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# “Exoticism, Cultural Hybridity, and Subaltern Identity in Three Macanese Novels”

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**Abstract:** Although the novels of Austin Coates, Henrique de Senna Fernandes, and Rodrigo Leal de Carvalho depict life in the former Portuguese colony of Macau, their individual perspectives reflect a contrast between literary colonialism and coloniality. A British public servant, Coates perceives Macanese reality through the competing biased eyes of an Englishman resenting Portuguese culture and administration in the colony; Leal de Carvalho, a Portuguese resident of Macau, romantically depicts the social nature of Portuguese colonialism; Senna Fernandes, a native Macanese educated in Portugal, offers his interpretation of the colony’s Eurasian inhabitants vis-à-vis its Chinese population. The aim of this article is to contrast the literary representation of three issues in Coates’s *City of Broken Promises*, Fernandes’s *The Bewitching Braid*, and Carvalho’s *The Count and his Three Wives*: exoticism, cultural hybridity, and subaltern identity.

**Keywords:** colonialism, coloniality, exoticism, fetish, miscegenation

The production of narrative in or about Macau has been limited. Even more limited have been critical studies of this literature. This article examines and contrasts three novels set in the former Portuguese colony. Exoticism, cultural hybridity, and subaltern identity are prominent features of *City of Broken Promises* (1967) by the British author Austin Coates (1922-1997), of *The Bewitching Braid (A Trança Feiticeira)*, 1993) by the Macanese writer Henrique de Senna Fernandes (1923-2010), and of *The Count and his Three Women (O Senhor Conde e as Suas Três Mulheres)*, 1999) by the Portuguese novelist Rodrigo Leal

de Carvalho (b. 1932). (Macanese is the ethnic group that originated with the sixteenth-century arrival of the Portuguese; it includes their descendants as well as Catholic Chinese.)

The novels' time periods and settings vary. *City of Broken Promises* fictionalizes the eighteenth-century lives of prominent businesspeople in the colony; *The Bewitching Braid's* plot unfolds in the 1930s, alternating between Macau's Christian sector (*Cidade Cristã*) and its Chinese quarter; *O Senhor Conde e as Suas Três Mulheres* tells a tale of migration that begins in Lisbon and transpires mostly in Macau around the tumultuous years surrounding the Second War.

According to David Brookshaw, Coates's novel "provided a type of blueprint for the fiction Fernandes and Carvalho would write" (6). Yet, while the plots of these works display similarities, Coates's perspective is filtered through the lens of British colonialism; Fernandes's, through the attitudinal legacy of coloniality—i.e., racist modes of interaction generated in colonized societies by the rise of capitalism during modernity (Mignolo); and Carvalho's through the social, paternalistic perspectives associated with Portuguese overseas expansion. An in-depth examination of British and Iberian colonial practices is beyond the scope of this article; however, it must be observed that, though British colonialism is associated with "racism/orientalism" (Lawrence 47-94; Said 31-110), Iberian imperialism is characterized by "miscegenation," a phenomenon that further differentiates Fernandes's and Carvalho's fiction from Coates's—Coates, it should be added, was a Lusophile who passed away in Sintra, Portugal; nevertheless, his novel reflects a British colonial mindset.

In regard to Macau, three points of interest should be noted. In 1554, it became the first European colony in Asia and also the last one—it was ceded to China in 1999, two years after the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong to the Chinese. There, the Portuguese, in addition to coolie trafficking and opium distribution, specialized, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century in selling Chinese females of all ages as sex slaves thereby inflicting a humiliating "colonial wound" on this region. Like Hong Kong under the British, Macau never gained territorial independence from Portugal. In this sense, both fall within the scope of postcolonial studies because, as European-occupied areas of China, they were restored as Chinese territories during the latter part of the

last century. (Macau's status as a special administrative region of China was agreed upon with Portugal years before the publication of *The Bewitching Braid* and *The Count*.)

