IMAGINING CHINA IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Since the late 1980s, there has been a steady production of Latin American narrative fiction in Spanish concerning China and the Chinese. Despite the work written about China and its relation to Latin America, no comprehensive examination of the representation of China in literature has been produced thus far. This thesis analyses nine novels in which China is the main theme, exploring how China has been represented in Latin American narrative fiction in recent decades. Using ‘China’ as a multidimensional term informed by Sara Ahmed’s understanding of ‘strangerness’ (2000), this thesis first explores how the novels studied here both highlight and undermine assumptions about China that have long shaped Latin America’s understanding of ‘China’. Secondly, using theories of the fetish, it shows ‘China’ to be a kind of literary/imaginary ‘third’ term which reframes Latin American discourses of alterity. On one level, it is argued that these texts play with the way that ‘China’ stands in as a wandering signifier and as a metonym for Asia, a gesture that essentialises it as an unchanging other. On another level, it argues that the novels’ employment of ‘China’ resists essentialist constructions of Latin American identity. ‘China’ is thus shown here to be a symbolic figure in Latin America, serving as a concept through which criticism of the construction of fetishised otherness becomes possible, as well as criticism of the exclusion inherent in essentialist discourses of identity, such as those contained in mestizaje. These discourses of mestizaje have traditionally emphasised racial and cultural mixture, and have excluded the Chinese from discourses of Latin American identity. As a result, ‘China’ is used here to deconstruct bound identities, interrupting discourses of otherness within Latin America. From this perspective, it is argued that these novels tend to gesture towards an understanding of identity as ‘being-with’, and community as inoperative, as developed by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 2000), whilst taking a cosmopolitan stance, as developed by Berthold Schoene (2011).

The novels have been divided between those that set their stories in China, such as César Aira’s Una novela china (1987); those that explore Chinese communities in Latin America, such as Ariel Magnus’ Un chino en bicicleta (2007); and those that focus on Latin American travel to China, such as Ximena Sánchez Echenique’s El ombligo del dragón (2007). Indebted to Ahmed’s, Nancy’s and Schoene’s theoretical perspectives, Chapter 1 explores how ‘China’, as both a physical space and a discursive context, foregrounds negotiations of power in the histories of both China and Latin America. Chapter 2 studies how ‘China’ is used to recall and interrogate the notion of an indistinct ‘oriental’. The final chapter seeks to understand the ways in which the novels articulate travel to China as a means of challenging Eurocentric structures and ‘national’ epistemologies. Ultimately, by disclosing the complex operations through which ‘China’ is represented in Latin American literary discourses, this study explores possible further reconfigurations of Latin American notions of identity and community as non-essentialist and in constant development.
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Introduction

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Latin America have engaged in a qualitatively and quantitatively new relationship since the 1990s, preceded by the country’s reforms in the 1980s and its rapid integration into the world market (Ellis 2009, 2014; Dussel Peters 2016). Since then, the presence of China in Latin American literature has increased. While representations of China in Latin American film and art exist from this period, it is in literature that a significant corpus can be found. Starting in 1987 with the publication of the Argentinean César Aira’s *Una novela china*, and accelerating through the 2000s, there has been a steady production of Latin American narrative fiction dealing with China and the Chinese in Latin America. More than twenty novels written by Latin American authors in Spanish, and which take China as their main theme, have been published between 1987 and 2016. Through an analysis of nine texts, this thesis explores how ‘China’ and ‘chinos/as’ have been imagined in contemporary Latin American novels.

While ‘China’ usually denotes the PRC as a country, the term ‘chino’ is far from stable. As anthropologist Lok Siu shows, the word ‘chino’ often actually refers to ‘Asian’, as a racial category, rather than an ethnic Chinese identity (2007: 202). According to Siu, with regard to the Mexican context, the term ‘chino/a’ is explicitly noted and used matter-of-factly for racial difference, and yet there is little connection made between discourses of racial difference and the power of racialization with its consequent production of social and cultural marginalisation (2016a: 177, 2016b). ‘Chino/a’ also recalls the hegemonic imperialism embodied by identity constructions in the Spanish colonial period in Latin America, where all Asians were collected together under the category of ‘chinos’ (Seijas 2015). The term is sometimes also used with no specific relation to any Asian origin, as in the eighteenth-century caste
system, where ‘chino’ was used to describe the mixture of ‘Morisco con Española’; or as derived from the Quechua word čína meaning female or servant (Real Academia Española 2017c). These different understandings of the term ‘chino/a’ suggest the various ways one can think about how and why China is represented in contemporary Latin America. In my examples, while ‘China’ usually does refer to a generic Asia, the sovereign country, or an exotic imaginary about it (similar to Edward Said’s understanding of the ‘Orient’ in a European context (2003)), I use ‘China’ principally as a multidimensional term whereby both the sovereign country (such as the PRC or the Republic of China — Taiwan), and the exotic imaginary of it, at least partially converge. More specifically, as a corollary of this exotic imaginary, this thesis proposes that in the novels studied here, the term ‘China’ is used to interrupt certain discourses of ‘otherness’ that are based on essentialist understandings of difference and mestizaje within Latin America.

By revealing the exoticised and racist assumptions about China that have long shaped Latin America’s ‘China’ since the arrival of the Spanish in 1492, the novels studied here expose how ‘China’ continues to be shaped by set ideas of an exotic, distant and faraway imaginary. Disclosing how China can embody ‘otherness’ in Latin America, the novels engage with China in previous terms of exoticizing, discursive formations, challenging that ‘otherness’ to varying degrees, engaging with that which has traditionally placed ‘China’ as distant and different. Thus, my main argument is that the novels studied here deconstruct the very idea of national and Latin American identities through the figure of ‘China’, based on a critique of essentialist understandings of identity and mestizaje. My analysis hence reveals a potentially more inclusive concept of China and the Chinese in Latin American imaginaries. As a potentially inclusive concept, ‘China’ functions as a space which
allows the Latin American author to question essentialist historical notions of identity and difference, and to suggest new ways of thinking about community in the region, arguably taking a more cosmopolitan stance.

As the novels studied here reflect upon homogenizing assumptions of both China and Latin America, they also expose the ways in which Latin America has regularly failed to engage with China on its own terms. Moreover, they expose how complex cultural heritage can be reduced to empty signifiers, becoming a pastiche of culture, devoid of meaning and significance. Building on these complex and contradictory understandings, I use ‘China’ as a hybrid, third term and a flexible discursive matrix that embodies, among multiple others, the geopolitical China and the mythical ‘China’, without ever prioritising one or the other, and thus constantly expanding its range of meanings.

My research thus focuses on how and why Latin American writers have represented ‘China’ in their texts. Among other readings, novels in which ‘China’ is central to the main story have already been valued as an escape from immediate reality (de Arriba 1996: 244); as a means of exploring the distance between cultures, revealing localised conditions of otherness (Masiello 2002: 216); as the expression of anxieties related to the uncertainties of cultural globalisation (Hoyos 2013: 83); and as expressions of interest in the meeting of Hispanic and Chinese cultures (Prince 2014: 118–19). Along these lines, it is possible to outline further axes along which we can understand a novelist’s decision to write about ‘China’. While the ideas presented above inform my understanding of the choice to depict ‘China’ in the novels studied here, my research reveals the multidimensional role of ‘China’ as metonym of Asia and performance of ‘otherness’.
On one level, we see these novels engaging with discourses of an imagined China as itself ‘exotic’ and ‘other’. On another level, ‘China’ in these novels is informed by the rise of the PRC as an economic world power (Myers and Wise 2017), which no doubt informs the commercial appeal of China as a theme in the Latin American publication market. Related to this context in which the novels are positioned, we need to take into consideration contemporary demographic changes. Since the 1980s, the Chinese population in Argentina, Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador and Mexico has increased dramatically (United Nations 2015; CELADE 2016), a fact also linked to the opening up of the PRC. On a further level, ‘China’ allows the Latin American author to adopt an external standpoint from which to explore Latin American identity, marked by the significance of the ‘chino’ standing historically outside the traditional Latin American racial and cultural axes of *mestizaje*. The case of China is representative then, not only because it is linked to the country’s growing economic power and migrant community, but also because the figure of the ‘chino’ has remained as a symbol of alterity.

From this perspective in which the ‘chino’ has remained as ‘other’ in Latin America, ‘China’ seems to serve as a concept through which to critique the exclusion of the Chinese in discourses of essentialist and national identities such as those contained in discourses of *mestizaje*, while simultaneously critiquing the construction of ‘Chineseness’. On one level, the understanding of *mestizaje* as a historical mixing of populations, a cultural phenomenon, and a political endeavour, endures in Latin America, but its specific meaning and deployment have changed over time, and vary from country to country within the region (Wickstrom and Young 2014; Eiss 2016). Despite changes in its nuances over time and places,

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1 For the analysis, I have included all data termed as China, Continental China, People’s Republic of China, Taiwan and Nationalist China.
*mestizaje* in Latin America can be defined as a term which emphasises cultural and racial mixing, homogenizing and reducing difference, even though, in reality, racial distinctions along essentialist physiological lines remain prevalent (Siu 2016a: 176; Wade 2016: 323–24).

Indeed, there is no single definition of *mestizaje* in Latin America, and the term itself contains tensions between sameness and difference, and between inclusion and exclusion (Hale 1996: 53; Wade 2005: 240). Florencia Mallon describes two discourses of *mestizaje* that are observable in scholarship: as an official discourse of nation and citizen formation, and thus an ideology of exclusion, and as a liberating force that opens up the categories of ethnicity and race (1996: 171). This kind of differentiation of *mestizaje* as diverse discourses is also noted by Jorge Klor de Alva, who notes the ‘chameleonic nature of *mestizaje*’ (1994: 251–53). And yet, as Peter Wade shows, these analyses focus predominantly on ideology and nation-building, rather than on *mestizaje* as a lived process (2005: 242).

Since colonial times, societies in Latin America have been conceived of as ‘formed from the biological and cultural mixture of Africans, Europeans and Native Americans’ (Wade 2017: 1). After independence in Latin America, political elites attempted to dismantle racialised difference, adhering to liberal universalism and campaigning for the creation of equal citizens (Wade 2016: 326). Yet there were major limits to equality, such as the exclusion of women from suffrage. And difference persisted, as citizens who felt themselves to be excluded pushed for their inclusion, thus raising issues of racial difference, and elites responded by producing difference in their discourse and practices, based on the foundation narratives of *mestizaje* (Wade 2016: 326–27).
For Wade, expressions of *mestizo* identity harbour within themselves a tension that inherently implies a permanent dimension of national differentiation, and yet it also allows for processes of inclusion (2005: 245). While traditionally a discourse of mixture, blackness and indigenousness can be subjected to hierarchical ordering through which they are made to occupy inferior locations, can be discriminated against and/or rendered exotic (Wade 2005: 255). Indeed, while Latin America’s ethnoracial classification is quite fluid, skin colour is a predictor of inequality (Telles and PERLA 2014: 10–13). Wade demonstrates that while *mestizaje* in itself can challenge an essentialist definition of identity via notions of hybridity, the elements that constitute the mosaic of *mestizaje* can retain their essentialist definition, reinforcing racial hierarchies and stereotypes (2005: 257). Precisely because the elements that constitute the mosaic of *mestizaje* can retain their essentialist definitions, I argue that *mestizaje* retains essentialist notions of identity. Thus, although it can become a space for the challenge of essentialism, it can continue to deploy essentialist understandings of identity and community. It is precisely the potential inherent in *mestizaje* for an essentialist understanding and deployment of identity that can be interrupted through the figure of ‘China’.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define *mestizaje* as a cultural and racial mixture along the axes of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ (Cunin 2002: 30, 37); as a term used throughout Latin America but whose meaning is nuanced according to the local context; as a term that, while it emphasises mixing and homogenization, also allows for essentialist physiological distinctions to remain; and as a word that needs to be considered in intersectional terms, as *mestizaje* interacts with gender, ethnicity,
class and other factors. As a forcible eradication of difference, or as a continuous construction of difference, *mestizaje*, like multiculturalism, can mask difference and fetishize that ‘other’ that does not fit. Building on Wade, I see *mestizaje* as holding the potential to be essentialist due to the production of difference found in its central structure. In relation to my argument, *mestizaje* can on one level be a celebration of the figure of the ‘other’ as the origin of difference. It can thus violently reproduce, as Ahmed shows, a ‘we’ discourse of community in the name of inclusion or multiculturalism (2000: 113).

Indeed, Asians have remained absent from discussions of the processes of *mestizaje*. As Kathleen López states, the Asian component has often been ‘absent in key anthologies on Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino literature, language, music, foodways, and culture’ (2016: 130). In the discourses of *mestizaje* formulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian bodies were excluded and viewed as being beyond incorporation, in contrast to the emphasis given to European and indigenous components (DeLugan 2016: 144; López 2016: 127). López notes how Asians in particular have been viewed as ‘temporary and fleeting migrant streams without a permanent imprint on society’ (2016: 125). As she explains, in the ‘mestizo nations’ of Latin America, elite formulations of *mestizaje* viewed Asians as ‘beyond incorporation, detrimental to the moral and physical well-being of the nation’ (López 2016: 127). Only exceptionally are the Chinese mentioned as a constructive part of Latin American identity (Ortiz 1989; Hu-DeHart 1991; Lee 2005; Hu-DeHart and López 2008).

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2 I define race as a social construct based on differences in particular physical features, and ethnicity on cultural differences, although both are intertwined (Telles and PERLA 2014: 30).

3 An exception to this is the case of Cuba, as studied by Ignacio López-Calvo (2008).
At the same time, however, López also notes that Asians, and particularly the Chinese, were paradoxically central to Latin American debates on national identity and culture due to the elements of anti-Asian racism to be found across the Americas (2016: 127). Indeed, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mestizo discourses of racial inclusion were disrupted by immigration restrictions, anti-Asian sentiment and the qualified portrayal of Asians as potential citizens (López 2016: 128; Sato 2006: 181). Anti-Chinese movements have further played a role in generating mestizo nationalism. In some cases these debates turned particularly violent for the Chinese, with the local government in Peru ordering the destruction of Chinese quarters in 1909 (Rodríguez Pastor 2000), or the slaughtering of hundreds of Chinese in Mexico in 1911 (Chao Romero 2010). Also in Mexico, discriminatory legislation led to the expulsion of the Chinese from Sonora in 1931 (Treviño Rangel 2005; López 2016; Chang 2017). From within this historical context, it is necessary to take into account the different politics of national integration through which the Chinese are constructed in Latin America. As Siu explains, the Chinese have been variously constructed in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, depending upon the context, which has been influenced by diaspora-homeland ties, the imperialism and hegemony of the United States, and the differences within and between diasporas (2007). And while experiences varied in the different Latin American countries and cities, as the following chapters show, similar cases are to be found across the Americas (López 2016).

Within these diverse experiences, and specifically in Latin America, because the Chinese have not formed part of the axes of mestizaje, their historic articulation from beyond mestizaje paradoxically locates them at the centre of discussions on national identity. In other words, through their paradoxical absence in mestizaje, the
Chinese become central figures who enable the articulation of national identities in Latin America. Within this context and understanding of *mestizaje*, therefore, the Chinese are excluded from one of the prevailing ways of understanding race in the region, which helps to explain why Latin American writers are turning to China to explore ‘otherness’ in Latin America. The impossibility of situating the Chinese within a *mestizo* framework simultaneously problematizes the *mestizo* framework in itself as well as essentialist discourses of national and Latin American identities, and questions the belonging of Chinese/Asian communities within Latin American identities. Because of the inability to situate the Chinese within the *mestizo* framework and essentialist identity discourses, ‘China’ can thus be analysed as a ‘supplement’ to both the discourses of identity available in Latin America.

Building on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theorisations on writing in its relation to speech, under which writing is understood to serve speech, Jacques Derrida develops his own understanding of the supplement. Derrida argues that the supplement, as observed by Rousseau, harbours within itself the accumulation of presence, as well as being a subaltern instance; an adjunct (2016: 158). Seeing both significations at work in Rousseau’s analysis, Derrida observes that the supplement is always an exterior addition (2016: 159), simultaneously adding on, and substituting. Derrida’s deconstructive approach destabilizes the hierarchies that Rousseau sees in the notion of supplement.

As Derrida explains, it is because of a *lack* that ‘something’ must be added on to ‘something’ already complete in itself. For him, ‘the sign, the image, the representation, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusions that sidetrack […] us’ (2016: 167). In other words, Derrida analyses how the supplement can be simultaneously ‘something’ that completes another ‘thing’ (such as a
definition or discourse), and ‘something’ that may also substitute it, and can therefore be a threat to it. That is to say, the supplement simultaneously completes ‘something’ complete in itself, and creates an excess. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s afterword to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* states, ‘the supplement is dangerous because not only does it suggest that full presence can be added to, but it also suggests that presence has a lack which can be filled’ (2016: 355). Derrida thus disturbs the power relations between the original and the supplement, as the supplement is revealed to be the condition of the original.

It is precisely Derrida’s logic of the supplement that I see as informing the role of ‘China’ and its interruption of essentialist understanding of identity, such as those contained in discourses of *mestizaje*. ‘China’ disturbs the hierarchies at work within essentialist understandings of identity, simultaneously supplementing it, and revealing the lack of the presence of ‘China’ within the discourses of national identity and *mestizaje* available in the different countries of Latin America. The use of ‘China’ in the novels analysed here can thus be considered as a way of denouncing the exclusion of the Chinese, while simultaneously revealing the racial and cultural politics involved in their construction as ‘other’, and of ‘otherness’ itself in Latin America.

That the Chinese are represented in these novels mostly as a ‘racial absolute’, as one single racial and cultural identity, contributes significantly to the way that I view the occurrence of the texts’ deconstruction of fixed identities and *mestizaje*. Because *mestizaje* in its most common understanding in Latin America refers to the racial and cultural mixing of the European and indigenous population of the Americas, the representation of ‘China’ in the novels as a racial absolute, rather than itself a product of its own forms of *mestizaje*, points to the powers at play in the
construction of difference. While *mestizaje* is a place of struggle, as it allows for the discussion of what should be excluded and included, and thus how power hierarchies can be challenged and inclusion promoted (Wade 2003), it may simultaneously essentialize and exclude those ‘others’ who do not fit.

Using ‘China’ as a performative site for the deconstruction of otherness, the novels selected here engage with a Latin American perspective that reveals how constructions of otherness transcend national boundaries. Given the emphasis on openness and flexibility, Doreen Massey’s theorisations of space are especially relevant to my rationale in determining the corpus of novels studied here. All have been written by Latin American, Spanish-speaking authors since the 1980s, and can be seen to challenge the ‘closure of identity in a territorialis a space of bounded places’, borrowing Massey’s words (2005: 183). Following Massey, I see places as unbounded, characterised by internal conflicts, ‘created and recreated from interactions with other spaces which are characterised by unequal flows and exchanges’ (1994: 1–9). From this understanding of places as unbounded, the novels studied here show the intersection between nationally defined differences in their particular understanding of ‘China’, and a simultaneous engagement in themes that are to be found across Latin America. In specific terms, novels were selected that encouraged a discussion of the role of China and the Chinese in Latin America through an engagement with issues of community, which are both a part of, and go beyond, local national contexts.⁴

⁴ Other novels on China in Latin America during this period are: the Mexican Bernardo Fernández’ *Ojos de Lagarto* (2009), in which different storylines concur in ‘La Chinesca’, a city of Chinese people; and Argentine Eduardo Berti’s *El país imaginado* (2011) which recounts the relationship between two girls and the choices they make within different loyalties, traditions and power structures. We also find Uruguayan Gabriel Peveroni’s collection *Shanghai* (2013a, 2013b, 2014), a group of *nouvelles* published in electronic format where most events are connected to the city of Shanghai, preceded by the play *Shanghai* (2011), and that have been recently published as a printed edition as
The different rhetorical uses of ‘China’ play out in different ways in the novels studied here, as my three chapters organised according to different themes demonstrate. This thematic approach reveals shifts in the understandings of ‘China’ from representing a concrete presence as a country, to ‘belonging’ to Latin America, to a ‘China’ that becomes a concept through which philosophical considerations come to be articulated. Throughout the chapters, and through close reading, national and racial assemblages are deconstructed. In chapter one, I analyse César Aira’s *Una novela china* (1987, 2005b), Alberto Laiseca’s *La mujer en la Muralla* (1990) and Mario Bellatin’s *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* (2001a, 2005). The stories of these novels are set in China and, in different ways, they all mock the appropriation of knowledge on China, while reflecting on those aspects that Latin America and China appear (not) to have in common. This chapter thus reveals how ‘China’ has been constructed and is disavowed as a figure of otherness in Latin America.

In the second chapter, I analyze Ariel Magnus’ *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007), César Aira’s *El mármol* (2011) and Cristina Rivera Garza’s *Verde Shanghai* (2011c). Here, the stories are set in Latin American Chinatowns and reveal how ‘China’ is

changing the city landscapes locally, disclosing the pervading racial hierarchies and
essentialist notions of difference at play in Mexico City and Buenos Aires. In the
third chapter, I analyse Santiago Gamboa’s *Los impostores* (2002) and *Hotel Pekín*
(2008), and Ximena Sánchez Echenique’s *El ombligo del dragón* (2007). Here, all
the storylines are linked to travel to and from China, offering a critique of fixed
world cartographies. My analysis in this third chapter assesses the hegemonic
hierarchies available in these novels, calling for a reconsideration of our
understanding of community. Thus, the focus of my research is built around the idea
that the novels both reflect and fuel various, widespread perceptions regarding China
in Latin America, that are paradoxically deeply rooted in national terms but that also
figure transnationally.

This thesis builds on a small, but growing body of studies on the
representations of China in Latin American literature. While some of the novels
chosen for my analysis have already been studied independently or in small groups,
there is as yet no overview that permits comparison, or the recognition of trends,
themes or tropes in the region. There has been no single analysis that groups and
analyses these novels relationally from within broader literary discourses on China in
Latin America, beyond national perspectives. While my analysis exposes the
differences between the novels that engage with the local, national or urban context,
as well as their temporal settings, my research demonstrates how elements which are
common to the corpus of texts also become available. In this sense, my study
responds to a gap in scholarship, which has overlooked these novels’ thematic
commonalities and intertextual relations.

Academic literary studies, and most monographs, choose a national canon
approach to the study of China in Latin American cultural manifestations, while
edited collections of texts usually adopt approaches to Asia suggested by the multiple themes of their articles or chapters, but that seem to overlook commonalities among case studies and generally build on theories drawn from Said’s *Orientalism* (Hagimoto 2016; Camayd-Freixas 2013; López-Calvo 2007, 2009, 2012; Nagy-Zekmi 2008; Rivas and Lee-DiStefano 2016; Tinajero 2014; Torres-Pou 2010). Such approaches have advantages, as they allow a focus on the specificities of each locality and its characteristics, as in the case of the former, or they include a panoramic perspective, as in the case of the latter. However, I consider it necessary to take a broader approach that is both regional and thematic, and that allows the observation of common points and differences in the representations of China in Latin America, going beyond national or local political and economic circumstances. This both regional and thematic approach allows me to take into consideration the complexity of representations and their role in the persistence of dominant conceptions of race and gender, among others (Hallam and Street 2000: 7). It also allows me to notice and take into consideration the fact that, since the 1980s, and in a particularly accelerated fashion since the year 2000, a clearly identifiable corpus of books on China has been published across the region.

Julia Kushigian’s *Orientalism in the Hispanic literary tradition: In dialogue with Borges, Paz, and Sarduy* (1991) and Araceli Tinajero’s *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano* (2003) have both been pivotal to studies on Asia in Latin American literature. According to Kushigian and Tinajero, alterity did not develop as the prominent image of the ‘Orient’ during the twentieth century in Hispanic-American literature, but rather it was a space of fusion. Their texts were the first to articulate and theorize the understandings of the ‘Orient’ in Latin America, proposing that the Orient was not related to an imperialist hegemony of Latin
America but, on the contrary, was gradually forming an imaginary East through a syncretic, eclectic and idiosyncratic literature (Kushigian 1991; Tinajero 2003). Gabriela Jauregui later analyses the work of Rubén Darío, Borges, Octavio Paz and Severo Sarduy in relation to Orientalism, arguing that if for Said the Orient is part of a binary, in her sample of works the Orient is more of an additional element that disturbs dualism (2008: 69–70).

Rosario Hubert has also taken a comprehensive approach in her analyses of China and East Asia in Latin America; she has studied writings about China in nineteenth-century Latin America and contemporary Latin American literature which engages with China and the ‘Orient’ (2012, 2015). Her work explores the ways in which East Asia is imagined in Latin America through the notions of cultural distance, fictional Sinology and critical exoticism. Likewise, Jennifer Prince studies Rivera Garza’s use of China in Verde Shanghai as an expression of interest in the meeting of Hispanic and Chinese cultures (2014: 118–19). She builds on Said, and identifies the different shades of orientalism available in the novel, including one in which the differences between Orient and Occident, and self and other, are blurred (Prince 2014: 134–135). An Asian American approach is also explored by Jason Oliver Chang, who explores the exclusion of Asian Latin Americans from nationalist renderings of mestizo composites, and the recognition of Asian subjects in the region (2016).

Another group of texts may be described as focusing on Asia and taking a national approach. In specific relation to Argentina, Axel Gasquet has written on the impact of Orientalism in Argentinean literature and thought (2007), arguing that a different kind of Orientalism emerged in Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century, which went beyond a bilateral European-American relationship, and
returned to the ‘Orient’ for conceptual reasons at first, then politically motivated reasons, and finally as an exploration of aesthetics. Also a critique of Said, Julián Vazeilles explores the increasing presence of Asia in Argentina in cultural and symbolic terms (2007). Focusing on Argentina as well, Chisu Teresa Ko studies multiculturalism and racial issues in the contemporary portrayal of Asians in Argentine cultural production (2009, 2014, 2015). Most recently, she argued that an Asian-Argentine approach can serve as an analytical and political tool to understand the position of Asians in Argentina, and to challenge the discourses which marginalize Asian-Argentines as irreversibly foreign or non-existent (2016b).

There is also a group of texts that focus on the representation of China and take a national approach. For example, Amanda Holmes has written on China in Argentine exotismo, and concludes that the self-consciousness of being peripheral figures motivates the authors to choose Oriental settings open to the possibilities of fiction and question the significance of artistic expression (2008). Luis Pulido Ritter has explored the representation of the Chinese in Panamanian Literature, observing how the presence of the Chinese is almost non-existent, and they often appear only as stereotypes, although authors of Chinese-descent nevertheless use them to negotiate a reimagining of the nation (2013: 81). And Chang has explored the case of Mexico regarding how the Chinese have constituted an alterity to the country’s mestizaje (2011, 2017). How the Chinese are made to belong in different national contexts is an aspect I explore in chapter two.

