new identitarian conceptions of what it means being Cuban, Caribbean, and Latin American. The Coolie Speaks is of interest not only for Chinese diaspora studies but also for Latin American, Caribbean, and Pan-African studies and literary criticism. This book

is bound to become a seminal work for the study of the Chinese presence in the Americas.

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