Female subalterns are protagonists in the three novels. *City of Broken Promises* fictionalizes the life of Martha M(i)erop, an eighteenth-century Chinese orphan "comfort girl" turned businesswoman, whose rags-to-riches tale would have been impossible if not for her amorous relationship with Thomas Kuyck van M(i)erop, a functionary of the British East India Company that, by means of two Opium Wars, imposed the sale and consumption of the drug on the Chinese. In this context, according to Mignolo, the Chinese, though never colonized, suffered coloniality on their soil as a result of this "imperial wound." The title of the novel is derived from the common practice of the British, in Macau as well as in Hong Kong, of promising marriage to their Asian mistresses, only to abandon them and their illegitimate offspring upon leaving the colonies.

In *The Bewitching Braid*, A-Leng, a Chinese water carrier, is seduced by Adozinho, a Macanese who ends up falling in love with her. Most of the novel narrates the tribulations endured by the couple after being ostracized by their respective groups. A-Leng's braid, a fetish of Adozinho's sexual desire and a symbol of her exoticism and "Otherness," gives the work its title. This object-obsession is common in colonial discourse; as Homi Bhabha so aptly puts it, "the recognition of sexual difference ... is disavowed by the fixation on an object that masks that difference.... The *functional* link between the fixation of the fetish and the stereotype (or the stereotype as fetish) is even more relevant" (74). Indeed, the braid enables Adozinho to fixate on a symbol rather than on the person to more easily ignore those differences leading to a transgression that will put him at odds with those around him. The braid is metonymic for conquest and sexual possession, though on the other hand, it might also ensnare the colonizer.

Fetishism is also part of Coates's novel, but falls more accurately within the realm of miscegenation. Martha is described by the narrator as having "up-tilted and almond-shape" eyes, pale smooth skin, fine black hair, a small child-like round face and dimples (21-22). Christina Cheng Miu Bing insightfully points out that "these racial stereotypes perhaps render the image of

an 'outlandish doll' and constitute a kind of epidermal fetishism that fosters Mierop's fascination with miscegenation. Martha is also ... reified as an object of sexual desire. Exoticization and eroticization of a Chinese girl appear to be the chief motifs in this colonialist novel" ("Colonial Stereotyping" 137). An attempt to lessen her "Otherness" and to place her in a European context is realized through various observations: "her black dress ... was more European than Chinese;" "she was a good deal more mature than most European girls of such an age;" "joining her hands ... she subdues her enthusiasm ... a gesture that made her seem suddenly very European" (21-23).

*The Count and His Three Women* narrates the story of the Count of Barca d'Alva, who was banished from Lisbon to Macau by his wealthy German-Jewish wife, Hildegarde, for philandering. There, he becomes sexually involved with Kate Abranches, a Macanese widow. Siu-Fá, Kate's Chinese maid, adoptive sister, and confidant, betrays her by eloping with the Count and marrying him in Lisbon. Thereafter, she becomes a bona fide Portuguese aristocrat by honing her social manners and language skills. Renamed Marta Abranches de Barca d'Alva, she eventually returns to Macau after the Count's death to place his ashes on Kate's grave, a gesture of atonement for her disloyalty. Reminiscent of the other novels, Carvalho exhibits fetishlike and Orientalist observations while describing Siu-Fá: "No seu quartinho aconchegado ... Siu-Fá desfazia a trança comprida e farta e contemplava-se ao espelho pequeno.... O rosto regular e redondo e os olhos amendoados eram seguramente orientais.... Ela não era grande como as chinas de Xangai" (155-56). (Throughout the novel, "olhos amendoados" is repeated when describing Siu-Fá's facial expression; the term "china" is pejorative, equivalent to the racial slur "chink" or "gook.") Nonetheless, as illustrated by these examples, Carvalho's exoticism, like Fernandes's, does not try to make cultural comparisons between the colonizer and the colonized as was the case with Coates.