Within texts that focus on the representation of China and take a national approach, Ignacio López-Calvo is a leading author in the field. In his book Imagining the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture (2008), López-Calvo shows how the ‘(mis)representation and erasure of the Chinese presence in [Cuban] cultural
production inevitably disrupts the official black-and-white discourse of the nation by
underscoring alternative notions of ethnic difference’ (2008:19). López-Calvo
frames his analysis within what Juan de Castro terms the ‘discourses of mestizaje’,
which celebrates ‘miscegenation or cultural mixture as the basis for conceiving a
homogeneous national identity out of a heterogeneous population [which] uses […]
heterogeneity paradoxically to imagine a common past and a homogeneous future’
(de Castro 2002: 9). Following de Castro, López-Calvo problematizes this
homogenization available in Cuban mestizaje, analysing the contradictions and
oppositions hidden within notions of homogeneity. While building on López-Calvo’s
theoretical approach and findings, I see ‘China’ here as a supplement to mestizaje,
and thus outside discourses of homogeneity and paradoxical heterogeneity.

A final approach to Asia in Latin America has been the analysis of the works
of writers of Asian descent, such as Debbie Lee-DiStefano’s book Three Asian-
Hispanic Writers from Peru: Doris Moromisato, José Watanabe, Siu Kam Wen
(2008), who focuses on writers of Asian descent and their participation in the social
and cultural realms of their respective Latin American countries. Ignacio López-
Calvo has also analysed the works of writers of Asian descent in Peru through his
texts The Affinity of the Eye: Writing Nikkei in Peru (2013a) and Dragons in the
Land of the Condor: Writing Tusán in Peru (2014), where he analyses the texts of
authors of, respectively, Japanese and Chinese descent in Peru.

As we can see here, most studies take an ‘Asian approach’ within the Latin
American perspective. When these studies do focus on China, they then usually take
a national approach to a particular Latin American country, the exceptions being:
Anne-Marie Lee-Loy’s book Searching for Mr. Chin: Constructions of Nation and
the Chinese in West Indian Literature (2010), Héctor Hoyos’ article Orientalismo,
globalización e imaginarios transpacíficos en la novela latinoamericana actual (2013) and Álvaro Fernández Bravo’s article 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 (2015). In her study of the literary representations of the Chinese in the West Indies from the early twentieth century up to 2010, in relation to nationhood, Lee-Loy sees the repeated images of the Chinese in West Indian literary texts as stylised representations of belonging which overlap with the performance of nation (2010: 40). Although her study does not focus on Spanish-speaking Latin America, her idea of representations of Chineseness as performances of stylised gestures that create and convey meaning of nationhood inform my thesis as a whole. The idea of performance exposes literature as a site from which ideas on identity and community can be expressed.

Also treating literature as a site for expression, Hoyos sees Una novela china, Los impostores and Un chino en bicicleta as manifestations of a new interest in the Orient, which extends the kind of well-established economic exchange to the cultural realm. Analysing their processes of exoticisation and orientalisation of Chinese culture, he locates these works within a transpacific imagination, and links this literature to the anxieties of globalization. Drawing on Said and Fredric Jameson, he speculates on the possible cultural transformations that the establishment of a transnational literary community could bring.

Fernández Bravo takes a more systematic approach and suggests a typology of the modes of engagement between China and Latin America, and a stereotype economy which, he argues, informs this exchange. His typology suggests three different models, the first being the ‘exoticist imaginary’, defined as a specific mode of knowledge informed by the imaginary and fabulation, where the notion of
distance acts as stimulus for invention. Here, he argues, there is no ‘real’ knowledge of China, and the sources for knowledge are never clarified. Secondly, he suggests a ‘hybrid approach’, where there is certain contact with the ‘real’ Chinese world, through travel; grounded on notions of migration and mobility; and where a linguistic component acts as support for symbolic mediation, such as the coexistence of different languages in the text. The third typology Fernández Bravo identifies is what he terms, ‘a view from within’. The narrator in this kind of novel acts as a trafficker who extracts information, practices, uses and customs through which Chinese communities operate. While his classification fails to underscore the overlap between the different typologies, his analysis does indeed at the intersectionality of representations of China in Latin American literature. In this article, Fernández Bravo also explores the standing of the stereotype economy and the fetish in relation to the representation of China in Latin America. Although he states that the relationship between identity and stereotype must not be based on fixities or stable reproductions, his appraisal of the stereotype as ‘manteniendo un rol válido en la igualadora globalización’ — that is, as a signal of identity, even if imaginary — suggests a possibility that runs the risk of privileging essentialist understandings of identity (Fernández Bravo 2015: 67–68); something that is defied, albeit with nuances, in the novels studied in this thesis. And while Hoyos seems to sidestep the novels’ articulations of new subjectivities within a global context, he does indeed explore a global perspective in these texts. Indeed, Fernández Bravo and Hoyos successfully gesture towards the role that an imaginary of China can play in Latin America, in regard to fixed categories such as identity, literature, ‘China’, or ‘Latin America’, and within a transnational perspective.
Generally speaking, it is the Chinese who seem to have captured the imagination of writers in Latin America, more than any other Asian ethnic group (Leong and Hu-DeHart 2012). However, even with Lee-Loy’s, Hoyos’ and Fernández Bravo’s texts, there is still a lack of analysis that focuses specifically on the representations of China in Latin American literature, and which goes beyond national perspectives. My study differs from the previous works due to its transnational perspective, employed in the study of the representation of China specifically. A transnational perspective allows me to juxtapose and expose the interconnectedness of different national understandings and ideas on ‘China’. While each novel is analysed from within its national context, the thematic approach of each chapter reveals the importance of a transnational approach. As Chang argues, a hemispheric paradigm allows us to fully explore the ‘reception, integration, and subjectivity of Asians in Latin America’ (2016: 46). Such a perspective aims to undo the antagonistic structures of a global literary field organised around notions of cultural difference, as Mariano Siskind has noted in Latin America (2014: 6–7).

As we have seen, even though there has been a re-evaluation of the role and presence of Asia specifically in Latin American literature, most of these studies privilege ‘Orientalism’ as a theoretical lens, and an imaginary of Asia in general, rather than China in particular. While authors within this body of literature can be seen to critique and to push beyond Orientalism, they ultimately remain bound to discussions of Orientalism in Latin America. From a theoretical perspective, most of the above studies on Asia are shaped by, or respond to, Said’s foundational ideas developed in Orientalism (2003). Additionally, as we shall see, within the above

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5 Said posits in Orientalism that Western cultural activity served to augment the ideology of Western hegemony (2003). Said presents a strong case for ‘Orientalism’ as a prejudicial mode of knowledge of the ‘other’; a coming to terms with the Orient based on the special place within a ‘European Western
analyses and those that build on them, Jorge Luis Borges’ work figures prominently. Because the self/other imagery of a metropolitan observer organising the ‘other’ does indeed reveal the limitations of fixed understandings of cultural difference, it is therefore necessary to go beyond Said’s notion of Orientalism. While I intend to go beyond Orientalism in my analysis, using Sara Ahmed’s figure of the stranger and Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of the subject, the fact that the novels studied here build upon these previous understandings of ‘China’ makes it necessary to briefly revisit and review Orientalism and Borges in their relation to China and Latin America.

In her 1991 book, Kushigian argues that Said’s ideas in Orientalism were not valid for Spain or the former Spanish Colonies in America. Focusing on the Moorish influence on Spain, she argues for a continuous ‘intellectual contact with the Orient’, stating that ‘Hispanic Orientalism’ is a distinctive historical phenomenon, open to dialogue and exchange with the East (1991: 2–3). Jauregui, building on and critiquing Kushigian’s reading, argues that the binary structuring of Said’s Orientalism acts as a different kind of duplication in the works of Latin American authors such as Dario, Tablada, Borges, Paz and Sarduy, affording a ‘mirror image to be repeated ad infinitum’, where ‘Orient and Occident are no longer in binary and oppositional relation […] [but their relationship can be retraced in] the ellipse’ (2008: 69). Through polyglossia and polyvocality, she argues, there appears an ‘equalizing principle […] that counters traditional Orientalism’ (Jauregui 2008: 69). In contrast, experience’. For him, Orientalism can be defined broadly as a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient’, with an internal consistency of ideas about the ‘Orient’ (2003: 1–28). For Said, Orientalism is an ideological myth which delineates the boundaries of East and West, and then presents the East as an inverse and flawed ‘other’ (Mualem 2016: 133).
Ian Almond suggests that Borges belongs to the Orientalist tradition ‘in all of the positive and negative senses that Said has applied to the word’ (2007: 67).

Robin Fiddian takes yet another approach; in his 2003 study he argues that Borges expresses his discomfort with the discourse of Orientalism and the cult for the exotic through his statements in parenthesis (2003). In his analysis of the poem ‘El Oriente’ (1975), Fiddian argues that it ‘elaborates a personal conception of the geographical and conceptual entity that Westerners call “the Orient”’ (2007: 195). According to Fiddian, this conception acts as a statement of Borges’ fascination with the East, qualified by his appreciation of the interrelationship between East and West, marked by acts of mediation and translation, and the porous boundaries between self and other in the construction of identity (2007: 201).

Shlomy Mualem, building on and critiquing a Saidian framework, describes Borges’ work through the term ‘dialectical orientalism’ (2016: 131). Mualem argues that Borges deploys a philosophical-universal position that deviates from the delimited framework of national ideology, thus establishing a ‘uni-ideological philosophical and transcultural view of the interrelationship between “East” and “West”’ (2016: 132). Mualem’s reading of ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’ (1976) leads him to present Borges’ stance as ‘transcultural’; between nationalism and cosmopolitanism (which Mualem does not, however, stop to define), valuing every work of art for its aesthetic worth, regardless of the culture to which it is ascribed (2016: 139). Indeed, according to Francine Masiello, Argentinean literature’s move through the ‘Orient’ uses the distance between cultures to explore the construction of meaning, ‘to explore their own conditions as “other” in the society in which they live’ (2002: 216).
What I aim to show here then is not that the novels do or do not represent or use difference in their depictions of ‘China’, but rather how they deploy difference to challenge fixed views of otherness. By deconstructing the structures of difference contained in *mestizaje* and essentialist identity discourses, these novels simultaneously challenge and resist an understanding of otherness and difference as developed by Said. I explore how ‘China’ allows for an exploration of the construction of otherness in Latin America, which goes beyond the binary structures of West/non-West, East/West and North/South. The novels here point towards the world as it is, rather than as it has been constructed; by exposing the binary structures through which ‘China’ has been constructed in Latin America, the novels undermine said structures. Building on Fiddian and Mualem, I also consider the novels studied in this project to be, to a degree, continuations of Borges’ contested notion of the Saidian ‘Orient’ in Latin America. However, if in Borges we still find binary views of East and West, self and other, or barbarism and chaos as noted by Arthur Rose (2017: 49), this dichotomy is problematised in the corpus of novels I study.

Through the novels studied here, China is shown in various ways to be a lens through which essentialist notions of identity are challenged. My deconstruction of essentialist otherness derives from a typically poststructuralist position, as defined by J. A. Cuddon (1999b, 1999a). On one level, a Latin American composite identity emerges as a way of countering *mestizaje*; interacting with, rather than replacing, national, ethnic and regional identities. While there continues to be a particular ontology of the Chinese as ‘other’, the narrative fiction studied here becomes a space from which Latin American authors demand that Latin America come to terms with its own composite identity.
In order to go beyond Said’s theorisations on *Orientalism*, I explore the use of ‘China’ through Ahmed’s figure of the ‘stranger’ and ‘strange encounters’ (2000). Herself working through paradigms drawn from feminist theory and postcolonialism, Ahmed explores the tensions implicit in the use of ‘strangerness’, where postcolonialism has traditionally concerned itself with the ‘other’ in relation to the ontological status of the subject. Her notion of ‘strange encounters’ allows us to address how the meetings that produce the ‘stranger’ are ‘determined, but not fully determined’, and to understand ‘how that figure is put to work, and made to work, in particular times and places’ (Ahmed 2000: 11–17, italics in the original).

Ahmed defines the ‘stranger’ as ‘the one whom we have already identified in the event of being named as alien’ (2000: 2). She suggests that the figure of the ‘stranger’ is *produced* through knowledge, *in* the encounter, and that the recognition of the stranger is an affective judgement (2014). ‘Strange encounters’ reopen past encounters, determined by their historical relation, and involve difference, given that there is an asymmetry of power (Ahmed 2000: 8, 13). Ahmed explains that subjects come into existence as entities only through encounters with others, and thus the subject’s existence cannot be separated from the ‘others’ who are encountered (2000: 7).

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6 There has been a well-rehearsed critique of Said’s *Orientalism*. Said has been accused of ignoring class relations in the emergence of ‘Orientalism’ and of inconsistency in characterising it as a system of representations or misrepresentations (Ahmad 1992); of misappropriating Foucault by presenting no theory of resistance and offering no alternative to what it critiques (Young 1990), which makes the book theoretically inconsistent (Clifford 1988); of failing to see women as active participants in the power relation and ignoring gender position within the texts (Lowe 1991; Mills 1991); of emphasizing dominance and power over cultural interaction (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001); or that he does not present an alternative to the reductive approaches he describes throughout his text (Nestby 2013). The dichotomy between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ that emerges in *Orientalism* rests on stereotypes which ultimately essentialise and fetishize the ‘Orient’. But this does not undermine the fact that power determines which representations are accepted as ‘true’, that the truthfulness is alleged through a position within a discourse, and that this emerged from a structure of imperial domination (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001: 75). By offering an explanatory system for the historical, political and cultural construction of ‘otherness’, *Orientalism* has proved itself useful to a wide variety of analytical approaches.
The relevance of Ahmed’s ideas to my thesis derives from the fact that they highlight our ‘need to pay attention to the *shifting conditions* in which encounters between others, and between other others, take place’ (2000: 13, italics in the original). As Ahmed shows, it is in the process of recognition of the other as a ‘stranger’ that we identify him or her as such. The stranger can become a fetishised category (what she terms ‘stranger fetishism’) invested with a life of its own, as ‘the stranger’ is cut off from the histories which have led them to be determined as such (Ahmed 2000: 5). As the stranger is cut off from the histories that have determined him or her as such, Ahmed signals the *complexity* of the relationship between histories of colonialism and contemporary modes of encounter. According to her, ‘if we consider the production of “the stranger” through relationships of knowledge […], we can draw attention to the processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that are concealed in stranger fetishism’ (2000: 57).

Ahmed’s statement brings our attention to the mechanisms involved in the production of the ‘fetishised stranger’ and fixed otherness, using ideas that I will develop in the first chapter. While Ahmed states that ‘we need to move our attention from the production of otherness to the (re)production of strangerness’ (2000: 61), I build on her work to argue that we need to move our attention to the ways through which the (re)production of strangerness also continues to produce essentialist ‘otherness’. The fetishised stranger, being constructed as ‘other’, exposes the processes at play and through which ‘otherness’ is constituted, communicated and transformed, as well as incorporated, resisted and reinvented (Hallam and Street 2000: 1–5). In other words, focusing on strangerness allows us to observe not only how strangerness continues to be (re)produced, but also how it continues to (re)produce otherness. This process of (re)production of otherness, I argue, is as
As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan show in their book *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ‘the relationship between “transnational,” “postcolonial,” “center-periphery,” and “diaspora” in contemporary usage can be found in the way modernity masks particularities in favor of the appearance of universal categories’ (1994: 16). In their text, Grewal and Kaplan call for transnational alliances and argue against what they term a ‘standpoint’ epistemology (1994: 17–28). Regarding the risks of the masking of particularities in favour of universal categories, the present study seeks to question the distinction between ‘centre’ and ‘margin’, and fixed notions of otherness, thus revealing what Berthold Schoene calls the ‘anachronism of these kinds of hegemonic distinctions between self and other’ (2011: 27).

It is precisely because of the anachronism inherent in hegemonic distinctions that I consider it necessary to explore the mechanisms at play in the relation between ‘stranger’ (and strangerness) and ‘other’ (and otherness). Otherness and strangerness are sometimes used interchangeably, and their differences generate no consensus. For example, Bianca Szytniewski explores unfamiliarity, otherness and strangerness, and shows how sometimes otherness is perceived as a universal social condition, in contradistinction to the otherness of another human being, while strangerness occurs only when the otherness of the other becomes irritating or disturbing (2013: 185). For Ahmed, as Vince Marotta shows, ‘the stranger as other is constituted through power relations that are embedded in the past as much as in the present’ (2017 loc. 557), and thus Ahmed does not distinguish the ‘stranger’ from the ‘other’. In this thesis, I will consider otherness as an essentialist ontology and strangerness as
unfixed and flexible, the latter’s condition due to the central importance of the process of encounter. The ontological status of the subject thus differs in my working definitions of strangerness and otherness. While in strangerness the process of recognition of the stranger is open-ended, as the process is dynamic and open, in otherness the subject is considered as an essential other distinct from the self. Thus, by focusing on ‘strange encounters’, we can bring attention to the ways in which ‘fetishised strangers’ and ‘otherness’ are brought about, where fetishisation fixes and essentialises subjects as ‘others’.

Essentialist differentiations between people within Latin America have been most frequently studied in terms of race and ethnicity, and reveal how social stratification is linked to race (Telles and Steele 2012). Studies on race and ethnicity in Latin America have shown how they may structure inequalities; that skin colour is a consistent but overlooked dimension of inequality; and that ethnoracial discrimination is commonly experienced and witnessed (Wade 1997, 2013; Telles and PERLA 2014: 219–29). In specific terms of the otherness of Latin America, we find the work of Tzvetan Todorov, who argues that the relation of the West to the other in Latin America during the conquest was multidimensional. He views it as a case in which the axes include value judgement, the rapprochement or distancing in relation to the other, and the knowledge or ignorance of the other’s identity (1999: 185). Siskind, in his analysis of literary modernismo, states that the foreign ‘Other’ was the signifier of a cosmopolitan desire (2014: 122–23). Elizabeth Sosa takes another perspective, using otherness as a category of analysis that allows the Latin American subject’s position on the periphery to be challenged, by approaching the subject at the periphery from different perspectives (2009: 369). And as Lesley Wylie has shown, otherness in the Americas has been parodied in literature through
the *novela de la selva* (2005: 105–16, 2006: 733), removing any originary essence of what it is trying to represent. As we can see from this picture, otherness has been central to many studies of Latin American literature and identity. However, there is, as yet, no analysis of ‘China’ in terms of otherness in Latin America.

A useful approach to studying ‘otherness’ in Latin America is provided by making use of Kuan-Hsing Chen’s ideas in his monograph *Asia as Method* (2010). In it, Chen proposes positioning the West as ‘bits and fragments that intervene in local social formations in a systematic, but never totalizing, way’ (2010: 223). Rather than considering the West in oppositional terms, he argues, it can be viewed as one cultural resource among others (Iwabuchi 2014: 47). Chen aims ‘to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward’ (2010: 223). His rationale, which suggests the need for an ‘Asia and the rest’ worldview, and argues for a paradigm shift towards a deimperialised, decolonised and de-Cold War mentality, informs my understanding of how China appears in the novels studied here. Through his logic of ‘Asia as method’, which implies the possibility of shifting points of reference, China enters Latin American history and becomes part of it, but not in a totalizing manner. That is to say, Chen’s approach does not essentialise a Latin American perspective. From this non-totalizing stance, the novels may question the role that ‘China’, as well as the ‘West’, and ‘otherness’ in general, have in Latin America.

By putting Chen’s ideas into conversation with Ahmed’s, we can see how ‘China’ allows these Latin American authors to write beyond previous hegemonic systems of knowledge, such as ‘Western’ or Eurocentric narratives. ‘Strangerness’ and ‘Asia as method’ thus disclose the mechanisms at play in the (de)construction of
racialised and essentialist ‘otherness’ in these novels. Chen’s demand for a multiplication of frames of reference thus not only allows us to consider the multiple dimensions at play in the recognition of stranger, but it also calls for a specific understanding of the subject.

Regarding the recognition of the ‘stranger’, Nancy’s understanding of the subject as ‘being-with’, with its emphasis on the relationship between subjects (2000: 39), reminds us to focus on the process of recognition of the ‘stranger’ as such. This focus on process is a way of recalling that the ‘strangerness’ results from the encounter of subjects, and is not intrinsic to one or the other. This Nancean perspective on the subject not only allows us to think of the process of encounter, but it also emphasises the transnational aspects at work in the construction of strangerness, underlined by the ‘being-with’ of all subjects. While this emphasis on the transnational could suggest a fetishised understanding of a global community, Nancy’s notion of the ‘inoperative community’ can be understood instead as a non-essentialist reading of cosmopolitanism, as developed by Schoene (2011).

Through ‘strange encounters’, Ahmed argues, we already recognize ‘a stranger’ as the one we do not know, where ‘some bodies’ are more recognisable as strangers than others (2000: 3–4). Ahmed argues that we must refuse to take for granted the status of any given subject as a potential ‘stranger’, what I term here as ‘otherness’, with regards to its essentialist and fetishised nature. Ahmed cautions, with reference to Bülent Diken’s use of ‘the stranger’, of the effects of ontologizing the concept in the way that Diken uses it to inform his view of immigrants, foreigners and refugees as ‘strangers’. According to Ahmed, using the figure of the stranger metaphorically unites different forms of displacement and power imbalance under one single label. While Diken seems to follow Julia Kristeva in her call for an
ethics of respect for the irreconcilable (Kristeva 1991: 182), Ahmed argues that ‘we need to understand how identity is established through strange encounters without producing a universe of strangers’, since to conclude that we are all strangers ‘is to avoid dealing with the political process whereby some others are designated as stranger than other others’ (2000: 6). Ahmed’s articulation of the stranger allows us to question the frames of reference through which ‘China’ will be constructed as such. Therefore, an analysis of strange encounters ‘allows us to address how the encounters that produce “the stranger” as a figure that has linguistic and bodily integrity are determined’ (2000: 17), and are simultaneously concealed by stranger fetishism. In other words, the fetishisation of strangers fixes them as object and ‘other’, thereby denying them any form of agency or subjectivity. By focusing on the ways in which the ‘stranger’ is constructed as such, Ahmed’s figure of the ‘stranger’ allows us to go beyond an ‘ontological other’.

Reminding us of the frames of reference through which ‘China’ can be defined simultaneously as exotic, and as the fetishised stranger, postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan usefully describes ‘exoticism’ as both a particular mode of aesthetic perception, and a practice which renders ‘people, objects and places strange […] and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’ (2001: 13). According to Ahmed, communities construct these figures of ‘the beyond’ as a means of defining themselves. For Ahmed, the ‘alien’ is not simply what we fail to identify in the encounter, but it is the one whom we have already identified as ‘alien’. Insofar as the ‘alien’ gathers all that is beyond the human into the singularity of a given form (Ahmed 2000: 2), it becomes a fetish in psychoanalytical terms.
Indeed, the figure of the ‘stranger’ and Ahmed’s concept of ‘strange encounters’ allow us to go beyond ‘our’ familiar typologies in the analysis of Latin American novels that set their stories in China, allowing for a dialogue which does not simply hold the ‘other’ in a fixed place. Indeed, as Huggan shows, in the age of globalisation characterised by proximity, ‘fetishistic representations of an exotic other tend to repress the very cultural differences they are designed to reaffirm’ (2001: 17–18). In this sense, the figure of the ‘stranger’ summons the challenge implied in the notions of diversity (Jackson and others 2017: 2) and the ways through which we construct otherness. As Ahmed explains, differences are not to be found ‘on the bodies of others […]’, but are determined through encounters between others’ (2000: 9).

From this perspective, Nancy’s approaches to the subject as one ‘being-with’ and to the community as ‘inoperative’ are central to my reading of these novels. Because Nancy questions the (fetishistic) constructions of the subject, and of an essential community, his ideas reveal the ways in which it is possible to move beyond essentialist notions of existence and community. In other words, Nancy provides a way out of essentialist understandings of subjectivity. Like Ahmed, Nancy also moves away from the terminology of the ‘other’.

Nancy proposes the concept of ‘singular plural’ or ‘being-with’, where each singularity exists in relation to other singularities (2000). According to him, the I is necessarily constituted in relation to a plurality. For Nancy, as Marie-Eve Morin explains, ‘the singular plural means that there are singularities whose identity or selfhood can only be found in their “relation” to other singularities’ (2012: 2). Nancy emphasises that people are in-common, labouring to ‘elaborate a thought more fundamental than the same/other dichotomy’ as Watkin explains (2007: 61). Read in
relation to Ahmed, Nancy demonstrates how the recognition of ‘strangers’ is produced in the encounter, and that all encounters are informed by our relationship to others.

Building on the subject as ‘being-in-common’ Nancy proposes his idea of the ‘inoperative community’ (1991: 1–28). For Nancy, the ‘community’ remains unrepresentable. Nancy’s thesis is that at the core of Western political thinking there resides a longing for an ‘original community’. This longing contrasts with the current sense of disintegration. For Nancy, ‘being-in-common is what “we” are, and this way of being makes fusion or communion impossible’ (Morin 2012: 94).

Arguing that there is no ‘essential community’, and yet that people are-in-common, Nancy outlines the ‘inoperative community’ as a ‘collective human necessity without fixed teleological function’, as Schoene aptly puts it (2011: 17).

In this sense, then, both Nancy and Ahmed critique the celebration of otherness in ethical philosophy. Ahmed characterises ethics as a kind of hospitality towards strangers, arguing that the ‘ethical demand is to work with that which has already been assimilated, in order to work with that which fails to be assimilated’ (2000: 16). From this perspective, a focus on strangerness allows us to think about how a fetishised ‘China’ reveals the structures of differentiation at play in Latin America. Ahmed thus facilitates our understanding of how the ‘chino/a’ has been excluded from articulations of essentialist discourses of identity, notwithstanding the real presence of Chinese people in Latin America. This idea is central to my analysis in the second chapter, where the main events occur in Chinatowns, or are linked to Chinese communities. Thus, by showing how ‘China’ is articulated, I argue that the writers in this chapter demonstrate different ways in which China and the Chinese have or have not been assimilated.
My reading of Ahmed and Nancy allows for a critical reflection on what enables, and determines, the encounter, instead of installing a ‘mono-directional inclusion of the Other into hegemonic designs’ (Leinius 2014: 41). The authors’ choice of China to disrupt discourses of otherness challenges hegemonic racial and essentialist notions of identity in Latin America, evoking the being-in-common of the Latin American author at a personal, local and global level. From a cosmopolitan perspective, the novels can be analysed through various interconnected levels of the local, national, transnational and global, in order to expose their critique of ‘stranger fetishism’.

Cosmopolitanism calls on us to understand the world as it undergoes a transformation, whereby the global and the local are to be conceived of as reciprocally interpenetrating principles, engrained in an active engagement with the cultural other, and as phenomena that can be analysed from multiple perspectives (Beck and Sznaider 2006: 18, 22). From this position, the cosmopolitan is not exclusively a contemporary phenomenon, but rather an understanding of the world, that is committed to the liaison between the local and the global. Whilst remaining aware of voices that denounce some of cosmopolitanism’s Eurocentric and universalising stances, in which non-Western epistemologies continue to be marginalised (Leinius 2014: 39–65), I suggest that cosmopolitanism’s transnational approach also allows for a challenge to Western hegemony and Eurocentric worldviews. My argument is not that the cosmopolitan is to be equated with a loose definition of a universal global community in which everyone participates, which itself may simultaneously exercise and conceal inequalities, but rather that it challenges the dependence on subject positions in regard to a cosmopolitan perspective.
As Pnina Werbner explains, the 1990s were a watershed for ‘cosmopolitanism’ in scholarship, as heralded by David Held’s text *Democracy and the Global Order* (1995). Held took up the vision of Immanuel Kant’s ‘perpetual peace’ to argue for the ‘apparently utopian possibility of cosmopolitan citizenship’ (Werbner 2008: 2). Within this view we find Kwame Anthony Appiah’s vision of a cosmopolitan community, where individuals enter relationships founded on mutual respect, despite their differences (2007). Later, as Juan Flores notes, ‘grassroots globalization’ as set forth by Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford’s ‘discrepant cosmopolitanisms’, and the ‘grassroots/vernacular cosmopolitanisms’ of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and others, drew attention to the experiences of diaspora which diverge from a traditional, ‘privileged’ notion of cosmopolitanism (2010: 24–25). This trend in scholarship has led to calls for a new understanding of cosmopolitanism, and the recognition of ongoing issues of racial identity and gender inequality ‘often ignored or minimized in the grand narratives of transnational hegemonies’ (Flores 2010: 24–25).

Thus, proponents of new understandings of cosmopolitanism attempt to disassociate it from prior universal, hegemonic definitions. Rather, they argue that cosmopolitanism is now a variety of concrete practical stances that are provisional and can lead to strategic alliances and networks that cross territorial and political borders’ (Cheah 2011: 218). Defining this as a ‘critical cosmopolitanism’, Rebecca L. Walkowitz describes examples of it through texts that think beyond the boundaries of nations, but simultaneously compare, distinguish, and judge versions of transnational thought; testing moral and political norms, and valuing informal, as well as transient, models of community (2006: 2). Also going beyond the above notions of ‘traditional cosmopolitanism’, Schoene draws on Nancy to propose a new
understanding of cosmopolitanism, one in which the representation of worldwide human living and global community remains continually liable to affiliation, and capable of dispersion (2011: 17). While Nancy dismisses the term ‘cosmopolitan’, because of its associations with universalism and its ideological nature (2000: 148–51), his theoretical reconceptualization does in fact allow for a new, non-identitarian understanding of cosmopolitanism. According to Schoene, this kind of cosmopolitanism signals a ‘departure from traditional internationalist perspectives while stressing the significance of local cultures for the development of any meaningful and viable world-communal future’ (2011: 1).

Schoene observes a new kind of novel emerging in Britain, which he terms the ‘cosmopolitan novel’ because of the way it engages with the world and the interconnectedness of places. This novel would be made possible by globalisation, but simultaneously possesses the aesthetic resources to resist and challenge the homogenisation that globalisation may bring. Schoene notices how the cosmopolitan novel may innovate formally via the use of multiple narrative threads, or spanning different geographical locations and temporalities, to create a composite which is non-reifying (2011: 103), features also available in the novels I study here. According to Schoene, a novel’s cosmopolitanism lies in its particular stance towards the world (2011: 16). This stance is defined by him in terms of Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’, as a way of being-in-common that refuses to circumscribe community within a fixed or totalizing essence. As Schoene shows, Nancy’s outline of community as inoperative and being-in-common ‘proves instructively illuminating for literature imagining global community beyond “the people” or (united) nations, and outside the utopian/dystopian framework of ideological modelling or transcendent meaning-making’ (2011: 17).
Of course, this movement towards a global community could be taken as much as an effect of globalisation, as of cosmopolitanism. However, Nancy sees in globalisation a chaotic agglomeration ruled by capitalism, which allows for ‘alternative relationality that promotes the freedom and movement of singular beings’, as Jane Hiddlestone explains (2015: 103). In contrast to globalisation, I see this cosmopolitanism as aware of difference, more a sensibility than a set of rules or absolute notion of relationality. This cosmopolitanism allows us to focus on the relative difference, rather than on an essentialist understanding of differences. In this awareness of difference, cosmopolitanism exposes the ways in which ‘stranger fetishism’ is constructed and deployed through a fetishised ‘China’ in these novels.

Throughout this thesis I use the word fetish in different but interrelated ways to refer to the role that ‘China’ can be seen to play in Latin America through these novels. I follow both Bhabha’s definition of fetish, where the stereotype is fetishised (1994: 106), and Ahmed’s definition, where the stranger is cut off from the histories of its determination. Drawing on male psychoanalytic case studies, in his texts *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1949) and *Fetishism* (1927), Sigmund Freud describes the fetish as a form of ‘sexual perversion that constitutes itself as a metonymic substitution and as a disavowal of a lack’ (Pancrazio 2004: 29). For Freud, fetishism is the displacement of fantasy and desire onto alternative objects that allows the subject to deal with the fear of castration, through substitution. In other words, the fetishist is one who recognises a lack but rejects that knowledge. However, this is not a simple act of negation: ‘because the subject recognizes the possibility of loss and separation, he/she must disaffirm the reality of the absence through excess’ (Pancrazio 2004: 30). Building on Freud, Bhabha argues that the construction of the stereotype assumes that the ‘other’ is essentially coherent,
without admitting change or differentiation. However, this coherence is only a fantasy of wholeness.

For Bhabha, the stereotype thus constructs a group, or individual, as an essential or ontological ‘other’, while the strategic repetition of the stereotype potentially questions the fixity of that stereotypical construction. The stereotype thus oscillates between what is already known and what must be anxiously repeated, as if the essential other that should not need to be proved, can actually never be proven in discourse (Bhabha 1994: 94–95). This paradox pertaining to the stereotype is what Bhabha calls ‘productive ambivalence’ (1994: 96). According to him, when trying to define the ‘other’, it is necessary to articulate difference, as what is said about the ‘other’ defines the ‘other’. The discourse that constructs the ‘stereotype’ both recognises and simultaneously disavows difference. Thus, while the construction of the stereotype assumes that the ‘other’ is ‘entirely knowable and visible’, there is always something that exceeds what can be known of the ‘other’. This excess is what is denied in the process of ‘disavowal’ (Bhabha 1994: 108).

Regarding the stereotype in colonial contexts, Bhabha explicitly builds on Jacques Lacan to argue that identity is paradoxical, contradictory and constantly shifting, rejecting fixity and polarisation (1994: 5, 57–93). While for Freud, the libidinal needs are ‘lost’ to the subject, who then aims to recover them through symbolic substitution (the fetish), for Lacan the loss is not of a love object but of being itself. The subject’s attempt to regain what has been lost is what creates desire. This desire then contains both ambivalence and antagonism, negotiating between language (meaning) and the subject (being). This negotiation is illustrated by Lacan through the figure of two overlapping fields, which exemplifies how no field can be solely, or definitively chosen, thus revealing a third space. For Bhabha, ‘hybridity is
the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge’ (Rutherford 1990: 211). This hybrid ‘third space’ emerges as an in-between space, where hegemonic and normalised practices can be re-articulated, challenged and negotiated, allowing for new identities to emerge (Bhabha 1994: 53–56, 296). Hybridity thus discloses its potential for the deconstruction of stereotypes. While this formulation of hybridity is still susceptible to essentialist notions of identity and culture (Easthope 1998: 147), it will be, for the purposes of my thesis, central to the deconstruction of ‘stranger fetishism’ through the figure of ‘China’, allowing for new identities to be disclosed.

Bhabha thus locates the stereotype as a fetishised mode of representation, which he identifies within Lacan’s schema of the Imaginary. The Imaginary is the transformation that occurs when the infant recognises itself through an image which allows it to postulate a fluid identity between itself and the world. However, the reflection is simultaneously alienating, and thus potentially confrontational. Difference separates him from his mother. Like the image of the mirror, the stereotype is always threatened by ‘lack’. For Lacan, it is the entry into language, into the ‘symbolic order’, which forbids the union with the mother, while it is also because of language that that difference remains unstable. When the coherence of the stereotype is discovered as an imaginary, this difference is disavowed while it simultaneously has to be accepted.

The process of disavowal, as Bhabha notes, produces a strategy for the negotiation of the knowledges of differentiation, even as it negates the visibility of difference (1994: 189). It must be noted, however, as Jan Campbell points out, that Bhabha’s unexamined reliance on Lacanian concepts, such as that of the imaginary, fails to consider historical and political realities. Nevertheless, Campbell builds on Bhabha and calls for a personal multiplicity in which different identities are
structured ‘in term[s] of power, consciously and unconsciously in relation to each other [and which entails] rememorizing and recreating different bodily imaginaries and myths at an individual and a social level’ (2000: 201, 207). Read in relation to Bhabha, Campbell’s engagement with alterity and ambivalence allows us to move forward from binary and fixed constructions of otherness that help reproduce power inequality. Making use of stereotypical descriptions, the texts themselves show the limits of fixed oppositions in terms of understanding the complexities of identity. As Grewal and Kaplan also show, we can, and should, move away from models based on binary oppositions that cannot provide adequate maps of social relations or move us out of the paradigms of colonial discourse (1994: 9).

This double movement of otherness thus enables us to foreground the operations of displacement, and to consider the persistence of stereotyping. It must, however, be noted, as Anne McClintock and other feminist critics observe, that Freud’s, Lacan’s and Bhabha’s reworkings of the fetish are all concerned with the male body, thus rejecting the female fetishistic gesture (Campbell 2000: 195; Owen 2007: 50). As McClintock shows, this serves to ‘disavow the existence of female sexual agency except on terms prescribed by men’ (1995: 181). She argues instead that female fetishism ‘parades the presence and legitimacy of a multiplicity of pleasures, needs and contradictions’ (1995: 181). The ambivalence of the fetish, which, following Freud, oscillates between castration and its denial, does not necessarily embody two options. In McClintock’s words, ‘fetishes can involve triangulated contradictions, or more than three [contradictions]’ (1995: 202).

For McClintock, the fetish ‘embodies a crisis in social meaning’, housing symbolic and material difference at both a personal and historical level. In her work, she repurposes the fetish as a theoretical tool to explore the ambiguities and
complexities of the self within specific histories and contexts. The fetish, as viewed by McClintock, is a useful concept for theorising about objects, places, people, and practices that are contradictory and ambiguous. In other words, McClintock’s conception of the fetish houses the social contradictions that are experienced at a personal level. McClintock goes beyond Freud by showing how the phallus is not the only fetish and not all fetishes are sexual. She also critiques Marx’s ‘commodity fetishism’, arguing that he overemphasizes the economic realm. Pointing towards the spaces between social constructs such as race, gender, class or age, McClintock believes that sexual difference and inequality tend to be expressed through other differences, such as race or gender (1995: 183–84). McClintock’s ideas are central to my understanding of ‘China’ as a third term which involves contradictions and is multidimensional, informed by history and imaginaries. Building on McClintock, I see fetishism as exposing the hierarchies of social difference, as well as how these differences are articulated through other inequalities or alterities, such as gender or race.

According to McClintock, fetishes inhabit ‘the threshold of both personal and historical memory’; marking a ‘crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution’ (1995: 184). The individual thus gains symbolic control by displacing power onto the fetish, and then manipulating the fetish and its threat of (terrifying) ambiguity (McClintock 1995: 184). McClintock thus calls for an opening up of the definition of fetishism to more theoretical and historically fruitful alleys that would include both psychoanalytic insights (such as disavowal or displacement) and historical narratives of cultural difference and diversity (1995: 185, 202). McClintock’s expansion of the fetish beyond the male body, integrating it into history, allows me to overcome the limitations of a male-centred vision of the fetish.
From this perspective, building on McClintock, I see the fetishistic construction of ‘China’ in the novels I review as involving contradictions and engaging multiple approaches, including both psychoanalytical insights and historical narratives of cultural difference and diversity, and engaging explicitly with stereotypes understood in the way McClintock outlines.

Involving contradictions and engaging multiple approaches, the stereotype as fetish makes it possible for us to accept differences between the ‘others’ and among ‘selves’, while at the same time believing there is coherence between those same ‘selves’ and ‘others’. While Freud’s fetish is always both loved and despised, and Bhabha pointed out that the stereotype acts as fetish, the construction of the ‘other’ as a stereotype creates the fantasy of a coherent identity of the ‘self’, that simultaneously reveals the fantasy as being in fact beyond the control of the ‘self’.

The multiple and contradictory belief structure of fetishism is central to the act of stereotyping. It is from this perspective that the idea of the fetish is central to my analysis of novels that have a specific engagement with ‘China’ and with stereotypes and ‘Chineseness’. McClintock’s feminist theory helps me identify the formation of hegemonic structures, as well as the participation of subjects which have been made invisible in discourses of the nation and of Latin America, exposing the critical relations between different social structures and institutions, as well as revealing the structures of racial, ethnic and class power that exist in Latin America.

A common colonial and cultural history of Latin American countries provides a context for our observation of certain coherences in the way that ‘China’ is imagined in Latin American literature. A comprehensive approach reveals common themes that expose the imaginary of ‘China’ in Latin America. Indeed, ‘China’ is habitually positioned as an ‘ultimate other’ in Latin America. In relation to
the ‘chino’, and as Ko shows for Argentina, Asian-Argentines are still considered to be ‘foreign’, which she explains by the fact that Argentines consider Asian’s differences to be ‘unsurmountable and incomprehensible’ (2015: 2). And as Megan M. Ferry shows, the PRC’s political identity kept up its exotic appeal through the image propagated in the posters of the Cultural Revolution, where an exotic revolutionary paradise and specific characteristics of Chinese traditional art were circulated (2000: 239). Furthermore, Holmes states that while in the 1980s China already formed part of Latin America’s complex identity, she also notes how it still remained exotic, a notion which she states later deflated with the growth of real interactions between China and Latin American countries (2008: 77–78). And yet, an exotic imaginary of China remains, such as that of China with an archaic temporality or a millenary civilisation (Fernández Bravo 2015: 67), as we can see via cultural and literary representations and indeed, in the novels studied here. And while assumptions about the ‘chino’ transcend Latin America, nuances and often contradictory versions of what ‘chino’ encompasses appear in different countries, regions or groups, including common racist assumptions such as the incomprehensibility of the language or the eyes as a defining feature of a specific group. Indeed, ‘chino’ is usually evoked as a figure of extreme difference, with stereotypes transcending the region. ‘China’ goes beyond an exotic other to embody a specific otherness which brings together notions of the ‘oriental’ under the figure of the ‘chino’. It is from this perspective that ‘China’ appears distinctively as an ‘ultimate other’ specifically for Latin America.

By choosing a specific nation or nationality to write about, the novels studied here engage with previous fantasies and stereotypes, myths and projections of places and nationalities. This imagined ‘China’ builds upon inherited European views of the
East, informed by geographical factors, conquest narratives and an imaginary on China, which has been forged throughout history. Indeed, as Fiddian states,

the discovery of a New World beyond the western horizon of Renaissance Europe brought about a realignment of relations between East and West, introducing a third term that effectively re-cast Europe as the Old World sandwiched between the “New World” of the Americas, [...] and the Ancient Worlds of the Middle and Far East [...] (2007: 190).

Fiddian’s statement helps to explain the complex positioning of the Americas within an East-West binary. Following my understanding of the fetish, it is possible that the resonant singularity of the discovery of America, which fixes ‘America’ as ‘non-Western’, leads to a crisis which in turn fixes the ‘Orient’ beyond the Americas for the Americas. China thus becomes a fetishised metonym of ‘Orient’ and ‘other’, ‘beyond’ the geographical limits of the Americas. ‘China’ can hence be seen as a metonym of the exotic ‘other’. The Latin American author posits him- or herself within the ‘oriental’ and the ‘orientalist’ Latin America and, by showing ‘China’ to be other through ‘strangerness’, the author reveals ‘China’ to be an unstable and fetishised subject for Latin America. In my various novels’ challenges to the otherness of the Chinese, they disclose how ‘China’ has ultimately become a fetish of otherness for Latin America.

As ‘fetishised other’, a ‘China’ that is both historically and economically informed, is simultaneously used to recall the discontinuities and changes experienced by China as ‘other’. As fetish, ‘China’ masks the imagined absence and difference of ‘China’ in Latin America, while — as we can see via Bhabha — simultaneously pointing to its lack of representation (1994: 107). In this process of metonymy, and through historically diverse ideas of the fetish as a psychoanalytic term, the novels strategically expose how ‘China’ is multidimensional and
heterogeneous, and should not be thought of from within an essentialist, fixed framework.

McClintock’s exploration of the fetish thus helps us understand how the choice to represent ‘China’ plays a specific role, fulfilling the cosmopolitan impulse of the Latin American author. Furthermore, it provides a historically nuanced way of understanding Ahmed’s figure of the stranger as a fetishised category (2000: 5). Indeed, by acknowledging both China and Latin America as embodying the potential to be perceived as ‘exotic’, the novels can be seen to gain symbolic control, displacing power onto these fetishised exotic locations, exposing the constructedness of stereotypes, and thus manipulating the fetish and its threat of ambiguity. Building on McClintock, fetishism is thus revealed as a historical enactment of ambiguity, beyond fixed binaries, and embracing open-endedness (1995: 184, 202). An analysis of the role of ‘China’ allows us to see how these Latin American authors engage with global issues, while simultaneously emphasizing the local context in which the ‘fetishised stranger’ is constructed.

With stories set in China, the way in which the ‘stranger’ is constructed plays out in the novels studied in the first chapter. Here, I analyse César Aira’s *Una novela china* (1987), and Alberto Laiseca’s *La mujer en la Muralla* (1990), both of them Argentine authors. I then analyze *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* by the Peruvian-Mexican author Mario Bellatin (2001a, 2005). The novels will be shown to challenge the notion of a ‘China’ structured by binaries, through the displacement of traditional images of the ‘Orient’. Acknowledging and exploring the imaginaries and stereotypes that surround China in Latin America as they situate their stories in China, and use specific historical and cultural imagery, the texts evoke a performance of Chineseness. Allowing the reader to evoke ‘China’ through Ahmed’s
The novels studied in the second chapter are linked to Chinatowns and the presence of Chinese communities in Latin America. I analyse Ariel Magnus’ *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007), César Aira’s *El mármol* (2011), both of which are Argentine, and the Mexican Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel, *Verde Shanghai* (2011c). In these novels, the fact that Latin American Chinatowns are not exclusively Chinese, and that ‘supermercados chinos’ sell products from different ‘oriental countries’, contributes to the notion of an indistinct ‘oriental’, who is recognised as or named ‘Chinese’, but who can only be internally identified as Chinese, or otherwise. Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’ (2001: 263), further reveals how the idea of ‘strangerness’ is deployed here to challenge fixed constructions of alterity, revealing how ‘China’ is at once constructed and disavowed as ‘exotic’. In terms of Nancy’s ideas on ontology, these novels can be considered less in terms of the terminology of the ‘other’ and rather in terms of a ‘being-with’. I argue that by focusing on the Chinatown and the Chinese, the novels offer a critique of a racially homogeneous Latin America defined only in *mestizo* terms structured along notions of black, indigenous and white, by emphasizing its heterogeneity and hybridity beyond ‘local’ black, indigenous and white cultures.
The final chapter analyses the novels *Los impostores* (2002) and *Hotel Pekín* (2008) by the Colombian Santiago Gamboa, and Mexican Ximena Sánchez Echenique’s *El ombligo del dragón* (2007). In this chapter, the central role of travel emphasizes an idea of transnationalism and mobility in explicit relation to both China and Latin America. Like the novels studied in the first and second chapters, the novels studied here also disclose and challenge forms of contemporary othering and the asymmetrical distribution of power. However, here the emphasis emerges to make different locations in the world somehow equivalent, questioning hegemonic Eurocentric structures and ‘national’ epistemologies, thus calling for a reconsideration of community and cosmopolitanism. The novels expose how, as Massey states, cultural difference is internal to a culture while it is ‘implacably also a question of different others in distant lands’ (2005: 194). Through Nancy’s notion of community as articulated by Schoene, trying to move beyond and untie ‘imperialism’s core-periphery axiomatic’ (2011: 25), a cosmopolitan attitude and a composite notion of identity that challenges discourses of otherness are revealed in the novels studied here.

My concluding remarks are directed at the novels’ choice of ‘China’ as central to their narratives, and their relation to the growing presence of China in Latin America in the last decades. The emergence of a group of novels written by Latin Americans dealing with China appears at a time in which, as López shows, people of Asian descent in the region have themselves begun to explore race and identity through literature, poetry, art and politics (2016: 128). Simultaneously, an academic body of work dealing with Asian labour migration, settlement and the Asian role in national development has also emerged globally, and the Asian presence has been highlighted in studies of race, citizenship and culture (Hu-DeHart
2009; Chang 2011, among others). While *mestizaje* has endured as a salient paradigm for understanding race in Latin America, the political construction of Latin America has suppressed the presence of people of African and Asian descent, while favouring the intermixing between indigenous and European (López 2016: 125). And while later theorizations have aimed to go beyond the reductionism of *mestizaje*, a post-racial Latin America remains a myth (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016). Against this background, this thesis proposes that the imaginary fictionalization of ‘China’ here allows these authors to suggest ways out of an essentialist understanding of difference, identity and community in Latin America. With this in mind, the first chapter now interrogates the representations of ‘China’ as a setting in Latin American contemporary novels.

Latin American novels that set their stories in China offer a particular way through which to explore ‘China’. This chapter examines the way in which ‘China’ is represented and constructed in Latin American novels that use this country as a setting for their stories. Through my analyses of *Una novela china* by César Aira (1987, 2005b), *La mujer en la Muralla* by Alberto Laiseca (1990), and *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* (*La escuela*) by Mario Bellatin (2001a, 2005), I argue that ‘China’ in these novels is both a physical space and a discursive context that allows for self-reflexive explorations of narrative discourse, in ways that foreground the negotiation of power in the histories of both China and Latin America.

The stories are all situated in China during different time periods: *La mujer en la Muralla* is set during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), while *Una novela china* is set during the first thirty years of Communist rule (1949–late-1970s), and *La escuela* plays out across both ‘imperial’ and ‘communist’ periods in China. In contrast, Latin America’s presence in these texts is subliminal, if it is present at all. These novels present their stories metadiscursively as narrative, revealing the failure of overarching plot to fully recover any ‘real’ history or histories, (re)inventing narrative discourses, and thus re-encoding power relations through the construction of a recognisable ‘China’. In this chapter, I will argue that the novels can, in different

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1 Aira’s novels are usually signed off with a year which does not correspond to the year in which the text was published. The novel, first published in 1987, is signed off with the date 15 January 1984.

2 Originally published in 2001, the later editions of *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* differ in content and length. In this chapter, I will use the 2005 edition as the central text for my analysis.
ways, be read as broad postmodern allegories for the asymmetrical distribution of power at different points in history.

In order to explore how these novels encode power relations, I will focus primarily on their self-reflective, often metafictional narratorial construction, and on the depiction of China through various historical forms and cultural imagery. A chronological perspective on the analysis of the novels will also show how specific historical and cultural imagery permits an evocation of China through the figure of the ‘stranger’, as proposed by Sara Ahmed’s work of critical theory, *Strange Encounters* (2000). Because of their parodic narrative constructions, the novels challenge any specific ontology of China and the Chinese, instead opening up a ‘space of encounter’ with China. By revealing this opening of spaces of encounter through Ahmed’s theories, we can see how the novels expose the construction of the ‘stranger’ *in* the encounter, thus producing an innovative approach which has not yet been used to study notions of otherness and strangerness in Latin America.

This chapter hypothesises that, through subjective, overtly constructed discourses, ‘China’ appears as a symbolic object endowed with its own meaning and value, perceived as having inherent value that is separable from the historical referent symbolised here. With ‘China’ established symbolically, the act of narration itself becomes central to the retrieval and destabilisation of the story being told. I will elaborate on this perspective by examining the texts in terms of Linda Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction’ (1988), Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia (1981), and Jeremy Tambling’s ‘postmodern allegories’ (2010), all of which I will return to in more detail later.
I suggest that the way in which these novels act as ‘spaces of encounter’ is further problematised by the traces of asymmetrical power relations that outline people’s positions within society. In this sense, the historical context in which they were written sheds significant light on why these writers turn to China in order to engage in their reflections on the distribution of power. I will suggest that these authors turn to China in their works because China, perceived as antipodal and unknown, embodies specific forms of grand narratives and tyrannical power, simultaneously informed by notions of ‘China’ as ‘ultimate other’. Asymmetrical distributions of power will be shown to be associated with authoritarian or hegemonic rule, and the embodiment of power, or lack of it, among different members of society.

*Una novela china* and *La mujer en la Muralla* were published a few years after the end of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (1976–1983) and during the implementation of neoliberal policies and processes of democratisation in Argentina. *La escuela* was published after the fall of the *Partido Revolucionario Institutional* (PRI). Published as they were at a time of ‘overabundance of information and discourses’, as described by Reinaldo Laddaga, these novels conform very broadly to the postmodern trend of foregrounding the fictitious nature of ‘master narratives’ (2007: 20). The novels can thus be seen to consciously engage with a Latin American public whose idea of China is influenced by Cold War discourses on China as despotic and distant, and indeed as ‘ultimate other’, while simultaneously interrupting these discourses and the prior representations of that country. Precisely because they reveal the complexities of the previous histories and discourses that those ‘encounters’ contain, these novels can also constructively be analysed through the framework of postcolonialism.
From this postcolonial framework, this chapter aims to show how these novels offer an ‘attitude of resistance to cultural colonisation that is a vital characteristic of postcolonial discourse’ (Nagy-Zekmi 2004: 7). Ignacio López-Calvo persuasively argues for the difficulty of taking a postcolonial approach to the representation of China in Latin American texts. In his study, specifically on Sino-Peruvian (tusán) literature, he shows how this difficulty arises partly from the fact that China was never fully colonised by Western powers, and that in the Peruvian context the tusán discourse’s other, the dominant criollo, is in fact a community formerly colonised by an imperial power and later by economic neo-colonialism. López-Calvo therefore bases his approach on ‘internal colonialism’, invoking the marginalisation and exploitation of minority groups by mainstream society, as mainstream Peruvian society oppresses the Chinese and their descendants (2014: 6, 7). Furthermore, as Jon Beasley-Murray states, postcolonial theory largely remains:

too mired in a modern consciousness that clings to a North-South hierarchy, however much that hierarchy emerges troubled and uncertain [...] [And, likewise,] postcolonial theory’s undermining of the distinction between identity and otherness still tends to locate identity in the North and otherness in the South (2003: 234).

Taking into consideration López-Calvo’s and Beasley-Murray’s warnings, I will here follow Peter Hulme (1995), who argues that the field of postcolonial studies needs (his italics) to find a place for America, where ‘postcolonial’ refers to a process (his italics) of disengagement, which takes many forms and is probably inevitable in all situations that have been marked by colonialism (which for America would have begun in 1492). Boaventura de Sousa Santos indicates that ‘postcolonialism is part of cultural, linguistic, and literary studies, and privileges textual exegesis and the performative practices to analyse the systems of representation and the identity process’ (2002: 13). In this sense, ‘postcolonial’ can
be thought of as a descriptive term, not an evaluative term, nor an adjective describing a condition which assumes that a formal colonial status has been left behind, or that its effects can be overlooked (Hulme 1995; Fiddian 2000; Forsdick 2013).

Indeed, following Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “‘postcolonial’ can serve as a term that positions cultural production in the fields of transnational economic relations and diasporic identity constructions’ (1994: 15). While I share the well-rehearsed reservations of López-Calvo and other scholars about adopting postcolonial theories for Latin America (Moraña and others 2008: 5; López-Calvo 2014: 6, 7), I consider that aspects of postcolonial criticism can have specific uses in this context, in so far as it allows us to read these novels from within ‘the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order’, borrowing Bhabha’s words (Bhabha 1994: 245).