Colonial governance and exploitation, as a single concept, was rigidly stratified, slightly more so in British possessions. Perhaps with the exception of India, colonies were composed of the British dominant group, the East Indian buffer group brought in to serve as "the canary in the mine," and the subalterns, made up of natives and/or imported laborers. For example, in Jamaica, in

addition to the dominant and buffer groups, we find Africans, brought unwillingly as slave laborers, and their descendants, as subaltern subjects—the original inhabitants, the Arawaks, were exterminated. In Macau, however, Coates writes a novel that, by including British subjects, perforce adds a layer to the structure: a subdominant group, the Portuguese. In *City of Broken Promises*, Anglo characters, including the narrator, manifest their prejudices toward Catholic Portuguese (Coates makes no distinction between Peninsular Portuguese and mestizo Macanese) and the “inscrutable” Chinese. For example, the narrator observes “that all that concerns the Portuguese is old and decrepit” (7) after having described the city as an infested extension of Europe, “subdued by Roman Catholic superstitions” (6) and that it is “priest ridden [with] so many churches for such a small population” (8). Thomas himself, supposedly more open-minded, evinces his strong dislike of the Portuguese in a diary entry: “I detest all that part of Macao which is Portuguese” (158). It was also an integral part of British imperialism to consolidate power through converting the colonized to Protestantism by means of a Bible translated into the native language. In Macau and China, however, the British tweaked the formula by incorporating opium into the effort. Consequently, “opium and the Bible were intriguingly put side by side to the extent that it was hardly possible for the Chinese to refuse the equivalence of the Christian God to the ecstatic opium” (Miu Bing Chen, *Macau* 68).

Carvalho, well aware of the condescending attitude of the British toward their longest standing ally, voices it through a British character in *The Count*. In relating how Samwell Bellows, general manager of the Macau Electric Lightning Company, Ltd., learns of the Count’s inheritance, the author observes that, to Bellows, “os pequenos dramas dos portugueses, locais ou de Portugal, eram, de resto, assunto que não lhe diziam respeito; ele era britânico, graças a Deus” (388) and that news or gossip seems to appeal to these sensitive people: “Coisas de portugueses! Sempre emocionais” (389). This sense of superiority is also reflected by Hildegard’s German maid, Frieda Grüber who, after her mistress’s death, confronts the Count when he tries to occupy his widow’s house, disdainfully exclaiming to herself: “Ah! estes ‘portugueses!’ ... Ah! *Diese Portugiesischen!*” (446).

Anglo supremacy is reemphasized when the Count and Siu-Fá arrive in Paris after betraying Kate. The Count, aware of Siu-Fá's fear of ending up in debtor prison, validates not only British attitudes, but also a Portuguese sense of inferiority or of "second class status" vis-à-vis its ally: "Será que em França, ha prisão por dívidas? Não, não é possível, a França é um país civilizado; é o país mais civilizado do mundo! Bem, depois talvez da Inglaterra ..." (433). It must be noted that the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance of 1386, though serving both nations well throughout history, favored one partner, England/United Kingdom, enabling it to carve out an empire in Africa and Asia at the expense of the other. The Portuguese, consequently, often resignedly acknowledge British hegemony as expressed by the Count.

As regards the "impenetrable" Chinese, comments like "fixed Asian expressions" (18) and "somber Asian eyes" (21) sprinkle the early pages of Coates's novel. The term "Macanese" appears only in reference to the local dialect spoken by the natives of Macau. Martha, the subordinate orphan with no genealogical identity, believes that through sheer mimicry she can escape her "Asianness." Like many Macanese, she believes in her superiority to the Chinese because of her conversion to Christianity. Such a notion, coupled with her assumption that she now has a surname, Auvrey, that of her adoptive French father, is put to the test when she is ejected from the Frenchman's house by his wife, Teresa da Silva, whom we assume to be Macanese, shortly after his death:

[Teresa] "You will go now with what you have on your back and nothing more."

[Martha] "I will take my rosary with me."

[Teresa] "You black-soul Chinese devil ... what need have you for a rosary?"

[Martha] "I am not Chi ..." yet as she reached the word Chinese her voice died away. What she was trying to say was not true. She was Chinese ... but she had been told that she was not a real Chinese, not like other Chinese who worshipped devils and would go to hell when they died. [But] it was true, then. She was not ... accepted truly into the Christian family. They had all told lies to her. (64-65)

Thus Martha comes to the realization that, no matter her attempts to become like the colonizer, she will always be the Other.