Unlike tusan literature, the novels studied here can also be seen as part of a criollo discourse, informed by Western narratives on China that reproduce the exploitative relationship between the imperial Western metropolis and its colonies. From this angle, I deploy the term ‘postcolonial’ as a tool for the revision of assumptions that privilege certain narratives, and as a strategy for reading cultural representations under the optic of power relations. A further significant theoretical positioning must now concern the working definitions of postmodernism used in this analysis.

The novels studied here reveal themselves to be postmodern through the presence of unreliable narrators, fragmented narratives, and paradoxes, among other
features. Discussion of postmodernism grew to particular prominence in Latin America mainly during the 1990s; as Diana Palaversich shows (2005), the concept of postmodernism can be used for Latin America, when considering the interrelated cultural, political and economic phenomena which arise from the region’s immersion in global and transnational capitalism. In this sense, and using Doreen Massey’s reconfigured understanding of space as situational and in constant change (2005), it coincides with a moment within the establishment of transnational capital, characterised by immanence, the noting of dispersion, fragmentation and a fading sense of history. Revealed as postmodern, I argue that the novels studied in this chapter engage with Hutcheon’s concepts of narrative perspective to problematise self-consciousness, the ‘real’, and the incorporation of actual historical figures and texts. They go beyond Eurocentric and North American frames of reference, allowing, in turn, an encounter with China as the ‘stranger’. In this way, the novels studied here reflect on both their own ‘locality’ and their belonging to the global community, as well as to global experiences of power imbalance.

Within this context of postmodernism, these novels can be defined on one level in the terms Hutcheon proposes in A Poetics of Postmodernism, as historiographic metafiction, in that they are ‘intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages’ (1988: 5). Their ‘theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs […] [allow] for […] [their] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past’.

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3 Significantly, within this discussion, Santiago Colás condemned theorists of postmodernism, questioning Hutcheon’s exclusion of the ‘concrete, historical, and political dimension of postmodern culture’, and what he presents as her ‘unconscious universalizing impulses’. He suggested instead an alternative ‘postmodernism’ for Latin America, related to social and political circumstances. While arguably Colás’s approach may be relevant for some Latin American works, I prefer to engage here with Donald Shaw who argues for a distinction between texts which show a greater possible conformity to canons of postmodernism in Europe and North America, and works that tend to illustrate the notion of specificity to Spanish America (Colás 1994: 3–4, 18; Shaw 1996: 430, 2002: 211–12; Palaversich 2005: 9–10).
working ‘within conventions in order to subvert them’ (Hutcheon 1988: 5, italics in the original). As Hutcheon claims, ‘fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality’, played out in terms of parody and metafiction (1988: 40, 45). It plays ‘upon the truth and lies of the historical record’ reminding us that we name and constitute events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning, admitting ‘the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today’ (Hutcheon 1988: 97, 114, italics in the original).

That is, while these texts engage with a specific historical-political reality, they simultaneously question the construction of discourses that claim to establish any form of direct representational or mimetic correspondence with reality.

In this sense, ‘historiographic metafiction’ offers us a valuable approach here by allowing us to ‘cast doubt on the very possibility of any firm “guarantee of meaning,” however situated in discourse’ (Hutcheon 1988: 55, italics in the original). The texts can be seen to engage with specific historical-political realities, both within China and Latin America, whilst they remain aware of history and fiction as human constructs. This disavowal of access to a ‘real historical past’ as an expression of counter power, in which the recognition of mediated textual access through fiction is favoured, forms the basis for my analysis in this chapter. Given the doubt inherent in any guarantee of meaning, however situated in discourse it may be, Ahmed’s theoretical approach to ‘strangerness’ is a useful device for the analysis of the novels.

Building on Ahmed’s work on the ‘stranger’, I argue that these novels contest the discourses of otherness, drawing attention ‘to the forms of authorisation and labour concealed by stranger fetishism’ (2000: 74). Read as ‘strange encounters’, in which strangerness unfolds, these novels reopen prior histories of encounter between China and Latin America, informed by the Cold War; histories of imperialism and
colonialism; refusing a Eurocentric perspective on knowledge and worldviews; and denying the ‘past-ness’ of these histories. Reopening prior histories of encounter as Ahmed shows occurs in ‘strange encounters’, the novels engage with a Latin American reader, while giving up any totalising thesis about what determines the encounter (2000: 10–11). The potential openness and elasticity of these novels, made available through their fragmented narratives, may ultimately then affect a reader’s perspective on prior histories they are familiar with. While shaped by these histories, the novels destabilise boundaries and create new spaces through which China can be ‘encountered’.

With a view to exploring in precise linguistic terms how the narrative aesthetic works (de)constructively in these novels, thus engaging with Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction’ and Ahmed’s ‘strange encounters’ as textual practices, I will also make use of Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia. Bakhtin suggests that the novel orchestrates its themes by ‘means of the social diversity of speech types and by differing individual voices’ (1981: 263). Heteroglossia, therefore, enters the novel through ‘authorial’ speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres and the speech of characters; ‘each of them permitting a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships’ (Bakhtin 1981: 263).

Heteroglossia, ‘once incorporated into the novel […] is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way’ (Bakhtin 1981: 324, italics in the original). Thus, from a Bakhtinian perspective, the novels appear to play with different languages and versions of reality, none of which may lay claim to an absolute ‘truth’. For my purposes, heteroglossia makes available the various utterances through which the stranger is encountered as ‘stranger’. Through ‘hybrid construction’, where one single speaker contains two languages,
and through the ironising of ‘authorial authority’, Bakhtin’s techniques of incorporating heteroglossia into the novel may reveal the discourses through which power positions are (de)constructed. These discourses are studied here through Ahmed’s terms, as discourses that remake ‘what it is that we may yet have in common’ (2000: 181, italics in the original), while not holding the other in place. Indeed, given that an exploration of heteroglossia allows us to discern the complex interplay of power relations between subject positions in the novel, a final, further question must concern the allegorical relationship that power relations may have with the asymmetrical distribution of power in broader historical and political contexts.

In order to hone my allegorical reading more closely, I will draw on Jeremy Tambling’s approach through Walter Benjamin. Tambling shows how Fredric Jameson’s concept of ‘national allegories’ assumes that there actually is a continuous narrative to be retrieved, while Benjamin’s approach, nearing that of deconstruction, shows meaning to be discontinuous, drawing attention to its constructed nature, and rejecting any single and consistent meaning (2003: 14–15). Tambling refers to this as an allegory that is ‘postmodern’, ‘where fragments suggest the impossibility of reading a text for a single isolatable truth’ (2010: 159). Thus, no supposition can be made of an underlying, coherent meaning. It is from the assumption that no supposition can be made of a underlying and coherent meaning that I read these novels as a broad, postmodern allegory for the asymmetrical distribution of power: the texts reveal the constructedness of their narrations, a position that is suggestive in itself of the power imbalance that the ability to ‘construct’ embodies, yet stopping short of any moral judgement.
Indeed, Victoria Albornoz presents the use of parody and allegory, together with the ‘fictionalisation of fiction’, as distinctive features of Latin American literature in the 1990s. This literature, she suggests, arises from the need for release from historical reality, and is characterised by the construction of diverse subjectivities, voices and narrative configurations (2011: 3–4). Indeed, as Montaldo explains, a large body of literature was dealing with the legacy of trauma. Argentinean literary production particularly saw itself immersed in processes of privatisation and the reduction of the state, the internationalising of the economy, and an overall questioning of the institutional order (2010: 11). As mentioned in the Introduction, Francine Masiello has suggested that Argentinean literature’s journey through the ‘Orient’ during this time utilises the distance between cultures to explore the construction of meaning, ‘to explore their own conditions as “other” in the society in which they live’ (2002: 216). In this sense, one way in which Albornoz’s ‘release’ can be seen in Argentina’s literature is through the choice of an ‘exotic’ setting.

In post-dictatorship Argentina, according to Martín Caparrós, the choice of an exotic setting became a trend for the ‘nueva narrativa’ (1989). Caparrós differentiates between ‘us’, who ‘nobody needs’, and ‘them’, the 1960s generation, who thought that literature had a place within discourse that sought to change the world (1989). These authors may be included in an Argentinean narrative trend which Maria Laura de Arriba calls ‘the novel of alienation’ (1996: 245). De Arriba argues that what is at stake here is the very urgent necessity of reflecting on the defeat and horror of a recent past not yet laid to rest in Argentina itself (1996: 249). This kind of novel, she argues, seeks to escape from immediate reality, locating its stories in exotic places and alien times (de Arriba 1996: 244).
‘Casi paródicamente’, as Caparrós puts it, a group of Argentinean authors founded a literary group in the 1980s, to which Aira and Laiseca were both linked at the time, and called it ‘Shangai’. The sense of parody that Caparrós recalls here derives in one sense from the choice of a location that acts as a symbol for that which is as far as possible from Argentina geographically and culturally. The group described itself as sharing a distrust of politics, and a disengagement from literary programmes as narratives of ‘the real’. It aimed to underline the complexity of culture as multi-layered, and to abolish the representation of local colour (Kurlat Ares 2013: 625–26).

As presented by Caparrós and others, the ‘Shangai’ group can, on one level, be regarded as a paradoxical response to Jorge Luis Borges’s foundational essay El escritor argentino y la tradición (1953), which argued for freedom from ‘local colour’ in literary expression for the Argentinean author. Borges expressed the need to write ‘sin los camellos por delante’, because ‘el culto argentino del color local es un reciente culto europeo que los nacionalistas debiesen rechazar por foráneo’ (1976). Borges was referring to a literary tradition that did not need to resort to local clichés to be authentic, and which offered freedom from the restricting burden of portraying ‘local colour’ (Kurlat Ares 2013: 626; Rose 2017: 44). In this sense, the resort to the ‘Orient’ is seen to parody the choice of what could still be termed ‘foreign local colour’, in a challenge to the call for writing without ‘camels’. By conspicuously over-using and overstating the exotic, these writers parody ‘official narratives’ regarding tradition or culture. The parodic nature of this act of disruption emerges through their explanation for using the name ‘Shangai’.

In their manifesto, the group stated that ‘Shangai’ represented a form of temporal exoticism, a route to anachronism that, all possibilities considered, was the only utopia allowed to a city that already knew itself to be exotic (Caparrós 1989). Indeed, the word itself is interrogated: ‘la palabra Shangai, no existe, porque puede escribirse de tantas formas distintas que ni siquiera es necesario escribirla’. The group also challenged the ideas associated with the word ‘Shangai’: ‘Shangai suena a chino básico, y sólo lo incomprensible azuza la mirada’ (Caparrós 1989). The ‘Shangai’ group was also aware of the English term ‘to be Shanghaied’, to be spirited away while asleep or drunk and press-ganged into work. And above all, the group played with the arbitrary nature of their choice of name: ‘Shangai es, sobre todo, un mito, innecesario’ (Caparrós 1989). Furthermore, the choice of a place linked with the nineteenth-century expansion of the British Empire evokes histories of colonialism, exploitation and racism.

Caparrós, in keeping with the spirit of ‘Shangai’, downplays the manifesto and establishes a clear distrust of totalitarian themes, endorsing an interest in fragmentation and digression. While the malleability of ‘Shangai’, as presented by Caparrós, leads to the notion that the actual Chinese city itself is irrelevant, the choice of a city which conventionally embodies the ‘exotic’ and is linked to imperialism in the Western imagination may point to a location whose narratives have been continuously and strategically redefined (Chen 2007). It evokes a place whose history has been displaced, given to it, or imposed upon it, by authors. It also evokes the liminal in ways that are particularly relevant to my interpretation of Ahmed’s ‘stranger’ in this chapter.

5 While most texts refer to the group as ‘Shangai’ (without the ‘h’) it is also possible to find it referred to as ‘Shanghai’, the official transcription of the Chinese characters into Spanish. This confusion regarding the way in which to spell the group’s name engages with the manifesto’s interest in digression, by using the word without considering any spelling rules (Caparrós 1989).
In the novels studied here, ‘Shangai’ appears to be ‘produced’ through knowledge: it is simultaneously known and unknown, yet recognisable as a ‘stranger’. Following Ahmed, who re-reads Kristeva’s purely psychoanalytical concept of abjection as requiring a ‘more proper historicisation’, one might claim that:

It is the function and effect of the border […] that allows us to think about how the bodily exchange between subjects reopen the histories of encounter that both substantiate and subjugate strange bodies […] (Ahmed 2000: 52).

Read in relation to Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, ‘Shangai’ appears as the abject: at one level, a jettisoned object which is excluded, establishing the boundary line of the subject, while at the same time permitting a fascination for the subject (1982: 2). In this way, echoing what the ‘Shangai group’ does with Shanghai, the abject is establishing and undermining the border between what is within and without: the abject is not reducible to an object or body, therefore, as it relates to the border which becomes the object (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Therefore, the novels studied here allow us to explore a necessary component of Ahmed’s theory, namely: ‘how bodies are differentiated through the metonymic association of some bodies (and not others) with the border that confounds identity’ (2000: 52, italics in the original). The ‘Shangai group’ can be seen to question the exclusion of Shanghai from its histories of determination: the group’s manifesto seems to call for a reopening of past encounters, exploring the different and fragmented approaches that the city/word allows. In this sense, the use of the exotic setting reopens prior histories, gives up any totalising thesis and casts doubt on any guarantee of meaning. This concept of a ‘novel of alienation’ appears on one level to act as a way of reconciling the escape from ‘immediate’ reality with a reflection on
Argentina’s recent concrete horrors under the Junta of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, embodying the differing discourses at play in this post-dictatorship scenario.

Indeed, the ‘Shangai’ group established itself within a very specific historical context, where the narratives enforced by the authoritarian Junta were being examined. As described by Caparrós, the group was established in a country where bodies had been ‘mutilados, corrompidos y, sobre todo, ocultados, desaparecidos’ (Caparrós 1989). He states that they write in a ‘desert of bodies’ and he believes that in these authors’ novels bodies are ‘elididos, desenfocados, inhallables’ (Caparrós 1989). Both Una novela china and La mujer en la Muralla reveal themselves to be heirs to the ‘Shangai manifesto’, and the relationship of both Aira and Laiseca to this movement is highly relevant to my analysis below.

Considered part of the ‘Shangai group’, César Aira (1949–) is a prolific author who has written over eighty short novels. He is considered to be an exponent of Argentinean contemporary literature (Escobar Ulloa 2004), and has gained international recognition, as when he was nominated as a finalist for the Man Booker International Prize in 2015. His work has been described in terms of lessons about vital topics: the twists of fate; the demonic drive of youth; love, and its ‘nightmarish version’: marriage (Contreras 2002: 292–93). Aira’s novels have often toyed with presentations of the ‘East’, as exemplified in El volante (1992), El pequeño monje budista (2005a) and El mármol (2011), but Una novela china is the only one to use China solely and overtly as a setting.

Aira’s work can be divided into a ‘canonical corpus’, formed by his novels published in the 1980s, which Jesús Montoya Juárez suggests can be read as national
narratives, a re-writing of history, or travel writing; and the ‘novelitas’, a ‘serie b’, published in the 1990s, where the production of his texts is accompanied by extensive reference to mass culture (2006: 1669, 2008: 53). His texts have been described as a literature based on continuity, on a return to a beginning, and on procedure (Remón-Raillard 2003: 59; Porrúa 2005: 25; Villanueva 2007: 369). Dierdra Reber also differentiates Aira’s works of the 1980s as ‘historical’, albeit heavily parodic, novels (2007: 371). Indeed, Aira’s work as a whole is difficult to label. Graciela Montaldo points to Aira’s radical features, situated as surrealist, characteristics also noted by other authors (Montaldo 2005: 127; Speranza 2006: 289–315). Aira himself compares his work with surrealists such as Max Ernst or Joseph Ernst and says that ‘respeto de los personajes, prefiero los estereotipos o marionetas, sin psicología o profundidad’ (Escobar Ulloa 2004). His narrative fiction, including the ‘Eastern’ novels, can certainly be classed on one level as postmodern, questioning as these novels do both ontology and narrative fixity. As Reinaldo Laddaga puts it, ‘los libros de Aira se resisten al resumen’ (2006: 159, 2007: 7). Aira himself, however, has rejected the term postmodern for his work (Alfieri 2014).

In Las vueltas de César Aira, one of the first extensive studies on Aira’s work, Sandra Contreras also rejects the term postmodern, and suggests the alternative: that his work is better considered as ‘una singular vuelta a las vanguardias históricas en el fin de siglo’ (2002: 14, italics in the original). She hypothesises that Aira’s ‘vuelta al relato’ is the result of the questions his work poses from the perspective as if it were of the literary ‘vanguardia’ (Contreras 2002: 21). Montaldo also reads Aira’s literature as avant-garde (2010: 95). Contreras describes Aira’s writing as ‘huida hacia adelante’, which assumes a writing style that never returns to make corrections, thus disrespecting the coherence of the plot, and
engaging with the question that has underpinned Argentine narrative since the 1970s: how should a story be told; what is its nature and function (2002: 11–12). Nevertheless, following Hutcheon’s notion of ‘historiographic metafiction’, and concurring with Montoya Juárez and other critics (Montoya Juárez 2006: 1673; Saíttá 2013: 136–37), I would suggest that Aira’s work, and specifically Una novela china, can still be read as postmodern on account of its self-reflecting metafiction and problematisation of mimetic representation.

Álvaro Fernández Bravo has described Una novela china as following an exoticist imaginary, where the representation of China is based on an imaginary version of the country; he states that Aira invokes a representation of China that recalls Western understandings of Chinese culture (2015: 63). In his analysis of the novel, Héctor Hoyos shows that Aira makes China equivalent to a distant archetypal land, through developing an effect of de-familiarisation and locates this in the process of globalisation (2013: 84). Hoyos argues that Aira shows how orientalism is part of a larger framework, advocating a multipolar perspective as part of the process of globalisation, where centre and periphery are interchangeable, ultimately questioning the centre-periphery dichotomy as a whole (2013: 86–87). Hoyos contends that in Aira’s text the emphasis is on invention, creativity and benign play, exposing the contradictions of this orientalism (2013: 88). Both Fernández Bravo and Hoyos contend that an imaginary of ‘China’ is thus recalled through references to China, while the source of such knowledge remains hidden (Fernández Bravo 2015: 58, 61; Hoyos 2013: 88).

According to Amanda Holmes, as I will develop later, in Una novela china Aira builds on pre-conceived notions, depicting a marvellous China (2008: 71, 73). Holmes argues that China is the ideal setting for Aira because of the complexity of
that country’s identity as understood in Latin America (2008: 78), while Montaldo proposes that Aira’s orientalism is a way of reaching an ‘autonomización del mundo ficticio’ and as a way of destabilising his position as an Argentine author (1990: 109). Indeed, as Sandra Contreras shows, Aira exploits strategies for exoticising places while also highlighting their exotic representations in such a way that the representations become parodies of the exoticised setting (2002: 68–72). Holmes shows that Aira manipulates the Oriental setting to propose that perspective causes an imbalance in the identification of what is actually real, a conceptual premise which becomes stronger in the context of the novel’s composition during the military dictatorship in Argentina (2008: 73). Aira’s text thus leads to a revision of the notions of the boundary between fiction and reality, distorted vision and the significance of the literary work in contemporary society (Holmes 2008: 73). Emphasising the constructedness of the ‘China’ revealed in *Una novela china*, within this critical context, *Una novela china* indeed explores invention and creativity, and underscores perspective as it reflects on literature. In relation to this background, I argue that the text’s specific choice of ‘China’ as a subject on which to write about invokes the particular role of ‘China’ in Latin America as symbolic of a hermetic otherness which is then disrupted through the novel’s misleading elements and textual interruptions.

Set in rural revolutionary China, *Una novela china* presents the story of Lu Hsin (Lu), whose romantic desire is fulfilled after he marries a native girl from the mountains that surround his village. In order to marry her, he adopts and raises a child from the mountains, who he then marries. Parallel to his romance, the narrator introduces us to the various occupations held by Lu throughout his life, such as his literary and engineering works.
The panchronic narrator introduces the story with a reflection on human life, on events, histories and history, explaining how every place is touched by events, within a wider, eternal circumstance and how, ultimately, everything passes and is forgotten (2005b: 3). The heterodiegetic and ostensibly ungendered narrator (by which we are left to assume a normative masculine) informs us he has learned about the story of Lu, and decided to commit it to memory, thus making his alignment with an authorial position explicit. He tells the reader that the story will be forgotten, and that he intends to remember it ‘exclusivamente como parte del trabajo, mucho más amplio y abarcador, de olvidarla’ (2005b: 5). His explicit choice to select certain passages from Lu’s life, his use of ellipses, his comments and his ambiguous presentations of the character’s thoughts, all point to his being an unreliable narrator.

Through homodiegetic analepsis, the narrator tells us about Lu’s origin and then focuses on his life at the age of about forty. The narrator characterises himself as a repository of truth, positioned beyond time in his philosophical introduction. This act of locating himself confers on him the authority to decide that Lu’s story is worth telling. The reader is addressed as if from a Chinese context, as if s/he were familiar with a Chinese cultural framework. The narrator thus leads the narratee towards a specific historical context that provides the time-frame in which the story develops.

One particularly significant aspect by which the narrator’s reliability is called into question is by his explicitly stated decision to tell Lu’s story (2005b: 5). While he presents elements that appear to be central to Lu’s life, the exceptionality of these, and the reason the narrator calls him ‘nuestro héroe’ or ‘hombre-orquesta’, is not explained (2005b: 30, 61). The narrator refers to Lu’s ‘fantástica inteligencia’, but his ambiguous presentation of him as having ‘falso mandarinismo’, without
explaining what would constitute a real mandarin, invites the reader to wonder whether Lu’s story might just be ‘nonsense’ (2005b: 6). The possibility of the story being ‘nonsense’ is also raised because of a reflection on ‘nonsense’ that appears later, in English, in the text, in a context where it is unclear whether what is presented is Lu’s or the narrator’s view: ‘No eran sólo los ingleses: la Naturaleza también amaba el nonsense’ (2005b: 75). Lu’s more developed perspectives, by which ‘se adelantaba a sus conciudadanos’ (2005b: 19), act as marker of his exceptionality. Yet his fame is attributed to an editorial which portrayed him as one of the initiators of the Cultural Revolution, an event described as ‘la más fantástica confusión que hubiera reinado nunca sobre la faz de la tierra’ (2005b: 75), where ‘fantastic confusion’ is as an oxymoron.

Overall, there is no clear or unambiguous justification of the narrator’s choice to tell Lu’s story. This ambiguity allows us to contemplate the possibility of a narrator who, only by mistake considers Lu’s story to be worth telling. The narrator’s unreliability is also underlined through the equivocal presentation of Lu. For example, he is presented as ‘un mandarín, salvo que no lo era’ (2005b: 5). Furthermore, while Lu is presented as a man of science, the image of an airplane described as a ‘gran pájaro rígido’ (2005b: 57) considered by him to be an auspicious symbol, gives him away as superstitious. Like in postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 1988: 117), this overtly controlling, yet subjective narrator reveals the inability of access to any certainty.

The narrator’s selection, concealment and delay of the delivery of information also act as markers of unreliability. A bird’s-eye view and presumably unlimited knowledge allow him to focus on certain scenes and situations, as he himself states, ‘podríamos relatar docenas de episodios del mismo estilo’ or ‘no
había sucedido nada digno de mención’ (2005b: 7, 27). Likewise, the impression that the narrator is concealing information is confirmed by the narrator himself: when he tells us about the location of the village, he states: ‘quizás no lo hayamos dicho todavía’ (2005b: 9). The reader is left to wonder what other information the narrator has still not said, or may never say at all.

As noted above, the narrator has chosen to present the story of Lu, but also intrudes on the text with his own comments, continuously displacing the information presented. This displacement appears, for example, through the use of expressions such as ‘creyó entender’ or ‘creyó verlas’ (2005b: 35, 74). This indicates the uncertainty of the narrator’s knowledge of Lu’s thoughts, or the interarticulations of the thoughts of both. At certain moments, the narrator’s thoughts seem to coincide with Lu’s, as occurs in phrases such as ‘la frontera entre la salud mental y la demencia es imperceptible’ (2005b: 21). In this case, free indirect speech acts as a marker for the ambiguity of the narrator-character relationship, while the utterance reveals a certain ‘wisdom’ on the part of the narrator.

The text itself thus leaves the authenticity of the events that occur open to question. The authenticity of the information given is also rendered dubious, as is the case with Lu’s quotation from ‘miss Moore’ (2005b: 49). If we assume that his intention is, in fact, to cite Marianne Moore’s poem ‘Silence’, then Lu’s completion of the verse would, in fact, represent a misquotation of it. While Lu quotes ‘My house is not an inn’ in English, the poem states ‘Make my house your inn’ (Moore [n.d.]), leading the reader to reconsider Lu’s knowledge. In this way, the text forces us to ask whether Lu is actually a fool who has been mistaken for a hero. In revealing Lu’s fallibility through the words of a mediating narrator who trusts him, the fallibility and possible deceitfulness of the narrator himself is emphasised. This
fallibility, in turn, reveals a text which seems self-consciously aware of its own subjectivity and its partial representation of a ‘truth’.

Furthermore, this unreliable narrator is also allegedly ‘Chinese’, and assumes that the narratee is familiar with what he is presenting, as he sets the story in a supposedly recognisable ‘China’. The use of Chinese names for towns and people, or the mention of porcelain and dragons, contribute to establish a repertoire of imagery which ‘instantly’ refers the reader to China. For example, and as noted by Fernández Bravo, Lu Hsin is described in ‘Chinese’ stereotypical terms as courteous, serene, patient and knowleadgeable (2015: 63). This Chinese imagery is reinforced through the mention of specific historical events, such as the Long March or the Cultural Revolution (2005b: 6, 75). Vocabulary, such as ‘li’, a traditional unit of distance, and the continuous mention of the drinking of tea, also contribute to the rendering of a recognisable ‘China’. Yet the search for ‘gekorisen’ [sic] or the mention of a plant called ‘Hannokan’ [sic] (2005b: 23, 94), both apparently invented words, also parody an ‘oriental’ setting, as their pronunciation in Spanish suggest an ‘oriental’ language. These ‘invented words’ reveal an utterance populated with social intentions as characteristic of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981: 277–78, 300), serving the purpose of recreating a fetishised China through ‘strangerness’. As Ahmed suggests, the recognition of the stranger is an affective judgement, here recalled through words which ‘appear’ as ‘strange’. In this way, the ‘China’ represented in Una novela china corresponds, on one level, to the country China, while other more imprecise elements, which seem to belong to the realm of fiction due to their ‘invented’ nature, allow the reader to regard that depiction as fallible, illusory and deceptive.

Phrases which attribute certain traits to the Chinese and other ethnic groups in China contribute to the description of a particular ‘China’, such as ‘los chinos
tenemos distintos mundos superpuestos’, the distinction between ‘chinos de verdad’, or the racist description of a character as with ‘cara amarilla de mandarín’ (2005b: 93, 26, 77). The world appears to be culturally divided between East and West (2005b: 9), where the main differentiation seems to reside in the people’s knowledge and values, revealing different worldviews within the novel (Bakhtin 1981: 360). In this sense, the ‘intelligent’ and ‘cultured’ Lu is presented as different from his neighbour who is described as ‘tonto’, or to people of ‘mediana cultura’ (2005b: 24, 50, 9, 34). Lu is presented as knowledgeable about the Western world: he knows various Western languages, has a predilection for the work of the writer Jean Paul, knows by heart the works of Von Chamisso, venerates Kant, and reads Stendhal and other Western authors in their original languages (2005b: 9, 16).

Nevertheless, Lu’s interaction with the Western world is presented as partial, as can be seen in his preparation of ice-cream, ‘casi sin saber que en Occidente la costumbre ya estaba establecida’ (2005b: 8). Furthermore, we also see a signalling to the Latin American canon through a reference to the day García Márquez’s ‘coronel Aureliano Buendía’ was introduced to ice. This reference to the Latin American canon thus shows how Lu’s relationship with the ‘West’ is ambiguous and fragmented. On the one hand, his discovery of ice cream is presented as overdue; on the other, Lu seems to have known that the discovery had already been made but fails to admit it openly. Overall Lu is presented as being specifically ‘Chinese’, with the text stressing his reflective attitude, presenting him as ‘muy oriental’ and ‘de espíritu mandarin’ (2005b: 67, 74). These lies and falsities signal the postmodern concern for the ‘truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture’ (Hutcheon 1988: 108), leading the reader to question the construction of discourses.

6 This signalling towards the opening lines of Gabriel García Márquez’ novel Cien años de soledad (1983: 59) has also been noted by Ida Vitale (1990: 46).
The ‘Chineseness’ of Lu is also played out in opposition to the mountain-dwellers, the ethnic group to which his adopted daughter and future wife Hin belongs. In the story, the mountaineers are presented as different: for example, his adopted daughter Hin turns out to be a ‘typical’ highland beauty, and she wears a ‘different’ hairstyle, ‘dos trenzas anudadas atrás por las puntas’ (2005b: 8, 60). The opposition available between the ‘Chinese’ and the mountaineers thus reminds us of the potential essentialist understandings of identity which allow for a binarial contrast between two (or more) groups of people such as that available in discourse of mestizaje in Latin America. As Peter Wade explains, and as we have seen in the Introduction, mestizaje, as a place of struggle, allows for the discussion of who can be included or excluded (Wade 2003), and thus potentially allows for essentialising ‘other’ identities. For example, in Una novela china, incest is presented as a custom of the mountain-dwellers, but not of the Chinese (2005b: 18). And Lu’s daughter and wife-to-be is part of a different race, ‘preciosa y rara’ (2005b: 18, 60). While Lu is presented as a kind of hero who has rescued this ‘relic’, their relationship is based on a power imbalance stemming from differences of race, gender, age and class, all of which allow for the adoption and the incest.

Lu’s position of power is made available by the fact that the mountaineers are practically voiceless and indistinguishable from one another, with Lu depicted as dismissively hiring people to take care of his daughter or to help him run a newsheet (2005b: 15, 33, 44). And yet, the narrator states, Lu is aware of racial issues (2005b: 15). Lu’s conflation with the narrator conveys the latter’s prejudice regarding race, and highlights his generalisations about Chinese culture, revealing layers of power asymmetry. Lu can thus be seen to embody Ahmed’s theories as well as Tambling’s notion of the postmodern allegory, as these ‘encounters’ show
how the figure of the ‘stranger’ is put to work, via the asymmetry of power, that also involves difference, while the impossibility of a single isolatable truth is also suggested (Tambling 2010: 159). In this way, the narrator and Lu both appear to be powerful, while Hin’s agency is limited by the exercise of Lu’s power, also revealing the gender power imbalance available in encounters. At the same time, the novel undermines Lu’s power, as he is powerless in his submission to the narrator, and is presented within an authoritarian context: while he contests power (through his publishing of a revisionist editorial), a stronger force (the Party) uses his voice (the ‘most famous dazhibao’) in order to put into motion a bigger process of change (the Cultural Revolution). As in postmodern fiction, the story instils power, but then challenges it.

Against this backdrop marked by power imbalance, language creates an atmosphere of timelessness. The specific historical context introduces the reader to the Communist revolution, which has been a fundamental element in Latin America’s imaginary of China since the 1950s (Holmes 2008: 76). In the case of Argentina, many travellers had visited China and then published testimonies of their trip, while news of the Chinese revolution also appeared in the press. As noted by Megan M. Ferry and Holmes, as we noted in the Introduction, the Cultural Revolution posters that circulated in Latin America featured an ‘orientalised’ exotic space; a revolutionary paradise associated with the promotion of China’s socialist ideology. The revolution reframed China’s representation in Latin American literature and culture by including aspects of its recent history, while it also sought to maintain its exotic appeal (Ferry 2000: 239; Holmes 2008: 76).

While addressing the narratee from the context of Revolutionary China, the narrator also recalls a timeless and static China. A struggle between unchanging
tradition and a rapidly changing modern China emerges from the circular sense of time. This timeless and static China appears through phrases such as ‘nuestros bellos cielos siempre iguales’ or Lu’s solemn attitude when feeding his cats, described as a ‘ceremonia’ (2005b: 6, 9). In this way, Lu seems to embody an eternal China, in the sense that even though he experiences strong changes throughout his life, he does not change intrinsically, symbolised by his wearing of traditional clothes (2005b: 7).

This ‘Chinese’ imagery, therefore, contributes to the creation of a revolutionary yet timeless and orientalised ‘Chinese’ space, interrupted by unclear or possibly invented elements which underline the fictional nature of literary discourse. The fictionality of narration is also recalled by the narrator himself, who evaluates the work of others who have written about China: ‘Se decía que provenían del tronco originario manchú, pero era un rumor difundido por los cronistas antiguos, viciados de imbecilidad’ (2005b: 16). This fictionality refers us back to the pattern presented at the beginning of the text: an eternal ‘China’, interrupted by events and stories, which, ultimately, pass and move on. The narrator highlights the illusoriness of events, filtered through his own worldview. The filtering further distances the illusion of ‘reality’, pointing to a postmodern shifting of perspectives and questioning of any totalising system (Hutcheon 1988: 67).

Holmes has underlined how Una novela china makes use of an exotic setting as a way of opening up a fictional space, and of shifting perspectives. With China being as exotic as any fictionalised setting, Holmes shows how Aira exploits the setting to propose that perspective causes an imbalance in the identification of what is real; questioning the significance of contemporary artistic expressions and emphasising the importance of the viewer’s gaze within a context of globalisation (2008: 73, 83). For this opening up of a fictional space and shifting perspectives, she
builds on Contreras and Laddaga, who observe the presence of ‘miniaturas’ in Aira’s work, seeing objects and situations through a ‘telescopio invertido’ (Laddaga 2001: 41; Contreras 2002: 67). As seen above, Hoyos’s analysis of *Una novela china* engages with Holmes’ by suggesting that exoticism allows Aira to ‘emphasize the concept of perspective, rather than the idea of a strange and marvellous place’ (Holmes 2008: 78). This emphasis on perspective recalls the words of Aira himself, who has stated that he invents spaces,

[…] donde pueda funcionar una pura ficción como la China y por eso escribí *Una novela china* y nunca estuve allí. Son espacios de pura ficción, de pura invención, donde puede pasar cualquier cosa (Dapelo and Aira 2007: 51).

Holmes claims that Aira develops an image of China built on pre-conceived notions of the Asian country, which he then uses as a landscape open to fictional experimentation (2008: 71). Nevertheless, this ‘exotic’ landscape is grounded in material conditions that are tied to a ‘real’ China, even while Aira presents it as ‘pure fiction’. The use of specific words, places, or people implies a detailed knowledge of China. While this knowledge does not require one to have *been* there, it does recall a China beyond ‘pure fiction’.

While I agree with Holmes that Aira’s setting is shaped by ‘authorial authority’, and that the use of China-as-setting emphasises the locus of enunciation of the gaze, I contend that Aira uses China not only as a tool by which to explore the concept of exoticism, but that he also uses ‘China’ to subvert previous ‘exotic’ narratives, as the novel also emphasizes the partiality of ‘prior histories’ regarding China. In this sense, I agree with Ofelia Ros who — with reference to Jacques Lacan’s theory of appropriation of the slave’s knowledge and its incorporation into the master’s discourse — analyses how, for Aira, writing offers the ‘possibility for
reproducing structures of domination and repetition, or the contrary, for interrupting them with a symptomatic laughter’ (2011: 149, 162). By presenting events in a plausible way, yet interrupting them via intermissions in register and theme, Aira seems to ‘un-fix’ China while retaining elements which lead the reader to think of ‘China’. This unfixedness refers back to Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction’, as the novel inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world.

Interruption, furthermore, is stressed at the end of the novel, which ends with a significant change of register. As Contreras notes, while the narrator maintains the courtesy sustained through the text, the end is presented in an abrupt and unexpected way (2002: 120). In this regard, the novel ‘plays’ with Latin American preconceptions of China.

In relation to this ‘playing’, Hoyos argues that ‘[...] para Aira el Oriente es una invención de la clase media argentina’ or of ‘cierta clase media criolla latinoamericana’ (2013: 89–99). Hoyos suggests that in Una novela china, as in Santiago Gamboa’s Los Impostores and Ariel Magnus’s Un chino en bicicleta, ‘el orientalismo sur-sur incluye la fantasía imperialista sin reproducir su ideología de superioridad cultural’ (2013: 100). Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest that Aira’s construction of China as the ‘stranger’ goes beyond Argentina and the Latin American criollo middle class, recalling the Western world. As Masiello shows, by testing and challenging boundaries of the ‘Orient’, the North/South, East/West or familiar/distant axes are removed (2002: 217). Yet, following Ahmed, the emphasis on reading texts as a form of ‘strange encounter’ reveals how such encounters are always mediated and partial (2000: 15).

This notion of encounter as mediated can be observed through the fact that Lu learns about the world by reading Le Monde and Reader’s Digest. This suggests
that not only the novel, but also its protagonist, is postmodern, which in the words of Jameson can be defined as someone ‘[…] fascinated precisely by […] materials they no longer simply “quote” […] but incorporate into their very substance’ (1991: 3). In this way, the novel makes explicit some of the ‘prior histories’ which inform Lu’s encounter with the ‘West’, problematising the histories of his determination (Ahmed 2000: 51). The novel ‘un-fixes’ Lu and therefore evades ‘stranger fetishism’ by exposing ‘China’ as fetish in the terms defined by McClintock, exposed as a composite symbolic figure (1995: 184–85). The ‘encounter’ goes beyond an imperialist fantasy or a removal of boundaries by being interrogative of holding ‘others’ in place.

The novel emphasizes the notion of perspective and otherness through the mention of mirrors and reflections, of ‘alteraciones ópticas’, and of the relation of the real and the oneiric (2005b: 23, 43, 49). The different points of view are evoked when Lu himself reflects on perspective as he looks at his village from the mountains, in contrast to traditional Chinese paintings, which portray the mountains from below. This idea of different points of view is further enhanced when Lu boards an aeroplane and looks at his village from a bird’s-eye perspective (2005b: 81). The relevance of the point of view sheds light on how the novel is a reflection of Lu’s life, exposing the mechanisms of representation. In this way, the novel problematises representation even as it invokes it, an element that becomes a defining characteristic of the text. By opening up the text, focusing on the strangerness it evokes, the ‘stranger’ is un-fixed. While pointing to this ‘reality’ beyond discourse, its representations are shown to be discursive constructs, further problematising narrative representation, exposing the crisis of grand narratives and acting as counter-discourse in the terms described by Hutcheon (1988: 40).
Irene Depetris Chauvin has analysed how, from a Deleuzian conceptualisation, Aira’s novels expose the mechanisms which allow for the functioning of simulacra, while at the same time subverting them (2014: 69). This mechanism exposure comes close to my argument, as I agree that the China constructed by Aira ‘already is’ constructed as fetishised ‘stranger’, and it is this ontological being which is challenged within the text itself. Aira re-invents ‘China’ as ‘stranger’, exposing the reader to what ‘we have already designated in the beyond’ through our recognition of the one that is different from ‘us’ (Ahmed 2000: 3). Yet at the same time, Aira challenges this ontology of the ‘stranger’ from within the text itself.

In *Una novela china* it is possible to observe predictable descriptions of landscape, and yet also words which are seemingly ‘lies’. As noted by Hoyos, contradictions are thus exposed. Hoyos argues that contemporary fiction about Sino-Latin American relations can be considered from a position somewhere between cultural comprehension and incomprehension; and that between these points there is a partial understanding, called ‘opacity’ by Hoyos. The evocation of Lu Xun through the character Lu Hsin, an aspect that would only be noted by readers aware of the Chinese writer’s existence, stands as an example of ‘opacity’. This reference to Lu Xun can be seen as a provocation on the part of Aira, which contributes to an obliteration of boundaries between the local and the foreign, reflecting on the possibility of representing other cultures and the limitations embodied therein. It is also revealing of heteroglossia, with the relationship between Lu Xun/Lu Hsin standing as a way of relativizing borders created by history and society.

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7 Hoyos states that Lu Hsin is also a distorted image of the political role of Lu Xun. While Hoyos presents Lu Xun as ‘[…] el escritor oficial del régimen del presidente Mao’ (2013: 101), it is arguable that this was the use that the Communist Party made of Lu Xun. While I agree that the use of Lu Hsin for the main character’s name should be further explored, and that Aira definitely presents a distorted figure of the original Lu, Hoyos’ vision of Lu Xun as a Marxist-Leninist set against the Guomindang could be called into question. The real Lu Xun was not necessarily a blueprint of the Communist future, nor an obedient follower of Mao and of the Chinese Communist Party’s line (Goldman 1982).
My analysis thus reveals that the notion of China as alien remains, encoding power relations, insofar it is presented as a system in itself, and hence recognisable as different and as ‘ultimate other’. Aira’s narrator fixes the place of enunciation, and by doing this reveals the capriciousness of the narrator, questioning the authority of his knowledge and reminding us of the textual access to the past. In this way, as in historiographic metafiction, the novel establishes a ‘truth’ only to subvert it from within (Hutcheon 1988: xiii); China is presented and contested as the ‘fetishised stranger’, problematising what is stated outright and emphasising narrative constructedness.

As noted by Hoyos, Lu Hsin becomes the epitome of multipolar interactions, challenging a division of the world between centre and periphery (Hoyos 2013: 86–87). Yet I argue that the text not only challenges a centre-periphery approach, but portrays China as alien, insofar as it is presented as a hermetic world, real or invented. I suggest that *Una novela china* reaffirms a notion of cultural specificity by drawing on imagery which also stimulates the notion of ‘China’ as stranger.

The presence of the state and the ‘authority’ of the narrator recall a despotic China, while the misleading aspects of the narration suggest that more than one discourse on China exists. These multiple discourses recall the fragmentation of the ‘master narratives’ from Argentina by exploring different approaches to China, as the ‘Shangai’ group does with ‘exotic’ settings. By drawing attention to the authoritative, authorial techniques by which the ‘stranger’ emerges, the text makes available a worldview and a version of reality which cannot lay claim to an ‘absolute truth’, as Bakhtin points out occurs through heteroglossia in the novel (1981: 263). This challenges any specific ontology (Ahmed 2000: 144), including that of China and the Chinese, from within the text itself. By displaying ‘differentiation’ (among
‘strangers’) happening at the level of the encounter, and not because the ‘stranger’ is inherently different, the text challenges cultural colonisation as described by Bhabha (1994). The challenge presented by China as a fetishised stranger and figure of otherness also appears in Laiseca’s La mujer en la Muralla, as we shall now see.

Alberto Laiseca (1941–2016) was considered a ‘cult writer’, partly because of his role reading horror stories on television, which raised his popularity in both the literary sphere and that of mass-media (Gómez and Conde de Boeck 2013). Even before he was published, he was well known by fellow Argentine authors who celebrated the quality and originality of his work (Cacciavillani 2010; Erlan 2014; Fernández González 2014: 90, 2016: 70). Aira praised him in 1989, calling him an ‘artista maduro y consumado’ (1989: 4). Like Aira, Laiseca also plays with presentations of the ‘East’ in his literature, as in La hija de Kheops (1989) and La Puerta del Viento (2014), and he often stated a specific interest in the Orient, China and Chinese topics (Von Baumbach 2014). His interest in exotic themes is broadly acknowledged, yet this corpus features his characteristic interruption of ‘exotic’ texts with what José Agustín Conde de Boeck aptly terms ‘disonancia argentinizante’ (2016: 110, 114) — that is, words that remit the reader to an Argentine context. His work has become well-known and accessible in recent years, but there is as yet limited critical analysis of it. Regarding his novel La mujer en la Muralla, as far as I am aware, no in-depth analysis has yet been published. Most of the available works refer to his participation in the ‘Shangai’ group and the ‘public figure of Laiseca’, linked to his appearance on television and film.

Ricardo Piglia observes that Laiseca is influenced by authors and trends from outside Argentinean literary tradition, an observation with which Hernán Bergara concurs in his appraisal of Laiseca, as noted by Carlos Fernández González (2014:
107). Bergara demonstrates these eclectic influences of Laiseca by listing the ways in which Laiseca’s work has been described:

[…] Juan Sasturain lo califica de escritor “raro;” Fogwill señala que Aventuras de un novelista atonal es una novela que milita en la “desobediencia al canon narrativo oficial;” Miguel Dalmaroni llama a la obra de Laiseca una “rara avis;” Flavia Costa habla de Laiseca como “erudito en cosas raras” (2013: 11).

Regarding Laiseca’s La hija de Kheops and Aira’s Una novela china, and here I would also include La mujer en la Muralla, Montaldo suggests this is a literature that recognises the existence of the foreign and speaks about it, thereby recovering the fictionality of literature. Fiction itself becomes a salient feature, as does the exercising of fiction beyond history, as Montaldo explains (1990: 110). And while Laiseca does indeed engage with literary traditions beyond Argentina, his novel La mujer en la Muralla can be described, on one level, as a rewriting of a story by Borges. Indeed, one could argue that his novel is an extended version of Borges’ short story ‘La muralla y los libros’ (2011) published in 1950, as both focus on the first emperor of China, the ‘Great Wall’, the Emperor’s relationship with his mother, and books. However, this relation between Borges’ and Laiseca’s texts has not been mentioned by Laiseca nor yet observed by the critics. While Borges hypothesises in a couple of paragraphs about how Shi Huang Ti’s character was influenced by his sense of betrayal regarding his mother, Laiseca spends 312 pages exploring this possibility.

La mujer en la Muralla was published in Buenos Aires in 1990. A second edition of the novel, published in Spain in 2002, presented it as Laiseca’s ‘más fabuladora, más elaborada y más leída’ novel (Tusquets [n.d.]). Like Una novela china, the text discloses power imbalances through its construction of character, narrative structure and imagery, and defies the authority of knowledge by contrasting
subjectively constructed discourses, as narrated by different voices, stressing the subjective character of literary representation. In this sense, heteroglossia is present through the multiple narrators, allowing for specific worldviews to coexist, to encounter each other and to conflict with each other within the text.

Information as to the source of the knowledge presented in the novel is suggested via Laiseca’s own statements. He said that he drew his knowledge for the novel from Lin Yutang, who visited Argentina in 1959 and 1962 (Morero 1962), even though, as Laiseca put it in 2005, he was ‘un autor para señoras gordas’ (García 2005), suggesting Laiseca’s reservations regarding Lin’s academic significance. Laiseca claimed that he had considerable knowledge of Chinese culture, acquired after he read Lin’s book *Sabiduría China*, which includes *The tale of Meng Chiang*, the work that inspires Laiseca’s title (García 2005; Palumbo and Rossello 2010; Lin 1942: 909–31). Laiseca also claimed ‘mucha formación china’ since his twenties, when Lin’s visits to Argentina occurred (Molle 2011).

But throughout the book, that which is fiction and that which is based on ‘real’ history remain difficult to distinguish, as original historiographic sources are not quoted, so the text acts as a parody of genuine knowledge about China, casting doubt on the very possibility of ‘any guarantee of meaning’ (Hutcheon 1988: 54–55). As we shall see, historiographic sources come under scrutiny through the text’s questioning of assumed correspondence between ‘text’ and ‘reality’ (Hutcheon 1988: 56). Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia reveals language’s connection to social and historical spheres, exposing the fallacy of neutrality (1981: 300, 334) and allowing

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8 Regarding *Sabiduría China*, Laiseca most probably means the Spanish edition of *The Wisdom of China and India* published in Buenos Aires in two separate volumes. The first part of the book would have been published in Spanish under the name *Sabiduría Hindú* (Lin 1959b). *Sabiduría China* was translated by Alfredo A. Whitelow (Lin 1959a). In English, it is only possible to find the text *The Wisdom of China and India* (Lin 1942).
us to detect the interplay of power positions within the novel. Simultaneously, this
text draws attention to the forms of authorisation concealed by stranger fetishism,
which assumes the ‘stranger’ to be the one we do not know (Ahmed 2000: 74).

The novel is set in historical China, and many of the characters are based on
real historical figures, although only some are explicitly presented as such (1990:
305). The text opens with a short story/chapter that narrates the events of the last day
of King Nan, Emperor of the Chou dynasty (1046–256 BC). A heterodiegetic
narrator who uses external, panchronic focalisation, and who remains as main
narrator throughout the text, addresses the narratee in the third person as ‘el lector’
(Laiseca 1990: 9). The main narrator’s instructive tone sets up an underlying power
imbalance between himself and the narratee.

The rest of the novel tells the story of the Qin Emperor (Ch’in), describing
how he gains power and how his Empire finally falls. The main text takes the reader
back and forth, via jumps in time orchestrated through analepses, with stories told
from a hypodiegetic level that emulate old Chinese novels, such as Journey to the
West (Wu 1977), and with extracts from the diaries of characters, which partially
complete the gaps in the main narrative (1990: 70, 136). The gaps are formed by
prolepsis, with the narrative taking an excursion into the future by introducing Lai
Chú, a spiritualist who serves as advisor to the Ch’in Emperor and who, after being
exiled by Ch’in, ends up serving as advisor to the Han dynasty. Lai Chú acts as a
uniting thread throughout the book, where he is presented as reflective and ironic,
caught between magical, economic and ideological forces that he cannot control.

At the same time, the story is continuously commented upon by secondary
narrators, introducing the notion of subjectivity. This ‘Chinese box' narrative
structure itself enacts the novel’s main themes of control and power. The two-dimensional construction of the main narrator as both narrator (telling the story) and informant (providing historical detail) makes him an interpreter who positions himself as powerful, while the multiplicity of narratorial voices undermine his authority. The multivoicedness thus draws attention to the *constructedness* of the text. In relation to Tambling’s notion of allegory (2003: 14–15), we can see how the multivoicedness shows meaning to be discontinuous. With no continuous narrative to be retrieved, and in line with Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the supplement (2016: 168), ‘China’ here emerges as a fetish of otherness, revealed as an additional element that disturbs essentialist discourses of identity available in Latin America.

The narration begins with the presentation of King Nan, who is staged as representing an exception in Chinese history. His energetic attitude is exposed by his lack of consideration for protocol, where ‘sus faltas contra el ceremonial de la madrugada le trajeron no pocos problemas’ (1990: 10). Descriptions of empty places, such as the emptiness of his palace, which is described as being as empty as the Gobi desert, emphasise the King’s solitude (1990: 9–11). His active attitude towards work highlights the isolation of the King, alienated from Chinese ceremonial structures, thus presenting him as an exception in relation to other Emperors, on account of his humane features within a context of authoritarianism. The humanity of King Nan, explicitly presented by the narrator, is contrasted with the horror perpetrated by his predecessors. This dissociation from other sovereigns evokes alienation, reinforced by the narrator’s description of his custom of ‘levantarse solo’ (1990: 9). Yet this exceptionality does not seem to undermine his power: he is constantly referred to as King and Emperor, reinforcing his centrality and the formality of the dynastic power system.
Other characters are also defined through their physical attributes and their particular expressions. For example, the narrator introduces the character Lü Pu Wei as being severe, while a dialogue with his servant portrays him as violent. The insults and shy responses allocate both servant and master specific social positions, exposing their worldviews, as in the following quote:

Ello no impedía que el acomodado comerciante Lü Pu Wei lo estimulase cada tanto con expresiones tales como: “Torpe”; “Incompetente”; “Yán guitez” (diablo extranjero, aunque el otro fuese tan chino como él); “Inservible” y “Gusano desvergonzado”. “Sí, Gran Señor”; “Sí, Gran Señor” (1990: 21, italics in the original).

These presentations work to establish the rank and status of characters in the story: Lü Pu Wei’s attitude can be contrasted with that of the Emperor, while the servant represents those with no power at all. Seemingly powerless members of society are then silenced in different ways, underlining the weakness of the subject, who is distant from sources of power. Following Bakhtin, these descriptions, speeches and actions expose the ‘ideological positions’ demarcated within the heteroglossia (1981: 333–35). This differences in authority relates to ‘historiographic metafiction’ and its signalling to the ‘discursive nature of all references’, which highlights the ‘conditions of our mode of knowledge’ of events (Hutcheon 1988: 119). Within this context, the imbalance of power relations is exposed through the panchronic main narrator, whose self-declared power is undermined within the text itself. His control over time and his assumed knowledge suggest his reliability and authority. Nevertheless, his unreliability is simultaneously disclosed through ellipses and gaps, notes, obvious omissions, dismissive opinions and interpellations.

The main narrator explicitly filters or defers information that might ‘horrify’ the reader (1990: 9); and leaps in time, and stories told by fictional characters, defer information of how events will develop, maintaining the tension throughout the
narrative. The hypodiegetic level has both actional and explicative functions. For example, the story told by Lai Chú of how he became an astrologer explains the role he then plays as advisor to the Ch’in Emperor (1990: 222). At the same time, other stories may also undermine the authority of the narrator by indirectly questioning his knowledge.

Throughout the whole text the narrator presents his personal knowledge, describing how eunuchs were castrated, commenting on the behaviour of prostitutes worldwide, or not explaining a joke that he judges to be untranslatable, but that does in fact work as a joke in Spanish: ‘Ton Ton. Soy, en efecto, bastante tonto’ (1990: 46, 140, 98). His knowledge also appears in footnotes that have no referent, but that are presented as if they were, in fact, there to explain the main text (1990: 231). Furthermore, the text itself is stated to be a translation of another, unknown, text; orthographic differences for the same words are included with no comment; and in a note he recalls his knowledge of sinology with no account as to how he has acquired it (1990: 19, 21, 65, 99, 207). Through precise factual information, such as providing the ‘hipotenusa de cincuenta y dos metros’ (1990: 47), the narrator underlines his commitment to describing a ‘reality’ that is concrete and plausible.