In *The Bewitching Braid*, civilization, although generally free of racist remarks, is nonetheless fashioned along colonial perspectives. Adozinho is depicted as an ethnic hybrid because of his Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch ancestry. However, though Fernandes explains Adozinho's European lineage—a Dutch great-grandmother and a grandfather from northern Portugal—nowhere does he specify the source of the Asian portion of his genetic makeup. Readers are not informed that Adozinho has Chinese blood until the narrator describes him physically: “He was proud ... of his cheekbones that came from his Chinese side” (10). It could be inferred that it comes from the paternal side given that his father, Aurélio, had been a “functionary of the Chinese Customs House” (11). That he has a Portuguese name, that he is Catholic, and that the customs house where he might have worked was administered by the British in the European Settlement of Shanghai makes this inference rather farfetched (the Portuguese shut down the Taipa Chinese customs house near Macau in 1849). And, just as the British view the Portuguese as superstitious in *City of Broken Promises*, Adozinho and Aurélio deride as “superstitious nonsense” the Chinese belief in *feng shui* held by the women in their household (13).

Fernandes's reluctance, whether conscious or not, to provide the Chinese descent of his Creole protagonist may stem from the “coloniality of power,” i.e., the inability of colonized or formerly colonized peoples to overcome European prejudices toward ethnicity, race, and culture. By downplaying his Sinic origins, Fernandes, an Asian-Portuguese from Macau, i.e., a Macanese, tries to “lactify” them, to use Frantz Fanon's terminology. Macanese were, for decades, the elite indigenous group, the buffer group between the dominant Portuguese and the subaltern Chinese on the island. Yet it is clear that, to Fernandes, as to Coates, Macanese is synonymous with Portuguese: “The *kwai-los*, as all Portuguese were called [by the ethnic Chinese], regardless whether they were native sons of Macao or had come from outside, were viewed with suspicion” (16)—this DuBoisian double consciousness of ignoring a part of one's racial makeup to acknowledge only the other may be found in the American West where descendants of the original Spanish settlers consider themselves “white,” not



“mestizos” as many of them are in actuality. It should be reemphasized that, whereas Fernandes’s intent is to “whiten” the Macanese through their Portuguese lineage, Coates’s is to lump Portuguese and Macanese together as inferior “others.” Again, remnants of this “they all look alike” viewpoint survive in the U.S. when one occasionally hears the term “Spanish people” or “Spanish food” when referring to Latinos or their cuisine. While it is true that certain Latinos may employ this qualifier when referring to themselves, this custom is mostly a holdover from the days of segregation, much like some elderly African Americans still consider themselves “Negroes.” The only exception that comes to mind is that of the Spanish descendants who inhabit the northern part of the State of New Mexico.

George Cuming, a British character in Coates’s novel, derisively alludes to the Chinese by pointing out that the ruffled shirts, worn by the British of the period in Macau are “laundered in Calcutta” because “no Chinaman has ever known what to do with them” (33). Adozinho, on the other hand, having been publicly spurned by A-Leng, reflects on the aspect that exacerbates his humiliation, “she was a water-seller a washerwoman ... an example of the famous bad manners of the inhabitants of Cheok Chai Un” (20). Though Cheok Chai Un is the neighborhood of the poor ethnic Chinese, Adozinho anchors his sense of superiority in socioeconomic, rather than racial or ethnic factors.

In Carvalho’s novel, on the other hand, the Count, a mainland Portuguese and thus generally of a European mindset (colonial and biased), the reader encounters derogatory remarks repeatedly directed at the Chinese. For example, when the Count is approached by two members of a Chinese gang to which he owes money, he makes these asides that reflect his prejudice and his unfounded notion of ethnic superiority: “Que língua intratável [Chinese]! Se eles quiserem que aprendam português!” (284); “Nem sequer me lembro de quem foi [the money lender]. Se eles são todos iguais!”; “Os ‘chinas’ não se atreveriam [to hurt him] ... ‘Nunca’ se atreveriam! Com um reinol?!” (286).