In the novel, the main narrator’s assumed scholarly authority is weakened by his pseudo-academic notes and non-academic register: presenting knowledge without quoting his sources and intervening in the story with what are clearly his own opinions and reflections. His explanation of the ‘rape of Nanjing’, a real historical event, is described through his own evaluation with expressions such as ‘tan horrible’ and ‘esto (sin nombre)’ (1990: 21). Colloquial and vernacular language also disrupt the narrative itself, with expressions such as ‘súper’, ‘parranderos’ or ‘remolones’ (1990: 19, 47). The narrator’s dismissive and judgemental opinions of Chinese
culture and historical characters undermine his academic knowledge, as indicated by
his use of words such as ‘tontos’ or ‘estupideces’, by describing the practice of
burying eunuchs with their organs as ‘parodia estúpida’, and by his presentation of
the character Tchao Kao as ‘este funesto personaje’ (1990: 10, 46). The narrator also
intrudes into the text by uttering his own views in parenthesis, as in the following
extract: ‘(si se me permite la malsoneante y poco castiza expresión)’, after using the
slang term ‘quilombo chino’ (1990: 61). This specific term, ‘quilombo’, as will
emerge later, also relates the reader to Latin America. In this way, via the use of non-
academic register as well as colloquial and vernacular language, Bakhtin’s
heteroglossia enters the novel by ‘means of the social diversity of speech types’
revealing the context of the utterance (1981: 263).

The unreliability and obvious subjectivity of the narrator also appear in swift
changes of register. After a paragraph that refers to the horror executed by the troops
of Ch’in, the narrator describes a street, ‘una de las más hermosas y aristocráticas de
Han Tan’ (1990: 22). The paragraph is constructed around an evocation of flowers
and colours, in a sensuous, physical description of a Chinese street. Yet there is a
shift midway through the paragraph, signifying a change of register from a narrator
who seems present, to one who almost disappears, giving way to a descriptive list,
playing with ‘the links and interrelationships between utterances and languages’
(Bakhtin 1981: 263), changing from a historical to a more philosophical register. The
covert narrator thus enhances the textuality of the narration, with the elements
described acting as ornaments, separated from their original functions. This shift
creates a tension which also emerges through elements that undermine the placid
surface of the text, such as the oxymoron ‘flores muertas’ or the chemical description
‘óxido sobre mercurio’. Likewise, the beauty of the place is then explained as
resulting from the use of human excrement (1990: 23). The oxymoron stresses contrast and underlines once again the unreliability and subjectivity of the narrator.

Finally, the unreliability of the narrator is also disclosed by his constant expression of opinions and his vagueness in the construction of phrases. An example appears in the following extract, where the narrator presents an opinion attributed to the author of the novel. While the paragraph starts by mentioning Sima Qian (145–90 BC), the Chinese historian (Watson 1958: vii), as the main source for this specific narration, the way the phrase is constructed makes it unclear whether the narrator is the author or not. In this sense, the narrator’s unstable location in the text is disclosed through the indirect intervention of an implied author:

Ahora bien, cuenta la historia (en realidad lo cuenta Ssu Ma Chién, el Heródoto de China) […] Es por lo tanto una opinión histórica del autor de esta novela, en la cual difiere de otros estudiosos, que la pretendida suba de impuestos al hierro y la sal nunca tuvo lugar durante los Ch‘in, y decir lo contrario, es una deliberada mentira de los Han, siempre interesados en desprestigiar a la dinastía que les antecedió (1990: 65–66).

The discussion available in this extract brings about a ‘direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic […] to the political and historical’ (Hutcheon 1988: 22). The presence of this ‘historical opinion’ acts as an ironic reworking of narratives on China, calling into question their veracity and their access to any ‘real’ history of China, and thus effectively parodying academic discourse. As is evident here, the narrator dissociates himself from the implied author, which makes us question the narrator’s authority, as he is presumably controlled by the implied author. While the main narrator quotes Sima Qian as the source for his knowledge, for which the exact source is never mentioned, the implied author summons the implied reader. The authority of the narrator here relies on the powerlessness of the narratee, removed from the story, and therefore unable to
discuss or question the information presented. At the same time, the implied author differentiates himself from the main narrator by stating his disagreement with Sima Qian and ‘other experts’, thus intervening in the text.

This exchange between the main narrator and the implied author makes us, in turn, aware of the presence of other voices in the text. The reader gets lost among the different commentators: a ‘comentarista ignoto’; a ‘comentarista anónimo de la dinastía Sung’; ‘Lin Yutón, dinastía mongola’, whose name obliquely reminds the reader of Lin Yutang; ‘Yin Hsi, oficial cuidafronteras, 1924, República de China’; and ‘Kuo Wei’ (1990: 103, 157, 180, 188, 312). These multiple voices enhance the reader’s awareness of the absence of any final, unifying authoritative/authorial voice, eliminating the possibility of certainty.

The multivoicedness problematises the multivalence of points of view, and is also available through the inclusion of poems without specified authors. For example, the following poem appears in the narration without previous mention, and because of this abrupt interruption, it is not clear who the author is, nor who is reciting this poem,

En ese momento, pájaros negros bajaban al parque.
_Urracas devoran orugas de primavera._
_En el pasto:_
hilos de oro,
flores amarillas,
pequeñas lanzas. (1990: 24, italics in the original)

The presence and style of the poem breaks the linearity of the prose and recalls ‘traditional’ Chinese poetry, such as that by Li Bai or Wang Wei (Seth 1997: xvi). Lin Yutang has referred to poetry as the result of a ‘Chinese literary genius’ that is ‘especially suitable to the writing of poetry’ (Lin 1936: 230). With the poem erupting in the text, the ‘ambiguity concerning the speaker dramatizes the
problematic relationship between any utterance and its origin’ (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 115), recalling the ‘languages’ of heteroglossia, offering in this way a ‘discourse’ and its corresponding ‘version’ of reality. The presence of poems and the undisclosed information regarding the identity of the poet can be a way by which the main narrator reveals information by alternative means, for example, symbolically invoking a menacing atmosphere by the mention of black birds and spears, while the concealed identity of the poet reminds the reader of the power of the narrator.

The unreliability of the narrator, the fragmentation of the text, and the persistent deconstruction of authoritative knowledge and epistemology also emerge through the presentation of the novel’s cultural and historical imagery. The novel repeatedly generates tension between what is ‘actually’ Chinese and what is the representation of a stereotype. The presence of ‘real’, historical Chinese people, and the fact that the story is set in ‘real’ China serve to enhance the notion of a certain specificity inherent to Chinese culture. While this imagery may at times convey contradictory visions, as a whole the images chosen offer a cultural and historical context that is broadly recognisable to the reader as ‘China’. The imagery thus assumes the existence of a definable ‘traditional’ Chinese culture, through representations of protocol, food and names for people, acts and places, positioned in a specific historical time, as the novel seems to invest ‘China’ with a ‘life of its own’ (Ahmed 2000: 5–6). Yet, as shall be seen specifically in relation to Latin America, the novel challenges this ontology from within the text itself. Indeed, as Homi Bhabha explains, and as seen in the Introduction, the repetition of the stereotype potentially questions the fixity of that construction (1994: 94–95). In this way, the tension that emerges between a ‘timeless’ China and a specific historical time, or
between China and Latin America, relates to power asymmetry in broader political and historical contexts, displaying the *constructedness* of grand narratives.

One way by which the *constructedness* of discourses is brought to the fore in the novel is through its continuous mention of protocol. The narrator is dismissive of protocol procedures while also presenting them as constitutive of Chinese culture, evoking yet challenging a notion of culture as static (1990: 24–25). Material descriptions also work to construct a textual imaginary of China as timeless, reinforced by the use of Chinese-style names for people, acts and places. While men and empowered women are called by personal names, women subjected to men are called by euphemistic names such as ‘Ojo del Cielo’ or ‘Espesura de Jade’ (1990: 11, 23, 95). These names are not necessarily rooted in actual Chinese naming practices, and are likely the invention of the author, indicating the implied author’s untrustworthy knowledge regarding China. The patriarchal representation of most women, via their euphemistic names, account for their lack of agency.

Textual imagery relating to specific acts and places emerge, in which punishments are figuratively referred to as ‘Arena del Viento de Mongolia’ or ‘Cofre del Príncipe Yen’ (1990: 106). During a sexual encounter, body parts are called ‘flauta de jade’ or ‘gruta de plata’ (1990: 143). Places are called ‘calle del Tigre que Salta’ or ‘puente del Faisán Dorado’ (1990: 19, 114). The use of symbolic terms for sex, places and women mocks *chinoiserie* by exaggerating and performatively overstating a certain aesthetic representation of a perceived ‘China’. These textual expressions can be seen to act as ‘ornamentations’, revealing the authority and freedom the author has to name. This notion of an aestheticised China is enhanced by the inclusion of lists of food, where listings of delicacies remit the reader once again to a ‘China’ that appears timeless (1990: 100). The text’s solemn
representation of food functions as a textual crossreference to traditional Chinese novels, in the sense emphasised here by Lin Yutang:

The seriousness with which we [the Chinese] regard eating can be shown in many ways. Anyone who opens the pages of [...] any Chinese novel will be struck by the detailed and constant descriptions of the entire menu [...] (1936: 320, italics in the original).

The culinary as a literary device acts as an ambiguous and shifting marker for distance. While the food is determined culturally, as evidenced by the reference to the ‘Thousand-Year Egg’, the inclusion of universally recognised food, for example fruit, such as grapes and melon (1990: 296), simultaneously makes the distance unstable. Thus recalling Ahmed’s reflections on ‘strangerness’, where the ‘other’ becomes ‘familiar’ or ‘strange’ as a ‘mechanism for establishing the permeability of […] boundary lines’ (2000: 119), the novel highlights notions of distance from and closeness to the place and time in which the narrated events occur. The novel is thus revealed to be a ‘mode of proximity’, which allows for the encountering of ‘China’ as ‘stranger’ (Ahmed 2000: 163), through the disclosure of its fetishistic aspects.

At the same time, the romantic descriptions of ‘China’ are interrupted by references to Latin America in the use of words such as ‘gliptodonte’, a prehistoric South American mammal, the use of the slang word ‘quilombo’, or the mention of ‘Victorias Regias’ a plant originally from Latin America (1990: 10, 61, 22). The narrator also explicitly directs the reader to a Latin American context when he speaks of the inflation of gold after the arrival of Europeans in Latin America (1990: 83). By recalling the colonial history of Latin America in a Chinese setting, Laiseca ironises and subverts a Eurocentric perspective. This irony signals the text’s discontinuity, which suggests ‘the impossibility of reading a text for a single isolatable truth’ to use Tambling’s words (2010: 159) but that, at the same time, still
refers to a reality outside itself. This double bind available in the text shows how ‘communities cannot be understood as simply on one side of identity or the other’, as Ahmed indicates (2000: 94). Even the mention of cheese, such as ‘patos hervidos en queso’ (1990: 132), can be seen as cutting across the description of Chinese food, since dairy products in general are not perceived as typical Chinese cuisine, acting as an ironic inversion of traditional Chinese foodstuffs (Ma and Rae 2004: 1). The novel thus points towards the internal conflicts which result from the unequal flows and exchanges between different locations as shown by Massey (1994: 1–9), while simultaneously hinting towards a global community which remains both liable to affiliation and capable of dispersion and thus suggestive of a Nancean cosmopolitanism as developed by Berthold Schoene (2011: 17). The use of disjunctive and incongruent terms in the listing of food, or in the narrative itself, through the use of a non-academic register, reveals an ironic discontinuity at the heart of continuity, a feature of postmodern literature according to Hutcheon (Hutcheon 1988: 26).

In this sense, the novel is in fact highly parodic in its intertextual relationship to the generic conventions of the Chinese novel, while stressing the context in which this fiction is being produced. Although the narrator orientates the reader within ‘Chinese’ culture and history, in relation to a timeless Orient, it disorientates and reorientates him/her by using words that refer the reader to Latin America with no previous warning. In this sense, it conspicuously does not hold a fetishised ‘China’ in place, and it draws attention to this fact through its various modes of narrative (de)construction. This disorienting and reorienting of the reader suggests the novel’s elasticity, relinquishes totalising notions about what determines the encounter. Simultaneously, it calls attention to the shifting conditions in which encounters take
place. And while the reader expects ‘China’ to fit a certain description, the text exposes interruptions to reveal this ‘China’ as a fetish in terms defined in the Introduction. By recalling cultural specificity and later disorienting the reader, it establishes and then undermines boundaries.

From this perspective, the ‘stranger’ can be seen to appear within the blurred borders, playing with what is, or is not, perceived as ‘stranger’. For example, the narrator presents the ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ as a set of oppositions held in place, as can be seen in the description of events that happen ‘no solamente en Occidente’ (1990: 123). However, the use of multiple narrators further underlines the destabilisation of narrative authority, resisting the privilege of certain narratives, such as those which define East/West divisions.

The appearance of specific traits and stereotypes via cultural and historical imagery can be interpreted as an ironic subversion of established discourses of historiography and textbooks on China available in Latin America. As noted by David Martínez-Robles (2008), while Western historiography on China has set out to overcome the prejudices of the past, it has been unable to distance itself completely from the resources and stereotypes that the Western world had come to accept about China: as a country of ‘miracles’ and ‘marvels’ in medieval times, as a refined and erudite culture in early modern Europe, to a nation where history and progress ceased since the Enlightenment. Recalling Ahmed’s ‘stranger fetishism’, ‘China’ here appears to embody a specific ‘nature’ (2000: 5). Martínez-Robles argues that a historiography has emerged only in recent decades that criticises such discourses on China, although it still fails to address them fully (2008). The stereotyping effects of this history and its relation to the notion of a fetishistic Chinese ‘nature’ are exploited by Laiseca, who makes use of specific traits and stereotypes in order to
portray a particular essentialist ‘China’, while also undercutting them, and pointing
the reader to Latin America. Disavowing any underlying, coherent meaning, the text
is in itself suggestive of the power imbalance that the ability to ‘construct’ embodies,
making claims about China’s ‘nature’ and, at the same time, subverting it. Resistance
to categorised knowledge, and hence to ‘stranger fetishism’, become available from
within the text itself.

Specific cultural and historical imagery is therefore used to (de)construct a
stereotyped, traditional and essential China, presented as prudent, individualist and
respectful of the soul, and patriarchal, with most women subjected to men and
named in artistic, symbolic terms. Yet the assumed authority of the narrator’s
knowledge helps (de)construct this ‘China’ through (ironic) comments that act as
anthropological generalisations. His authority is performed (ironically) in a
condescending manner, to the extent that he presents Confucianism and Realism as
sects, and even claims to ‘know’ what the Chinese ‘think’ at the moment of their
death (1990: 89).

The narrative construction, which purports to provide specific representations
of China, presents an ironic, entertaining, and at times violent and shocking
reworking of Chinese culture and society. The presence of ostensibly historical
characters establishes a claim to represent real people and events, but veiled
information about who is a historical character and who is not effectively maintains a
constant tension between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’. The perceived hermetic nature of
China and the limited Latin American historiography on China permit this authorial
liberty. So one is hardly surprised that one of the main characters in the text shares
with Laiseca the first syllable of his name, Lai, while Laiseca himself was sometimes

While the text seems to present a ‘traditional China’, there are indicators that point to Latin America as Laiseca’s real focal point. The novel releases itself from local historical reality, yet retains and denies the ‘past-ness’ of the ‘histories’ of colonialism and imperialism that determine, albeit not fully (Ahmed 2000: 6), the encounter between China and Latin America. In doing this, the novel echoes concerns regarding the narratives of dictatorships, such as the Argentinean Junta, which appropriate or discredit past narratives in order to justify their predominant role. The ‘encounter’ is hence informed by broader relationships of power and antagonism (Ahmed 2000: 8). Unequal distribution of power is thus explored through the construction of narratives that question the validity of the information given, reflecting on the differing discourses at play in a post-dictatorship scenario.

The disputed power of the main narrator reveals his claim to authority to be weak. The constant displacement of the narration draws attention to its constructed nature and allows for a broad allegorical reading in the terms defined by Tambling through which fragments suggest the impossibility of a single isolatable truth (2010: 165), simultaneously suggestive of power imbalance. The novel’s unsystematic discourses allow the ‘encounter’ with the ‘stranger’ to challenge textbooks such as those by Lin Yutang, which assume consensus regarding knowledge on China, and define a distinctive version of Chinese ‘nature’ (1936: 53). In this sense, the novel offers a critique of academic representations, mocking academic knowledge, undermining characterisations of what is typically ‘Chinese’ and exposing its contradictory possibilities. The novel thus responds to Ahmed’s call for ‘dialogue’, which would allow the differences between us that involve power and antagonism to
be present in the ‘encounter’ (2000: 180–81). As we shall now see in *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán*, the contradictory possibilities of ‘China’ can be further problematised. While Aira’s and Laiseca’s texts interrupt discourses on ‘China’, the author Mario Bellatin takes this interruption further in his novel *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* by emphasising the fetishist nature of ‘China’ in Latin America.

Bellatin’s novel *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* was published around ten years after the publication of *La mujer en la Muralla*, in 2001, just one year after a watershed moment in Mexican political history. The PRI, which had held power between 1929 and 2000, came to the end of its seventy-one-year rule, when the opposition candidate was elected President. Viewed within this hugely complex socio-historical scenario, the Mexican narrative tradition does not seem readily reducible to any distinct or definitive trend or style. The novel in Mexico has been described by Raymond L. Williams as heterogeneous, influenced by the region’s multiple indigenous groups, the *mestizo* culture, and subject to the literary influences of Europe and the United States (2007: 27–28).

Postmodern literary texts began to appear in Mexico in the late 1960s, influenced by the workers’ and students’ movements of 1968, reinventing an indigenous and revolutionary literary style. Salvador Elizondo’s *Farabeuf* (1965) stands out as an example, playing extensively as it does with language, characters, events and aspects of ‘Chineseness’. The publication of Carlos Fuentes’s *Cambio de Piel* (1967) also broke with established modernity by formulating questions, flaunting unresolved contradictions and revelling in the different versions and alternative truths in which characters had no fixed identities (Williams 2007: 134, 2002: 214).
A second movement involved authors born since 1955, focusing on popular unrest within migratory and border contexts, and exploring the interplay between fiction and real life (Williams 2007: 28–32). These themes include historiographical origins and games with language, while escaping formal rules and the judgmental evaluation of categorisation. The texts position themselves, literally and physically, in a transnational context. In many of these cases, national borders are also significantly blurred, and this phenomenon of transnationalism can be observed in relation to Bellatin, who is usually referred to as ‘Peruvian-Mexican’.

Research and critics seems to coincide on the appraisal of Bellatins’s work and originality. He has been celebrated as a leading voice in Spanish fiction, but while he has been translated into English, his work is little known in the English-speaking world. While his corpus of work has been studied broadly, there is as yet no analysis of the specific role that China is made to play (or not) in this novel. Furthermore, no author has commented upon the different versions of the novel and, as we shall see, the way in which this may impact the invocation of ‘China’ in its relation to imaginaries available in Latin America. As far as I know, there is no existing specific analysis of the novel regarding its (non)representation of ‘China’.

Born in 1960 in Mexico to Peruvian parents, Bellatin moved to Peru when he was four. After periods in Peru and Cuba, he later returned to Mexico in 1995. Like Aira, Bellatin is an author who is difficult to label and has also been loosely referred to as postmodern, and paradigmatic of new artistic and social forms (Palaversich 2003: 26; Steinberg 2011: 105). Certainly his work is exemplary of the continuous reworking of fiction through fragmentation (Laddaga 2007: 163; Quintana 2009: 497). Jorge Panesi suggests that Bellatin’s aesthetic creed is to bring together parallel worlds whose relation to the everyday world is, simultaneously, evident, impossible
and tangential (2005). Bellatin’s work has been interestingly defined as ‘literatura postautónoma’, a term coined by Josefina Ludmer, which rejects literary borders, allowing for the narrating of the daily life of subjects positioned in territories produced and constituted by the media, new technologies, science and modern politics (Roig 2012: 39; Ludmer [n.d.]). The decoding of the novels therefore depends on their relationship to other works, including autobiographical insertions; their participation in other artistic activities; and the author’s own essays, written as manifestos, that establish a relationship between literature and performance (Mateo del Pino 2009: 119; Vergara 2010; Albornoz 2011: 37).

The significance of a narrative based on fragments reveals itself, among other features, through intertextuality. Catalina Quesada Gómez, in her study of Bellatin’s association with Severo Sarduy’s metafictional inclinations, notes how his works have been linked to Reinaldo Arenas, David Lynch, David Cronenberg, and Asian narrators, such as Kenzaburō Ōe or Yukio Mishima (2011: 298). Álvaro Martín Navarro also recalls intertextuality in Bellatin’s ‘Japanese’ works, and how they present similarities with Japanese texts and authors directly (via quotes) and indirectly (via themes) (2010: 132–35, 155). However, Palaversich notes that in his works, Bellatin never mentions the names of Borges, Julio Cortázar or Elizondo, with whom he nonetheless maintains a close intertextual dialogue.

What is ‘true’ and what is ‘false’ remains in constant tension in Bellatin’s literature precisely because of the play of intertextuality (Azaretto 2009). This tension also emerges through the use of language itself, in a process where notions of identity and self are disarticulated, as observed by Megumi Andrade Kobayashi (2014: 69–70). Palaversich observes how the incorporation of alternative narrative lines disavows the stabilisation of the texts and disconcerts the reader (2003: 32).
Fragmentation thus appears to negate literary and cultural traditions, as noted by López-Calvo (2013b: 340). Bellatin’s work comes across as fictional, but it is also as though it performs a kind of testimonial function (Ruiz 2008: 201). In this sense, as Laura Conde’s analysis of Bellatin’s work shows, the superposition of fragments from a ‘poética de lo mutilado’ finds a certain resonance in the mutilations committed by *Sendero Luminoso* and which, in the text, erupt as a mutilated archive (2003).

The way in which Bellatin plays with fragmentation through concealment and by leaving gaps is especially thought-provoking in his ‘Oriental’ works. The presence of ‘Oriental’ spaces in his literature has been stated by Bellatin himself to represent an arbitrary choice that does not disclose any special interest (Hind 2004: 198). In his words, these worlds are ‘un universo cargadamente inverosímil’ (Hind 2004: 201).

Regarding his ‘Japanese’ texts, he says,

Sencillamente en estos hay una falsa retórica japonesa que hace que el lector inmediatamente deposite una serie de elementos que no están en el libro, sino que yo sé cómo va a reaccionar el lector. […] Me interesa que crean que es Japón. Sí, que crean y después se den cuenta que no es porque el mismo texto tiene los elementos que decodifican esto […] (Hind 2004: 198).

Emily Hind, however, suggests that Bellatin’s choice of Japan and China, as in *La escuela*, is also used for contrast with the ‘West’, and therefore is not completely arbitrary. This contrast would reveal a struggle between ‘lo moderno y lo tradicional’ in Latin American literature, conducted in abstract terms. Bellatin argues that writing ‘Japanese’ texts as a way to go beyond ‘tradition’ and the canon is his way of responding to this struggle (Hind 2004: 199). Moreover, at the same time, he reveals his settings as conscious choices that gesture towards the global: ‘no es
Isabel Quintana suggests that literature, as a reservoir of aesthetic material and symbolic forces, is relocated by Bellatin in different settings, with Mexican literature vanishing as an explicit referent (2009: 487–89). His works would thus configure a poetics of desolation, where disrupted bodies are contained under the control of the state and its guardians; the very citizens that have internalised this discipline. The suffocating universes that shape Bellatin’s narratives open up an interrogation regarding the possibility of justice in societies that have been and continue to be immersed in violence. In this sense, disrupted bodies, as in *La escuela*, create fantasies and modes of resistance, and are also a means by which to represent pain as a kind of memory, denaturalising violence. Quintana suggests that Bellatin takes on these interrogations by reimagining them as displaced from their political dimension; he does not escape from politics and history, but stages them at their most monstrous extremes (2009: 503). The choice of a foreign setting allows him to engage with politics and history, whilst playing with the abject and its/his/her displacement. In light of the above, I will explore how *La escuela* deconstructs any fetishised understanding of ‘China’, not holding the other in place, and casting doubt on any guarantee of meaning.

*La escuela* was first published in Mexico in 2001. Other editions have been published in Buenos Aires in 2005 (Interzona), Mexico in 2005 (Alfaguara), San José in 2014 (Germinal) and Córdoba in 2016 (Borde Perdido Editora). There are major differences between the 2001 edition and the others regarding, for example, characters and narration. While the 2001 edition includes Chinese names and the word China, the editions published since 2005 do not, yet the text still allows the
reader to assume it is ‘China’ from the title and cultural references. I will use the Interzona edition as central for my study, as it is the most widely available and most widely distributed.

Through chapters/fragments presented with titles and explanatory notes, the reader is exposed to a multivoiced text with a non-linear timeframe. The story is presented through a heterodiegetic narrator and judgemental characters, told via internal viewpoints that alternate in focus throughout the text. The main characters are apparently a boy-man who grows up with his parents and must use a harness and an orthopaedic arm, who might be the founder of the ‘School of Human Pain’ and might have been castrated as a boy; a foreign woman whose husband has been buried in the village where events take place; and a woman in charge of drowning the third child of families, enforcing the law of the ‘authorities’. The novel is arguably set during the Chinese Communist Party’s rule, indicated through the mention of an un-capitalised ‘república popular’ (2005: 56, italics in the original), grassroots elections and social planning. While it also refers on occasion to the Imperial past, these references are ambiguous. Through a game of angles and perspectives, as ‘historiographic metafiction’, the novel obscures the storyline, thus avoiding any commitment to a specific ‘truth’.

By the end of the novel the text remains open, stressing the textual access to ‘histories’, while allowing for the (re)locating of the novel within alternative socio-historical contexts. Notions of asymmetrical power are thus revealed through this unstable narratorial construction. In line with Tambling’s notion of the postmodern allegory, the novel presents a complex engagement with the representation of ‘reality’, stressing the notion of subjectivity through fragmentation, with the trappings of power appearing in bodies, places and situations. The novel refuses to
endorse any single point of view, and does not hold the ‘other’ in place. In this sense, I argue that the allegory evokes asymmetrical power distribution as discontinuous, drawing attention to its constructed nature, and therefore allowing it to be displaced and re-situated.

The constructed nature of authority can be seen through Bellatin’s use of ‘Oriental’ features, which appear regularly in his narrative. Palaversich suggests that,

El hecho de que algunos personajes sean japoneses y otros chinos o árabes es, otra vez, una trampa textual que tiene el efecto de estrangement en el lector: aquel puede llegar a pensar que no entiende el personaje a causa de su “extranjería.” Sin embargo, estos personajes “exóticos” no poseen características adicionales que los distingan de otros del texto (2003: 33, italics in the original).

López-Calvo agrees with Palaversich in so far as he believes that Bellatin’s deliberate use of Japanese characters as a device for distancing himself from his text may also imply that he sees Japanese culture as the one farthest from his own, as he suggests ‘in a way, perhaps these characters embody the author’s Other’ (2013b: 339). He further suggests that Bellatin’s exploration of the ‘potential relationship between writing, translation and physical deformity leads, perhaps unconsciously, to the continuation of exoticising stereotypes about ‘Oriental’ cultures’ (López-Calvo 2013b: 339). But I will argue that the construction of narrative and character of La escuela suggests otherwise.

While, as López-Calvo observed in the case of Japan, an orientalised image of China likewise emerges, its disavowal of difference and its overlap with Latin America function here as a critique of ontological difference. Furthermore, the text appears as a critique to any ‘master narrative’, a critique which would extend to China and Latin America, thus revealing what we have in common with the so-called ‘stranger’, destabilising boundaries and creating new spaces through which this
'stranger’ can be encountered (Ahmed 2000: 8, 15). In this sense, it is possible to discern an engagement with politics and history that may be considered in terms of allegory, an engagement also suggested by Quintana (2009), Samuel Steinberg (2011) and Palaversich (2015).

According to Steinberg, Bellatin’s writing ‘[…]' toys with but cannot ultimately be made legible through the modes of national-political allegory that so often determine readings of Latin American texts’ (2011: 105–6). He suggests that Bellatin’s groundlessness exposes history’s virtual ‘failure’ to appear clearly, which in turn suggests a new way of understanding allegory under what he calls ‘interregnal times’ (Steinberg 2011: 105–6). Steinberg reads Bellatin from within an indeterminate historical periodization: he presents the waning of the PRI as a nearly imperceptible process, as the vacuum of ‘institutional power-in-legitimacy expresses precisely the continuity of the Mexican present with nearly 70 years of PRIist impunity, and, in a sense, with the reigning impunities of the years before that as well’ (2011: 106). I build on Steinberg’s perspective, as I interpret the novel as one in which ‘China’ is summoned in order to problematise the grand narratives of history.

The novel opens with a recommendation that refers to ‘reglas de juego para una posible puesta en escena’, as a theatre play, and advises the reader how we should express the ‘formas de representación’ (2005: 9). The panchronic narrator explains that these kinds of ‘theatrical representations’ were first encountered by anthropologists. He alerts the ‘reader’ to the fact that a sense of totality will emerge only at the end of the story (2005: 9). Furthermore, the narrator warns us that, because at the end of this kind of theatre, spectators might enter into a ‘bastante particular’ state of catharsis, its content is on occasions controlled by the
‘authorities’. In this sense, the novel introduces a story about ‘others’ as ‘strangers’, in this specific case, those studied by anthropologists. The narrator’s warning, his withholding of information and explanations, appear to confirm that the narrator holds authorial authority. Yet the different voices refuse to obey a hierarchy; the text’s ambivalence denies us access to a ‘truth’.

Dissimilar perspectives are revealed in the chapters/sections, which have been described as ‘miniatures’. As Facundo Ruiz shows, the term ‘miniatures’ suggests that the stories are exposed in the showcase of narration, presented as an imaginary diary or as a catalogue of scenes (2008: 209). In the same section, sentences present different, contradictory ‘miniatures’, further emphasised by the fact that there is no direct speech. Contradictions emerge within the first-person narratives, revealing a tension between characters’ psychological perspectives and their actual physical experiences (2005: 75). In this way, the characters’ monologues convey a denial of the self through contradictory statements about their own selves.

In relation to these contradictions, Francisco Carrillo Martin has noted how rupture is presented through the medium of theatre, with theatre acting as a space where the actors explain while the author disappears, thus allowing for the catharsis of the audience, generating autonomous codes, which appear during the theatrical representation and disappear when it ends (2010: 40). In this sense, the novel recalls Said’s theatrical metaphor for Orientalism, as Orientalism tries ‘at one and the same time to characterise the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe’ (2003: 71–72, italics in the original). Yet the interference of the implied author in the text, together with the fragmented narration, renders any single
characterisation of it impossible. The possibility of a single ‘meaning’ is hence disavowed.

The story is thus presented in a variety of inconsistent ways. While events seem to happen in Communist China, many elements refer back to Imperial China. This inconsistency can be observed, for example, through the boy who listens to a distant television through a window, who might also be the founder of the ‘Escuela del dolor humano’ in Imperial China (2005: 19). The novel is ambiguous throughout about the historical period. For example, there is no explicit information as to whether the founder of the ‘Escuela’ in imperial times is the same boy who is speaking from the ‘present’. The titles and explanations appear as analepses, while the narration is in the present tense. The novel plays with linearity: events are in the past, yet the text itself holds the promise of repetition, presented both as a play and as fragments.

Inconsistency also characterises the novel in a number of ways. For example, in the following extract that tells about the death of the ‘pedagogo’, founder of ‘la escuela’,

El pedagogo murió decapitado y en la horca. Aquel fue el final de la historia del fundador de la Escuela del dolor humano. Cada quien lo vio en su muerte de distinta manera. Sin zapatos, con garras de pájaro, con el cuerpo cubierto de plumas, con los testículos colgándole como si de un camello viejo se tratara, con una erección presente como cuando introducía las uñas destruidas en el cuerpo de sus amantes, con los pies embalsamados como les corresponde a todos los padres del planeta e incluso con un pájaro mudo acurrucado en su cabeza (2005: 53, italics in the original).

The paragraph evokes different points of view, suggesting that different people see/experience the same events in diverse ways. Contradiction also appears in the matter of temporality, as some of the individuals might belong to Imperial China and
others to the ‘república popular’. Simultaneously, it suggests that different characters might in fact be one, a suggestion enhanced by the fragmented narrative of the novel, which never introduces the characters as such. As Albornoz observes, the novel is presented as a mosaic of fragments which can never be evoked in their totality (2011). This mosaic allows us to recognise the text’s foregrounding of the fictitious nature of ‘master narratives’, a feature of postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 1988: 191).

This mosaic formation includes evidence that allows the reader to learn that the story is set in a recognisable ‘China’. Yet, as we will see, this formation also directs the reader towards Latin America. The novel generates tension between what is actually implied to be ‘Chinese’, what is recognised as ‘Chinese’ by the reader, and what could be Latin American. An example of this is the depiction of rituals. In his interpretation of the novel, Alan Pauls recalls Bellatin’s notion of regularity through the presence of ritual in La escuela and across Bellatin’s works (2005). As noted by Panesi, Bellatin actually invents rituals in La escuela, such as the unearthing of the dead (2005). The ritual acts as a process by which ‘China’ can be retrieved and the ‘foreign’ can be exposed. Yet the ‘foreignness’ is called into doubt by the explanatory note to a chapter that states ‘es curioso constatar que las fiestas folklóricas son similares en todo el mundo’ (2005: 40, italics in the original). The novel generates tension between what it shows that is implied to be Chinese, and what is recognised as ‘Chinese’ by the reader.

Furthermore, as has been noted by Albornoz, the traditions presented in the novel have a ‘sabor andino’, and the novel’s exploration of pain can be related to Dr. Farabeuf’s obsessive need to understand what happens at the moment of death in Elizondo’s Farabeuf (2011: 5). In this sense, aspects of the text clearly signal their Latin American heritage, such as the presence of men with ‘plumas de pájaro en el
cuerpo’, who recall the voladores de Papantla. These ‘un-fixed’ references act as markers of ambiguity, recalling McClintock’s notion of the fetish as involving a potential multitude of contradictions, housing the social contradictions that are experienced at a personal level (1995: 202).

Indeed, Bellatin himself further plays with the book’s contradictions and ambiguity. In August 2001, he published a piece featuring paragraphs and sentences that were later included in the published novel (released in September 2001). The 2001 edition includes an appendix which, as Palaversich notes, mocks the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, and includes a commentary which, it might be suggested, signals the arbitrary nature of the narrative montage (2003: 31). In the Interzona edition, the mocking of catharsis fades as an implied author demands to be shown whether the spectators have uncovered the links between the fragments, and this information allows for the appearance of ‘some level of catharsis’ (2005: 81). The arbitrariness of the montage is thus less explicit, giving the text a broader uncertainty. While in the August 2001 text a phrase is constructed as follows, ‘muchas veces, observadores internacionales se han cuestionado la cantidad tan alta de ejecutados que existe actualmente en China’ (2001b); in the 2001 and 2005 edition the word ‘China’ is replaced by ‘región’, and eliminates any temporal positioning (2016: 51, 2005: 71). While the 2001 online text can be seen as determined to show a specific Chinese context and the 2001 edition uses capitals when referring to the ‘Cultural Revolution’ and ‘People’s Republic’, in the 2005 edition China seems to fade into the background, although the context remains Chinese. These multiple versions of the text refers us back to Hutcheon, who shows how ‘the refusal to integrate fragments […] is a refusal of the closure and telos
which narrative usually demands […]’ (1988: 121); the novel thus challenging essentialist understandings of narrative.

Indeed, the author also plays with this ‘openness’ beyond the novel itself. In 2008, in a piece written in the first person, he recalls a character from La escuela, but locates her in Latin America:

El martes llega uno de mis personajes principales: la mujer de seattle [sic] que se dedica todos los años a desenterrar con sus propias manos a su marido en la cúspide de la montaña de un pueblo andino. El personaje aparece en mi libro La escuela del dolor humano de sechuánM.u [sic]. Quiere visitar, después de treinta años, el primer pueblo en latinoamérica [sic] en el que se instaló. No creo estar en condiciones de realizar el viaje con ella (2012, italics in the original).

As is evident here, the author explicitly shifts towards a Latin American location. A comparison reveals the contradictions, since in La escuela there is no information that would suggest the character is from Seattle, or that the story is set in an Andean town. The novel continues to raise issues of power, while at the same time demonstrating that China’s role as a referent for authoritarianism also applies to Latin America, thus extending the novel transnationally.

As Bellatin has mentioned elsewhere, he makes the reader imagine places through a rhetoric that has the intention to evoke specific locations (2012). In this sense, he reopens ‘prior histories of encounter’ between Latin American and China: even the somewhat eclipsed China of the 2005 edition can still be recognised through specific social references. Indeed, what is most relevant for my argument is to see how Bellatin plays with his audience’s assumptions by evoking China without explicitly mentioning it. While the location can, in certain instances, be viewed as an Andean village, specific details refer to a ‘real’ China, such as ‘república popular’ or ‘revolución cultural’ (2005: 65, italics in the original), leading the reader to consider
the meaning of ‘China’. In this sense, and following Derrida’s logic of the supplement, Bellatin’s text reveals the lack of the real historical in the ‘China’ available in his text (2016: 167). The economy of the supplement, as Derrida explains, has the power to procure an absent presence through its image while it simultaneously holds it at a distance and masters it (2016: 168), which is precisely what we see Bellatin doing in *La escuela*. In this way, Bellatin makes use of ‘China’ to disturb the hierarchical discourses through which identities are configured, simultaneously emphasising the unavoidability of the contact between subjects, an aspect that seems to suggest an understanding of the subject as being-with as developed by Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘where there is no “in itself” that is not already immediately “with”’ (Nancy 2000: 68). Referring back to Tambling, the text can be seen as creating a ‘postmodern allegory’ through its openness and the ‘fragments [which] suggest the impossibility of reading a text for a single isolatable truth’ (2010: 159). The nature of the novel allows the reader to doubt the veracity of quotes and information presented in the text. While in the 2001 edition the book further clarifies elements of the text as it includes a ‘Señal para el lector’ at the end, this is not present in the 2005 edition. This mischievous use of true and false quotes shows the way in which ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ may co-exist on the same ontological level, problematizing any correspondence between text and reality. Recalling McClintock’s theory of the fetish, ‘China’ in the novel is shown to embody an impossible irresolution (1995: 184), containing the negotiations and configurations of ‘strangerness’. In the recognition of ‘China’ made available in the novel, the fragments that comprise this ‘China’ ultimately disclose it as a fetish of otherness.

Compositeness is also presented through the fragmentation of the body in *La escuela*, an element that has been noted by Palaversich and other critics as a distinct
In this sense, we find traces of asymmetrically distributed power in and through traumatised bodies in *La escuela*, and this power is significantly exercised by the state and by society. As Quintana shows, the novel reveals the exercise of power from within the ‘gran relato del Estado’ more precisely, in its double logic of power: the control over individual bodies and the regulation of the masses (2009: 495–96). This double logic of power can be seen in the ‘democrats’, a volleyball team who have no fingers on their right hand because the state had them cut off after they exercised their right to vote; or a woman who drowns children that escape birth-control policies. The presence of the state is ubiquitous and the ‘Escuela’ acts as a mechanism for resistance to this ubiquity. From this perspective, ‘China’ here can be seen, on one level, to embody an ultimate, tyrannical power.

Through detailed description, body parts are also presented as grotesque, thus exposing the subjection of bodies to socio-political control. The hedonistic relationship a man has to his nails and testicles can be read as a marker of a kind of madness (2005: 75), while at the same time it acts as a mechanism to protect him from external threats, such as the state, embodied by the woman who asks about him. She represents the state, as her responsibility is to drown the third child of each family, exercising the state’s policy on population control. The ambiguity of the story allows us to think that the woman might be his castrated self, so that he knows about her because, in a sense, he could be her (2005: 55–56). Her practice of the

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9 In Bellatin’s works, bodies are seen to destabilise the concept of unity of the character and of the narrative construction. Palaversich links this destabilization via bodies to the fact that Bellatin was born without his right arm, in the sense that these bodies open up narratives which have not yet been explored. The presence of the body is also noted by Javier Guerrero, Kathryn Méndez and Ángeles Donoso: Bellatin is constantly blurring lines between autobiography, perceived reality and fiction (Guerrero 2009: 63–64; Donoso 2011: 96–97; Méndez 2014: 99–117). His constructions, such as of the ‘real’ or the body, are fragmented, mutilated and withhold complete information (Palaversich 2003: 36–37, 2015: 12, 16; Vaggione 2009: 475).
‘mechanism of pain’ can be seen as example of how she embodies the lessons of the school he/she might have founded. At the same time she is suggested to be the worst practitioner of the ‘escuela’ (2005: 56) thus effectively ‘un-fixing’ the narration by rejecting any reliable meaning.

Carlos Cherri shows how violence finds its justification in the logic of its means, not its end, and, linking this logic to La escuela, he explores how, through performance, literature builds for itself a means with no end (2012: 3). He concurs with Panesi’s views on fragmentation and ellipsis (2005), and Florencia Garramuño’s comments on the recreation of violence (2011). The capturing of the act of violence, Cherri shows, is presented paradoxically through its absence in the chapter entitled ‘Los democráticos’. The withholding of information in this section, where there is no explanation about the lack of fingers, is then explained in ‘Cerro de dedos’: it is the ink on the fingers that will lead to their amputation. It is only when the lack of fingers is clarified that the characters regain a discernible ‘normality’. Nevertheless, their bodies remind them of their past oppression. As Ángeles Donoso has observed, in Bellatin’s writing malformations, anomalies, diseases and eccentricities are always considered in relation to the parameters of normality imposed by others, such as parents, doctors or friends (2011: 96–110). Palaversich suggests that the novel normalizes the singular and the anomalous, reminding the reader of Thomas Kuhn’s notion that suggests that ‘anomaly appears only against the background provided by paradigm’ (2012: 65). In this sense, the multiple readings that the novel opens up both present and interrogate the parameters of normality imposed by others, with characters contradicting themselves and removing any trace of regularity or normality.
The novel thus exposes the control of the state over its citizens, and the control of the family over its members, which duplicates this external coercion. As Quintana shows, the mother who disciplines and forces her child to use an orthopaedic harness is moulding his body to ‘fit in’ to society (2009: 502). The boy suffers under multiple forms of power imposed upon him: that of the parents, social stigma and the intervention of the state. Yet the boy can also be viewed as the one exerting power over others, if he is actually ‘el pedagogo’, the founder of ‘La Escuela’. This representation of power is then fragmented through the multivoiced construction of the novel. If we literally follow the title of the chapter the boy without an arm can be read as the intrusion of the implied author, referencing the fact that Bellatin does not have his right arm. Heteroglossia also emerges within passages that suggest multivoicedness within the chapters/sections, such as when the boy talks about his dead brother, and his utterance is interrupted by the following phrase, ‘a mi garfio hubo que colocarle un recubrimiento de espuma para evitar que dañara a mis compañeros de clase’ (2005: 50), in this way toying with different versions of reality.

In the 2001 edition, the presence of the state and its exercise of power are explicit and personified, and experiences of pain are presented as experiences that can be ‘captured’ by the character Lin Pao. He is presented as the inventor of a game of mirrors through which pain can be fixed like a photograph. This capture of pain appears, Quintana suggests, as a way of capturing the memory of the people who suffered under state oppression. The staging of pain goes beyond death, with Lin Pao’s school of images considered dangerous to the nation by the state, and Lin Pao himself being ‘decapitated and hanged’ (Quintana 2009: 502). In this sense, the ‘Escuela’ contains in itself a disciplinary dimension with pedagogy as a mode of resistance: the ‘Escuela’ becomes a positive ‘self-disciplinary’ technique which
empowers. This is the reason why it has the potential to be a threat to the authoritarian structure. Yet in the 2005 edition the location of resistance is less explicit, situated in different, unreachable spaces due to the new edition’s narratorial ambiguity. In this edition, for example, Lin Pao is never named. The narrator’s ambiguity is displayed rather through the equivocal thoughts of the characters and the omission of key words, such as proper names.

As we have seen, these multiple readings do not allow for any closed interpretations. The monstrosity of the characters is revealed throughout the story in terms of the traces of previous histories that inform their grotesque bodies: such as the woman who self-harms or the man with horrific nails. In this sense, monstrosity reveals its previous histories, while the absence of any judgment reveals the text to be a ‘site of encounter’. While in both *Una novela china* and *La mujer en la Muralla*, a power imbalance is installed through powerful and unreliable narrators, and China is used as a way of exposing the fictitious nature of ‘master narratives’, in *La escuela* extreme fragmentation reveals the impossibility of any totalising narrative at all. The discursive ambiguity and unpredictable utterances lead the reader to continuously doubt, revealing meaning to be precarious, allowing for an ‘encounter’ with China as ‘stranger’, even as it disavows any ontology of the stranger, hence rejecting what Ahmed terms ‘stranger fetishism’ (2000: 4).

The characters in Bellatin’s text can be considered as fetished ‘strangers’, embodying otherness through their mutilated figures and experiences of violence. Any cultural antagonism that might raise the spectre of ‘stranger fetishism’ is negated by the presence of fragmented discourses. The fragmented construction opens up spaces in which we, as readers, can to some extent ‘identify’ with these characters. Both apathy and empathy towards the same characters is experienced
from one fragment to the other: while a child’s concern about his testicles is worrying as an indicator of abuse, his description of his ‘testículos palpables, sebosos, cargados de una pátina de grasa’ (2005: 42) evokes power over his own touchable body, while simultaneously conveying the grotesque. In this way, ‘China’ in the novel can be seen to embody the abject through the estranged bodies of the practitioners of ‘La escuela del dolor’, the touchable testicles of the boy-man, or the children drowned because of state policies. As Ahmed writes, encounters such as these ‘surprise the subject’ while they ‘reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference’ (2000: 8), recalling histories of violence in both China and Mexico. The lack of testicles, fingers, clothes, husband, or child, among others, opens up spaces to be filled by the reader. The ‘stranger’ is lacking body parts or relationships which can be given to them by the reader by ‘remaking what it is that we may yet have in common’, as Ahmed explains may occur in encounters (2000: 181, italics in the original), opening up spaces of encounter and encouraging dialogue.

In this sense, a reading of La escuela as ‘historiographical metafiction’ opens it up to analysis also as a broad allegory of power, questioning overarching discourses through a fragmented narrative. Throughout the different levels of the novel, such as the titles, explanatory notes and main texts, and through the ubiquitous presence of the state, power imbalances emerge. This power imbalance is also recalled through the parent-son, individual-community, state-subject or author-reader relationships. While the characters may engage voluntarily in these relationships, their conflicted internal monologues reveal difficulties embedded in these power dynamics. The state’s ultimate power is developed and maintained through mechanisms of vigilance that permeate society and these internal relations.
Ultimately, the novel questions the figure of the fetishised ‘stranger’, as the characters engage with the ‘stranger’ within themselves. That is, the ‘stranger’ is narratively displayed from within, allowing the reading of displaced internal narratives and exposing conflict.

Steinberg suggests that Bellatin’s books are works that announce ‘untimeliness’, hoping to endure a Mexican interregnum. Regarding La escuela, Steinberg suggests that ‘in a perhaps unintended irony, the text itself seems to thematise the critique of totalitarian political order […]’, while allegory, as the political-historical functioning of the literary, has been the object of disavowal by Bellatin (2011: 110). Yet irony can also be considered here to be deliberate. Bellatin’s explicit disavowal of allegory can be seen as a grand joke played on his readers, just as he plays with the format, inserting dramatised versions of himself. It is here that a key difference between Jameson’s and Tambling’s notions of ‘allegory’ comes into play: while Bellatin might be, through rhetorical operation, ‘saving’ art from the demands of a national-allegorical interpretation (Steinberg 2011: 110), it does not mean that the novel itself cannot be read in allegorical terms. La escuela, beyond the local Mexican context, can be read in terms of the ‘postmodern allegorical’, rejecting a single isolatable truth, and revealing the constructedness of the narration. As such, allegory attaches itself to an asymmetrical distribution of power, which permeates different members of society within authoritarian or hegemonic rule, embodied and subverted in this novel through the figure of ‘China’ and its unfixed strangerness.

Although in Aira and Laiseca’s works ‘China’ is deployed to embody master narratives of despotic power that are deconstructed in a variety of ways, as we have seen, in Bellatin’s writing, the use of ‘China’ seems more gratuitous. In Aira’s and
Laiseca’s texts, ‘China’ acts as marker of temporal-spatial distance, allowing for it to embody the fetishised ‘stranger’ in time and space, while simultaneously exposing the stranger as such. For Bellatin, ‘China’ rather embodies the openness of transnational links, both evoking and subverting discourses about ‘strangers’. The chronological distance between *Una novela china* and *La mujer en la Muralla* in relation to *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán*, also reveals a further removal of ‘China’ from the texts, seems to acknowledge the more ubiquitous presence of China in Latin America, influenced by China’s patterns of growth and consumption since the late 1980s (Myers and Wise 2017). In this way, China as ‘stranger’ allows for diverse and contradictory narratives which, in a way, are responding to Ahmed’s call for a ‘politics of encounter’, and rejecting any ontology of the ‘stranger’ (2000: 181), thus allowing for a space of ‘encounter’ and ‘dialogue’. The novels indeed disclose how, as Massey explains, the ‘multiplicity, antagonisms and contrasting temporalities are the stuff of all places’ (2005: 139).

In this sense, and to borrow from Bakhtin, I suggest that a ‘chronotope of encounter’ emerges in these novels. Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope (time-space) asserts the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships artistically expressed in literature: the representation of China as setting and cultural context interacts with the plot, history and characters, emerging through unreliable and unstable narrative constructions (1981: 84, 250–53). For Bakhtin, time and space are inseparable, a combination of setting and plot, with their intersections creating an integral whole. Following Bakhtin, the analysis of a chronotope entails attention to the narrative structure and the external social and political contexts. This ‘China’ chronotope embodies the existence of multiple conflicting discourses, revealed through utterances, evoking power imbalances by embodying the abject, and
disturbing all notions of conventional identities and cultures. In this way, China emerges as a kind of ‘uncanny’, foreign yet familiar, the known and unknown ‘stranger’, exposing spatialised social practices, and articulating subjective transnational experiences.

The ‘chronotope of encounter’ provides the novels’ grounding for the ‘representability of events’, allowing for the ‘strange encounter’. By depicting a static China, an ontological perspective on ‘China’ is made available, and it is then disrupted through irony and parody. To this end, the stagnant nature of ‘historiographic’ accounts, which attribute certain traits to China as ‘ontological other’, finds itself constantly displaced. In this sense, these novels address China’s ‘strangerness’ by ‘un-fixing’ certain boundaries concerning access to history, power and knowledge.

Narrative estrangement disturbs naturalised assumptions about where we are and how we position ourselves with relation to the world, while simultaneously playing out within borders. This narrative estrangement in turn makes possible a geographical reversal: the imbalance of power and its physical embodiment and practice relates not only to China, but also to Latin America. In this way, the novels unsettle the distance between ‘strangers’, while still acknowledging them to be ‘strangers’ in un-fixed and open ways. In this sense then, the presence of China here performs a political function, with the authors exposing the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of discourses that present a somewhat invisible China in Latin America, simultaneously challenging binary understandings between notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’.
In his analysis of Borges’ poem ‘El Forastero’, Robin Fiddian states that the poem adopts the perspective ‘of an ancient and venerable Eastern civilization, in order to openly critique historic assumptions about Christian Europe and the political and spiritual hegemony of the West’ (2013: 105). And while this critique seems to be what Aira, Laiseca and Bellatin do in these novels, they emphasize the textual approach to ‘China’ and the constructedness of ‘China’ in Latin America. Thus, they deconstruct a dualistic East/West vision which, as we saw in the introduction, remains present in Borges’ work. This deconstruction is especially interesting in the case of Laiseca, where his text La mujer en la Muralla can be read as a (very long) re-writing of Borges’s text ‘La muralla y los libros’ (2011), as mentioned above. As Torres Estrada states regarding the short story, Borges here seems to configure reality through an aesthetic exercise (2015: 137). Furthermore, the multiple narrators available in Laiseca’s text enhance the effect of Borges’ sole narrator, as the former text emphasises the multiple perspectives and ultimate disavowal of any isolatable truth. Laiseca extends Borges’ exercise and, like him, presents the suspension of truth and the coexistence of conjectures.

The choice of ‘China’ as a motif for the narrative thread thus serves to (de)legitimise discourses on the ‘other’, while revealing ‘China’ to be an ultimately distant, relatively invisible, exoticised and unknown place in Latin American literary discourses. The chronotope of China as encounter mobilises existing socio-political relations at the same time as it renegotiates them, destabilising existing hierarchies of power in Latin American contexts through a partly allegorical China. The authors seem to resort to China specifically because of China’s historically hermetic image in the Latin American imagination. ‘China’ as a setting allows for a performance of Chineseness. This performance positions ‘China’ as an ‘ultimate other’, precisely the
‘fetishised stranger’ in Ahmed’s terms, a notion which is simultaneously disavowed through the novels’ narrative strategies and (de)constructions. The defiance of the authority of knowledge disclosed in the novels reminds the reader of the fictionality of literature as demonstrative of the fictionality of all discursive constructs, including that which ‘China’ invents for itself. By exposing contradictions, these texts reveal and denounce the processes through which some others are rendered ‘stranger than other others’, borrowing Ahmed’s words (2000: 25).

In this way, it is tacitly implied that China as ‘stranger’ is admitted as possibly knowing differently to that which is representing it. In this way, the novels hint towards Derrida’s understanding of the supplement: the displacement of ‘China’ here leaves hidden its ‘strangerness’ as it also designates it unmistakably (2016: 182). ‘China’ is thus chosen to reveal the fragmentation and blurring of the known and unknown, and the novels reveal their ‘openness’ to the ‘stranger’, acting as a ‘space of encounter’, allowing dialogue and finding, through these discursively reinvented and destabilised ‘Chinas’, different ways to talk about contemporary power relations and forms of strangerness within Latin America as well.

While the stories in Chapter One were set in what was recognisable as a historical ‘China’, the novels studied here are linked to the presence of Chinese communities in Latin America. The novel *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007, henceforth, *Un chino*) by the Argentine author Ariel Magnus is set in the *barrio chino* (Chinatown) of Buenos Aires, while the story of *El mármol* (2011) by César Aira occurs around two ‘supermercados chinos’, as supermarkets owned or administered by Chinese people in Buenos Aires are known. In the novel *Verde Shanghai* (2011c) by Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza, the protagonist goes to a non-specified *barrio chino*, presumably that of Mexico City.\(^1\) I contend here that by focusing on the Chinatown and the Chinese, these novels offer an evaluation of the discourses that support a racially homogeneous Latin America by emphasizing its heterogeneity and hybridity beyond ‘local’ black and indigenous cultures. Read through Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of ‘being singular plural’ (2000), the postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’ (2001), and further engaging with Sara Ahmed’s theorisations on the ‘stranger’ (2000), these novels can be shown to converse with contemporary questions regarding multiculturalism (Aguiló 2014; Ko 2014, 2015), to unfix binaries (Lee-Loy 2010: 24), and to challenge the idea of a post-racial Latin America (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016; Da Costa 2016).