Although allusions to race per se are absent from the text, Carvalho, being a mainland Portuguese, subtly raises the issue of race when the Barão de Penha, having heard of Kate’s death, asked his wife Mari whether she too had heard the news, to which she replies: “O que foi Nino? Você vem amarelo ...”

(492). Carvalho then remarks, as omniscient narrator, that “o que não seria de admirar dada a evidente ancestralidade sino-malaia do Barão de Penha; mas por ‘amarelo’ a Baronesa queria referir-se à palidez que lhe sobreviera ao ouvir ... a notícia de que ainda não se recompusera totalmente” (42). The categorizing of Asians as belonging to a “yellow race” is a nineteenth-century racial European designation, a colonial construct, to differentiate themselves from Asians (Keevak 1-12). This classification is, of course, Orientalist because, for example, most if not all Japanese classify themselves as “white” (Wagatsuma 407-43). And though plausible, it would be unusual for an Asian wife to refer to the hue of her husband’s paleness as “yellow.”

In keeping with the Western Orientalist perception of and fascination with Asian women, their seductiveness and exoticism, Martha, A-Leng, and Siu-Fá are stereotypes cut from the same cloth. All three are orphans with no legal surname (hence no clear-cut identity), illiterate, sensuous, and ostracized because of their relations with non-Chinese. The male protagonists, also stereotypes, are affluent, educated, handsome Europeans who condescendingly take on Chinese women, first as lovers, then as wives. This formulaic dichotomy ensures a noble yet romantic plot: white boy meets girl of color and, owing to a love that develops through sexual exploitation, delivers her from a life of penury. As Rey Chow has observed regarding David Henry Wang’s anti-Orientalist play, *M. Butterfly*, in each novel “the superimposition of the racial and sexual elements of [the] relationship creates the space in which the story unfolds” (77). The disparity in the sexual agency provides for successful plots in both works only because of readers’ Orientalist bent. Were roles reversed—i.e., if European female protagonists had sacrificed their standing by falling in love with poor and perhaps unattractive Asian men—the plots would have failed; such women would have been considered insane (Chow 79) and the story line would have collapsed. In addition, these works’ Orientalist formula lends further credence to Rudyard Kipling’s divisive “Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” because “the Western partner is ... constructed as a messianic hero who rescues the Eastern ‘child’ from a hellish situation ... [thereby revealing] an unbridgeable gap between the two hemispheres through disjunctive representations” (Miu Bing Chen, “Colonial Stereotyping” 139).

Gayatri Spivak raises the provocative question “Can the subaltern speak?” in an essay with that title. She thoroughly addresses the question and concludes, “the subaltern cannot speak” (308). In these three novels however, they do so to an extent, but only if this category is strictly homogenized and the definition of “speak” is greatly simplified (Loomba 196). Martha, A-Leng, and Siu-Fá are three impoverished Chinese sex subjects. As females of color, they symbolize the most exploited of subjugated people: they belong to the lowest and most formalized class of subalterns and, as such, have absolutely no history—Spivak notes that “if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). All three, however, ascend socially and economically through marriage, the result of having previously entered into concubinage with males of the influential class. But even though China forbade interracial marriages between Europeans and Chinese in Macau during the eighteenth century, such couples could wed if they resettled outside the colony; most Englishmen, as mentioned, chose not to do so and left their illegitimate families behind after departing the colony. It was also rare among mainland Portuguese to marry their local lovers, whether Chinese or Macanese. The Count himself never intended to marry the Macanese Kate and elopes with Siu-Fá with the same mindset. The latter as Marta, soon after taking over her late husband’s firm, sadly recalls this colonial reality upon hearing that business partners will try to “seduce” her into selling her share of the company. As Carvalho explains: “Embora o termo ‘sedução’ estivesse, no espírito de Siu-Fá, mais associado à fraude dos reinóis as pobres macaístas e chinesas da sua terra que depois abandonavam com corações destrocados e sonhos desfeitos, compreendeu que não era esse tipo de sedução a que agora se arriscava” (569). On the other hand, marriages between Macanese and Chinese, though not forbidden, were uncommon generally for socioeconomic reasons. In *The Bewitching Braid*, Adozinho’s shunning by his clan forces him to descend socially and financially, making his marriage to A-Leng more plausible in the Macau of that era.

More importantly, as fictional characters, these women are a patriarchal construct: they speak and act as the authors believe they should. As has been observed, because of the nonexistence of a historicity from which to draw

female subalterns actions or statements, Coates, for example, feels compelled to have Martha, an alleged historical figure, provide a postmodern dialectic when she asks George Cuming, “Do I have to remind you that you are no longer among the English, where your word is all important and mine means nothing?” (254). Fernandes, although stressing that A-Leng does not forsake her Chinese nature, has her adopt the Catholic faith through baptism and church-sanctioned marriage. Thus he eases matters with Adozinho’s family, instead of having Adozinho sever ties with a religion whose cultural tradition links him to the power elite. Once again, the subaltern yields to the dominant class. At novel’s end, Adozinho’s father turns to reconciliation with his son by finally accepting his Chinese daughter-in-law and his grandchildren; A-Leng is also reintegrated into her own community. Carvalho transforms Siu-Fá into Marta who not only adopts her husband’s title, but also breaks with the stereotype by learning to speak “proper” Portuguese, adopting aristocratic practices and, even more astonishingly, mastering the intricacies of running a corporation. Such statements and deeds may only be fictional on account of the ahistoricity of subalterns.

The Westernization of Martha M(i)erop and Marta Abranches and the Christianizing of A-Leng reveal their authors’ creative conflict regarding the subaltern. A discourse is inevitably produced that engenders a logical split among its proponents—i.e., an ambivalence that creates an “Other” who is an entity that while different is not entirely so (Bhabha 86). This attitudinal conflict is prevalent among colonizers who, though deeming the subjugated peoples as inferior, skirt the issue of their inhumanity by professing to be carrying out a “civilizing” mission, one that brings the “Other” closer to becoming a replica of themselves (the notorious White Man’s Burden).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos observes that Portugal’s colonialism, given the country’s longstanding economic dependency on England, a relationship that at times turned it into an “informal colony,” was a hybrid, a subaltern. This subordination, as pertains to colonial discourse, “resides in the fact that, since the seventeenth century, the history of colonialism has been written in English, not Portuguese. This means that the Portuguese colonizer has a problem of self-representation rather similar to that of the British colonized” (11). As evidenced here, the British *City of Broken Promises* and the Portuguese *The*

*Count and His Three Women* corroborate this hypothesis, primarily through the works' characterization. In the former novel, British protagonists exhibit disdain and prejudice toward both the colonized and the Portuguese colonizer. By contrast, the latter work reveals, as voiced by various characters, not only the expected European contempt of the Chinese, but also a subtle acknowledgement of the Portugal's subordinate role in relation to other colonial powers, mainly Great Britain and France.

*The Bewitching Braid*, however, may be characterized as a modest attempt at a "third space," at a decolonizing hybrid discourse—A-Leng and Adozinho are an attempt to represent "a new Macau ... [one] based on a far more explicit compromise between Portuguese and Chinese cultures" (Brookshaw 118). This interdependence, though often arising out of necessity, must be attributed in large part to Lusitanian positive attitudes toward miscegenation, a practice that greatly narrows the polarization between colonizers and colonized. Unlike Anglo-Saxon colonial practices, which widened differences and gave rise to racial friction, Portuguese intermingling with the colonized renders postcolonial ambivalence almost inconsequential (Santos 17).

As a result, though the three novels feature female subaltern protagonists who speak through their respective creators, and though all employ examples of exoticism, fetishism, patriarchy and lactification to various degrees, Coates's work denotes a condescending attitude on the part of its Anglo characters toward "Others" that persistently reveals British Orientalism. Carvalho's novel reflects the perceptions of the Portuguese toward their colonized subjects and their oldest ally. Fernandes's work, on the other hand, illustrates the underlying logic of coloniality, i.e., its fictional characters reflect the values and views that colonial Portugal, relying on miscegenation, imposed on its overseas possessions to justify its imperial designs. It is this legacy that must be faced in the decolonizing of all Iberian former overseas possessions.

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