These novels will be shown to challenge fixed conceptions of race, gender and national identity, hinting towards alternative views on alterity, the state of being

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\(^{1}\) A similar version of my analysis of *Verde Shanghai* here will be published as ‘Mexico City’s “Chinos” and “Barrio Chino”: Strangerness and Community in Cristina Rivera Garza’s *Verde Shanghai* (2011)’ in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* (2017).
different or other, and community. Through the Chinatown and Chinese people, the novels both disclose and condemn racism in Latin America. On another level, these novels will also be shown to shed light on the economic and political role of China in Latin America today, reflecting on the structures which have intensified economic, political, and, to a lesser extent, cultural exchange between regions. The novels thus depict the changing demographic landscapes of Latin American cities, influenced by Chinese engagement in the region and informed by racism. Thus, the novels will be shown to expose and critique binarial constructions in the definitions of identity and community in Latin American cities. *Un chino* explores the role and impact of the different communities that coexist in Buenos Aires, whilst *El mármol* questions the notion of community through its depiction of a biased discourse of self-identity. Finally, *Verde Shanghai* challenges any notion of difference between self and other.

I argue that the three novels disclose the nuances of the word ‘chino’, linked to the marketisation of the Chinatowns in Buenos Aires and Mexico, and the ubiquity of Chinese supermarkets in Buenos Aires, ‘at a moment when cultural difference has become a valuable consumer item’, borrowing Huggan’s words (2001: 243). In this sense, the novels display the idea of China as fetishised ‘stranger’ in Latin America, simultaneously disavowing the racism that informs the literary and cultural discourses of Latin American identity in the region.

*Un chino* was written by the writer, academic, translator and journalist, Ariel Magnus (1975– ), and it won the prize *La Otra Orilla* on its release in 2007 (Hoyos 2013: 94). Building on Chisu Teresa Ko’s and Héctor Hoyos’ analyses, the novel can be linked to the dynamics of globalisation (Hoyos 2013: 84), and read as part of Argentina’s post-2001 ‘multicultural turn’, that increased the visibility of and granted unprecedented protagonism to racial others in Argentine culture and public
life, particularly those who were previously marginalised by discourses of the nation’s whiteness (Ko 2015: 1–3, 2016b: 201). Drawing on the ostensibly essentialist representations of the Chinese available in the novel, the text will be shown to expose the conflicting nature of such representations based on ‘the lay belief that social categories possess underlying attributes that are immutable and are indicative of the characteristic of group members’ (Chao and Kung 2015: 91). Through diverse epigraphs, the novel reveals the ideology of an implied author who is aware and critical of the essentialist discourses on China that the main male narrator espouses. In other words, the text challenges the existence of any ‘underlying attribute’ in its understandings of the subject, alterity and community.

*El mármol*, signed off in 2009, belongs to what has been described by Sandra Contreras as the second period of Aira’s writing, characterised by periodical publications; a continuing writing process that does not stop to make corrections until the text is complete; and surprising and unexpected endings (2002). By focusing on the dialogical aspects of the novel, as studied by Mikhail Bakhtin, where double-voicedness ‘serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions’ (1981: 324), an implied author de-authorises the narrator, exposing him as a stereotype of middle-class Argentina. The novel thus effectively ironises anti-Chinese racism, while engaging with wider critiques of a multicultural Argentina.

The last novel studied is *Verde Shanghai*, by Cristina Rivera Garza (1964–). Through its main character, *Verde Shanghai* will be seen to evade boundaries, emphasising ambiguity instead and operating in a pluralistic mode. Through the female protagonist(s), the novel rejects the Chinatown as a place of the ‘exotic’, and regards it as a space that allows for exposing the performativity of gendered and
racialised bodies. Bringing together Nancy’s ‘being singular plural’ with Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of ‘borderland’ (2007: 19–20), the novel can be read as a critique of constructions of gender and race in Mexico.

In relation to the disavowal of essentialist understandings of identity, Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’, described as ‘the oppositional system of postcolonial resistance and the profit-driven system of the transnational culture industries and global trade’ (2001: 263), further reveals how the idea of ‘strangerness’ is deployed in these novels to challenge constructions of alterity. Huggan’s anglophone bias, as well as his lack of attention to gender and sexual difference, has been noted by Ana Margarida Martins (2012: 1–62). Furthermore, Huggan’s postcolonial exotic is limited with regards to Latin America, as he signals that the ‘development of a global alterity industry in which the commodified signs of cultural otherness become a currency to be negotiated and traded by metropolitan interest groups’ (2001: 259, my italics). Acknowledging Huggan’s limitations, these three novels can all be seen in different ways to act through what he terms ‘strategic exoticism’, ‘working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manag[ing] to subvert those codes […], or succeed[ing] in redeploying them for the purpose of uncovering differential relations of power’ (2001: 32).

Indeed, as Selma Siew Li Bidlingmaier observes, Chinatowns are ‘often imagined to be spaces where time is suspended, conserving cultural authenticity, traditions, and all cultural artifacts’ (2011: 275). This conceptualisation allows for a loose deployment of the term, where Chinatowns can be defined around a geographical and economic area, as well as defined according to a certain imaginary about China (Luk 2008: 8, 80–81). Particularly in the Chinatowns of Latin America, it is possible to find people from Taiwan and from the People’s Republic of China.
(PRC), as well as people from different generations of migrants (Denardi 2015, 2016; Grimson and others 2016). Furthermore, it is also possible to find ‘Chinese’ products from other Asian countries that are taken to be ‘Chinese’, such as the figurine maneki-neko, which is originally Japanese. Overall, as shall be explored in this chapter, there is an assumption that objects, food and people are ‘Chinese’ in the Chinatown. This notion allows us to see how Chinatowns can be perceived, in words of Ruth Mayer, as ‘sites of mystery and sites of fascination’ (2011a: 1, 2011b: 118), their histories intrinsically linked to Chinese communities.

By suggesting the constructedness of ‘China’ and the Chinatown as ‘exotic’, the novels here engage with what Huggan terms the ‘postcolonial imperative to demystify “foreign” cultures and, ultimately, to show the constructed nature of discourses about culture itself’ (2001: 19), thus decentring assumptions regarding a metropolitan centre. While in Verde Shanghai this demystification is revealed by the fact that it is impossible for the main character to identify with any race, gender or culture, in Un chino and El mármol it is made available through the text’s double-voicedness. As developed by Bakhtin, and as seen in the previous chapter, double-voicedness in the novel reveals the utterance to be ‘contradiction-ridden, [a] tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language’ (1981: 272), a result of the fact that every utterance serves as a point where centrifugal and centripetal forces are brought to bear. Double-voicedness means that there are two voices dialogically interrelated in each utterance, allowing for heteroglossia, which serves ‘to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way’ (Bakhtin 1981: 324). Dialogism denies the availability of transcendental unity in the novel, challenging official closure, and opening up meaning and signification.
From this Bahktininian perspective, I will argue that Ahmed’s ‘fetishised others’ and Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’ enter into a productive dialogue in this chapter. While these theories have not yet been combined in a Latin American context, and do not account for the specific implications of race in Latin America (Wade 1997: 1–162, 2015: 1292–97; Telles and Steele 2012; Telles and PERLA 2014), they reveal how the ‘China’ that is available in the Chinatown is simultaneously constructed and dismissed as ‘exotic’. In the novels, the exotic nature of ‘China’ is deconstructed, challenging ideas of ‘difference’ and ‘distance’ associated with China in Latin America, destabilising the notions of North/South, of an East and West opposition, or of a West/non-West binary, through explorations of an ‘exotic East’ in a ‘Western’ Latin America. The novels can be seen to simultaneously redeploy their own versions of exoticism in order to critique discourses of national homogeneity and to question structures of domination.

In this sense, the novels also respond to Brett Levinson’s critique of the perpetuation of binaries, as embodied by Orientalism and de-orientalism, which ontologise alterity and cultural difference in Latin America (2013: 21, 33). These novels expose how ‘difference is a praxis, an engagement with alterity, that is also a poiesis, a making’ (Levinson 2013: 33, italics in the original). As Gayatri Spivak states in Can the Subaltern Speak?, what is ‘useful is the sustained and developing work in the mechanics of the constitution of the Other’ (1988: 294, italics in the original). It is useful because it allows us to expose the arbitrariness that those mechanics may contain. In this way, the novels studied here will be shown to challenge essentialism and deconstruct fixed notions of the ‘other’, by exposing the mechanisms at play in the practice and (re)making of difference. In other words, I
will show how the novels deconstruct the ways through which ‘China’ is made to embody a fetishised other.

By reading these novels through Nancy’s ideas on ontology, and in their exposure and decentring of the subject and community (the way they reveal the mechanisms at play in the practice and (re)making of difference), they can be considered as moving away from the terminology of the ‘other’ and thinking instead of being-with as ‘contiguity, contact, and touch’ (Morin 2012: 20). In this way, these novels can be seen to propose new understandings of the subject, race and the notion of community in Argentina and Mexico. Starting with my analyses of Un chino and El mármol, this chapter will now continue to explore how the practice and (re)making of these discourses on nation and race are both exposed and disavowed in these novels.

As Ko and Ignacio Aguiló note, debates about nationhood and race in Argentina need to consider the impact of the 2001 crisis as a key event that led to the interrogation of dominant discourses on ‘Argentineness and whiteness’ (Aguiló 2014: 191; Ko 2015). Indeed, Aguiló, Peter Wade and others have shown how narratives of whiteness have been central to the production of dominant discourses on the Argentine nation, rooted in the large-scale immigration from Europe and the extinction of most indigenous and Afro-Argentine populations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Aguiló 2014: 178; Wade 2008: 182; Alberto and Elena 2016). Aguiló argues that the 2001 crisis led to heightened racism, not only through anti-immigration rhetoric, ‘as the racialisation of immigrants allowed the identification of an internal threat – which is also external – on which to blame social malaise’ (2014: 180), but also through the idea of migrant communities as figures of
non-Western exoticism, leading to a growth in interest in ethnic cultural products and images of diversity (2014: 184).

Since the crisis, institutional and non-institutional efforts also contributed to the notion of diversity and a multicultural state (Ko 2014: 2532). Ko states that the economic crisis of 2001 profoundly affected how the Argentines see themselves, while the populist governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández replaced an ‘Argentine exceptionalism’ with a ‘Latin Americanist’ position, and the global pursuit of diversity created a new space for formerly marginalised peoples (2014: 2530). Also following Ahmed, she argues that the challenge to Argentina’s myth of whiteness embodies what Ahmed describes as a shift from the notion of ‘stranger danger’ to ‘welcoming the stranger’ typical in contemporary multiculturalism (Ko 2015: 3). That is, the dominant subject retains its normativity and requires the stranger to inhabit degrees of subalternity. Ko also observes how the multicultural project in Argentina has mostly excluded the Chinese (2016a: 277). Not only were they excluded from the 2010 Bicentennial National Census, but there is a circular omission and minimization of Asian population that rests on the presumption of their insignificance to the demographic of the country (Loveman 2014: 200; Ko 2016a: 277). As Ko explains, the estimates of the Asian population in Argentina are usually outdated and limited in scope as they can, for example, overlook those who do not participate actively in ethnic associations, or they ignore people of mixed descent and Argentine nationals (2016a: 272). Within this context, Ko sees the multicultural novels in Argentina as addressing the question of who the Argentine nation includes, and also as uncovering the violent process of Argentina’s whitening, a process also recognised by Aguiló (Aguiló 2014: 185; Ko 2015: 3). As the following section will show, both Un chino and El mármol engage in this debate.
Previous analyses of *Un chino en bicicleta* have explored how the novel engages with the migrant landscape of Buenos Aires within a context of multiculturalism and globalisation. *Un chino* was published in Spain and won the prize *La Otra Orilla*; the jury was formed, together with the Spanish writer Nuria Amat, by César Aira and the Colombian writer Santiago Gamboa, the latter two having also written novels with themes linked to China (Hoyos 2013: 94). Hoyos has shown how *Un chino en bicicleta* makes use of humour and explores culture shock, making use of myths and stereotypes regarding China and the Chinese (2013: 94). Hoyos sees the novel as an exploration of the intersection between the personal and the geopolitical, where Magnus explores the community of migrants in the city and cultural assimilation, and where his use of humour limits his denouncing or cultural critique (2013: 97). Hoyos sees Magnus reinventing cosmopolitanism from the perspective of common people who experience globalisation and in which the use of humour reveals the social anxieties that globalisation brings with it, while simultaneously decentering or widening traditional literary spaces (Hoyos 2013: 98, 102). Exploring the increased visibility of Asians in Argentina aligned with Latin America’s multicultural turn and proliferation of visibility of ethnic minorities, Ko sees *Un chino en bicicleta* contesting traditional notions of whiteness in Argentina (2015: 2). However, according to Ko, the novel does not entirely escape stereotyped visions of Asians (2016b: 278–79) and, regardless of is appreciation of diversity, the novel does not grant racial or cultural citizenship to Asian-Argentines (2015: 3), as the novel reconstructs the very multicultural discourse the limitations of which it reveals (2015: 11). Building on the work of Hoyos and Ko, I also see the novel as commenting on the presence of the Chinese in Buenos Aires; however, as I will now explore, I also see a process of denunciation of essentialism and racism to be
available in the novel, and indeed, the granting of racial and cultural citizenship to the Chinese and Chinese-Argentines.

*Un chino* opens with the main protagonist and narrator, Ramiro Valestra, being kidnapped from the Courts of Justice in Buenos Aires, establishing a corrupt and frail justice system not only through the failure of the security system itself, but also by Valestra’s own reflections. Through his use of slang and expressions that reveal his disillusionment with life in general, the reader learns that Valestra is a disheartened young man, who had been called to a trial as a witness, and who seems paradoxically quite relaxed about being kidnapped. Mainly through Valestra’s first person testimony, the reader learns about the way in which he is taken to the *barrio chino* in the Belgrano neighbourhood by Li, nicknamed ‘Fosforito’, his abductor, who stands accused of igniting a series of fires in the city. Although Li has brought Valestra there by force, he asks Valestra to help him find the real culprit of the fires. The reader later learns that Valestra has been laid off from his job, his father has been diagnosed with cancer, and his girlfriend has left him for his best friend. Valestra decides to stay in the *barrio chino*, where he makes friends, falls in love, and ultimately remains.

In the *barrio chino*, Valestra is shown around traditional ‘oriental’ places such as Chinese restaurants, a practitioner of Chinese medicine and a temple, revealing an ‘unknown’ world right on his doorstep. Even though he experiences and becomes part of this ‘other world’, symbolised by his falling in love with a ‘local’, he continues to think of himself as part of a ‘Western’ Argentine community. Even when Valestra suggests that his perception of the Chinese is changing, through expressions such as ‘la decoración, un bochinche de rojo y dorado, me pareció de lo más sobria’ (2007: 46), he continues to define himself in contrast to the Chinese. For
example, he contrasts his reaction, that of a ‘clásico argentino histérico’ (2007: 185), with a stereotypical Chinese one, ‘que prefieren pensar que llueve para no ver que lo están meando, ellos lo llaman budismo zen’ (2007: 185), a play on a well-known graffito popularised by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, which states ‘nos mean y la prensa dice que llueve’. Continuously using inappropriate expressions that he seems to find amusing and perhaps ironic, including the latter, Valestra remains resolutely within the dichotomies of same/other and East/West, while also confusing Chinese and Japanese traditions.

Valestra works through the familiarity of the ‘stranger’, ignoring the histories that inform the relationship that led him to perceive them as ‘strangers’ in the first place. However, a critique of this ‘ontology of strangers’ is simultaneously disclosed through epigraphs which reveal the ideology of an implied author. The epigraphs are selected from diverse sources, including theorists, philosophers, writers, films, and popular culture, and they are curated by the knowledgeable implied author, who chooses European, Chinese, Latin American, Argentine and indigenous sources, such as Mozi, Mao Zedong, Marco Polo, the Mesoamerican Popol Vuh, Les Luthiers and Jorge Luis Borges. The novel makes use of them to critique Valestra’s dismissal of the histories of racism and power imbalance and the essentialism that informs the construction of the discourses embodied by the protagonist.

In this sense, the novel engages with Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’, as Valestra’s presentation of the cultural other is ‘effectively repoliticised’ (2001: ix-x, italics in the original) in the text by Magnus, in order to critique discourses on strangers that have been informed by differential relations of power within contexts of globalisation and multiculturality. Valestra suggests a worldview that commits itself to giving a voice to the minorities and the injustice of their living conditions;
however, through highly humorous discourses, the novel simultaneously reveals him to be ignorant of the ‘real’ conditions of those subjects and their forms of sociality (Pereyra 2010: 183). As Ko shows, although Valestra ‘believes that he understands the “authentic” Chinatown and is eager to share his insight with other Argentines, whom he now considers ignorant and culturally insensitive’ (2015: 8) he ‘continue[s] to construct the chinos at […] [his] own whim’ (2015: 11, italics in the original) with his narration ‘persistently reducing the other to an essentialised and orientalised figure’ (2015: 5).

Ko questions the ‘deeply flawed places’ where Valestra finds ‘the truth’ (2015: 7), describing the Chinatown as the emblematic site of an exoticised other. There, Valestra learns that all Chinese are not the same and that the first ‘Chinese’ actor in Argentina, Lito Ming, is actually of Japanese descent (2007: 53). From this perspective, ‘China’ emerges as a metonym of the exotic ‘other’. Indeed, Lito Ming also enhances the idea of the barrio chino as a site of exoticism, as his current job is eating by the window of a Chinese restaurant in order to confer authenticity to the place, as noted by Ko (2015: 7). In this sense, Lito Ming embodies the description that Mónica Lacarrieu and Andrea Pappier give of the Chinatown: a place for intercultural consumption and the staging of difference (Lacarrieu 2002; Pappier 2011). The novel again conjures Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’, where ‘minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged [for economic reasons], to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perception of an exotic cultural other’ (2001: 95). Furthermore, the abbreviation ‘Lito’ can be a Latin American Spanish nickname, although it also encompasses the possibility of being a Chinese name.
Chinese immigration and the *barrio chino* are fairly recent phenomena in Argentina. An initial current of migration occurred towards the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries due to struggles in China, while the presence of Chinese in the Belgrano neighbourhood and the establishment of the *barrio chino* began in the 1980s with (Taiwanese) Chinese immigrants (Bogado Bordazar 2002; Sassone and Mera 2006: 6; Trejos and Chiang 2012: 117, 118; Amancay Torres 2015). As Luciana Denardi argues, to be ‘Chinese’ in Buenos Aires has various meanings: a strict meaning regarding people from the PRC and a wider meaning, which includes Taiwanese communities (2015: 89). The existing differences between the Chinese groups are, however, invisible in the *barrio chino* and in cultural events across the city (Denardi 2015: 98).

The *barrio chino* of Buenos Aires contains temples, restaurants and shops that sell articles from China, as well as from other Asian and Latin American countries. It was founded as a *barrio chino* in 2005 for ‘touristic and promotional purposes’ (‘Barrio Chino Belgrano Buenos Aires Argentina’ [n.d.], ‘Barrio Chino en Belgrano’ [n.d.]), and it appears regularly in the press and tourist guides to Buenos Aires (González Viaña 2014: 403). It is described as one of the city’s attractions, and is also promoted by the city’s local government (González Viaña 2014: 17, 518).² The website’s own description of ‘typical restaurants’ and ‘typical products’ evokes an essentialist ‘orient’. It has also been described as a place to find ‘exotic’ products and ‘extremely rare treats’ (Ocvirk [n.d.]). These websites and texts contribute to the city’s imaginary of the Chinatown, providing a different level of discourse regarding the understanding of ‘chino’ available in Buenos Aires.

² A new *barrio chino* was inaugurated in 2015 in Tigre (Greater Buenos Aires) (Amancay Torres 2015: 19–21)
In her study on multiculturalism in Buenos Aires, in which she examines the celebration of the Chinese New Year in the *barrio chino* and its sponsorship by the government of the city, Lacarrieu terms this ‘light multiculturalism’, according to which the minority group conforms to a schematic image of their country of origin which coincides with one promoted for tourism (2002). The Chinatown is thus precisely what Huggan describes as a staging through which the arguably ‘white stereotypical perception of an exotic cultural other’ (2001: 95) can be maintained, and consumed. Indeed, the visibility of race increased after the economic crisis, and one of its effects was the growing interest of certain sectors of Buenos Aires’s middle class in ‘ethnic cultural products and images of diversity’ (Aguiló 2014: 184).

In this context of multiculturalism, the shifting uses of the word ‘chino’ in Latin America, and Chinatown in a worldwide setting, require some further clarification here in order to stabilize their tendency to shift meaning between academic studies and, indeed, across branches of literary studies.

As discussed in the introduction, in Latin America the words ‘oriental’ and ‘chino’ are often wandering signifiers that mean ‘Far East Asian’. Specifically for the case of Argentina, Ko argues that Argentines consider Asians’ differences to be both ‘insurmountable and incomprehensible’, evidenced through the use of ‘oriental’ in everyday language and the interchangeability of ‘chino’, ‘japonés’ and ‘coreano’ (2015: 2). The word ‘chino’ is effectively used in this interchangeable way and, as Ko argues, sometimes followed by the insult ‘de mierda’ (2014: 2538). Ko states that in Argentina the word ‘chino’ is a permeable, derogatory term for Asians, and that the category ‘chino’ creates a pejorative meaning, which can then produce a semantically charged socio-racial boundary, structuring hierarchies of difference in Argentina (2014: 2533, 2538). According to Ko, the permeability of the term ‘chino’,
ascribed by the dominant subject, would always be on the threshold of divergent meanings informed by a notion of the Chinese immigrant as ‘entirely undesirable’, revealing the complex mechanisms of multiculturality (2014: 2543). From this perspective then, ‘chino’ might also not signify a subject entirely undesirable. In other words, the undesirability of the Chinese and the marketisation of cultural difference embody the paradox of the postcolonial exotic. This, in turn, informs the imaginaries and physical aspects of the Chinatown as represented in *Un chino*.

Hoyos argues that the novel’s ‘imprecise’ recreation of the ‘Orient’ is linked to the image of China held by a ‘certain Latin American middle class’ (2013: 99). He argues that the novel offers an inflection point in the process of recognition of China: instead of ‘luxurious and depersonalised *chinoiserie*’ (Hoyos 2013: 99, italics in the original), it makes available a China that manifests itself through cheap products. This changing image of China goes hand in hand with the depiction of Valestra’s growing familiarity with the *barrio chino* (Hoyos 2013: 99), an image informed by the increased economic and cultural engagement between the PRC and Latin America, as indicated by Robert Evan Ellis (2014: 3–12). As the novel shows, the recognition of China continues to be, at least in Argentina, informed by xenophobic discourses. Indeed, Valestra embodies traditional depictions of the ‘Argentine’ attitude towards the Chinese in Buenos Aires, as described by Florencia Alam, where the ignorance of Spanish is perceived to be representative of the Chinese refusal to integrate, hence becoming linked to a ‘justified’ exclusion, to conspiracy, threat and fears of invasion (2008).

For example, when visiting his former house (after some time in the *barrio chino* he gains sufficient independence to move around freely) Valestra is not
recognised by his alcoholic mother, who says to him ‘[…] pasa que los chinos de al lado no me dejan vivir, los chinos se llevaron a mi hijo, los vechinos [sic] de mierda, ellos tienen la culpa de todo…’ (2007: 193). After this scene, which displays the racism experienced by the Chinese community, he leaves his house and feels closer to the Chinese family who have just moved to his neighbourhood and who he greets with a ‘hello’ in Chinese (2007: 194). His encounter with the Chinese family also recalls the fact that not all the Chinese are concentrated spatially within the barrio chino, hence suggesting a new spatial configuration of immigrants in Buenos Aires. Valestra and his mother are presented in contrast: her intoxicated rant embodies white Argentina’s racism and xenophobia towards the Chinese, and she no longer recognises Valestra, who greets their Chinese neighbours in a friendly manner. On one level, Valestra represents the multicultural ‘new Argentina’ in contrast to his mother, who embodies a normative subject who is nationalistic, despicable and racist. However, Valestra continues in other ways to construct the Chinese in essentialist terms. The novel thus shows how, despite the difference of opinions between Valestra and his mother, he continues to essentialise in less obvious ways.

From this perspective, the novel reveals the essentialism within and beyond ideas of mestizaje. While Valestra can be considered mestizo, his biased views reveal how the notion of mixture can continue to essentialise difference. Indeed, and as we have seen in the Introduction, although mestizaje is constructed upon notions of mixture, structures of difference remain in place. Unable to succeed in neoliberal Buenos Aires, Valestra feels ironically ‘at home’ in a place he arguably misinterprets. ‘Aware’ of the Chinese presence in Buenos Aires, in the barrio chino and beyond, he speculates about Chinese domination of the world, only to conclude that the situation would not change much; ‘menos hamburguesa y más chao fan, menos MTV y más
karaoke’ (2007: 95), the latter a Japanese word. Valestra seemingly celebrates a multicultural Buenos Aires contrary to the ‘ethnic and racial fears of the stereotypically white Porteño discourse’ (Aguiló 2014: 183). In his attempt to clarify the misconstructions around the Chinese in Argentina, Valestra equates Latin American and Asian cultures (2007: 146), and thus essentializes both. In this way, while he seems to undermine a Eurocentric structure of power, he does not stop thinking of himself as Argentine, and continues to construct the Chinese as what Ahmed would term ‘fetishised strangers’. By referring to China through ‘chao fan’, a common dish in Chinese American and Latin American Chinese cuisine, and ‘karaoke’, which is also very popular in Japanese and Korean communities, he seemingly ignores the histories through which China has come to be associated with those terms. He thus exposes the complex and fragmented identity of an Argentine middle class man whose own experiences are inflected by ignorance and cultural incompetence.

Through the barrio chino, Valestra displays the ways in which racial meanings are produced, reiterated and normalised. The novel highlights the sense in which Argentine official discourses and media help to perpetuate racial hierarchies and essentialist understandings of culture and race. This racial hierarchy which hints towards power imbalance emerges through Valestra’s comments about the news coverage of Crónica TV, or his ironic remark on medical doctors who declare Li insane: ‘no todo está perdido para el mundo occidental mientras dos personas se puedan poner de acuerdo para declarar insana a una tercera’ (2007: 22). And within this context of perpetuating essentialist understandings of culture and race, he is economically displaced: unable to find a job and economic success, he is happy to abandon his previous life and stay in the barrio chino. Even so, although Valestra is
critical of the injustices of the neoliberal dynamics of Argentina, he continues to describe the Chinese in asymmetric and discriminatory terms. Valestra’s discourse emerges, for example, when he refers to Chinese women with euphemistic invented names as ‘Flor de Loto’ and ‘Jazmín de Jade’ (2007: 37), a mocking form of mimicry that we have also seen in *La mujer en la muralla*, that embodies discourses of essentialist otherness.

Ko argues that Valestra ‘certainly want[s] to include Asians in Argentina, but by confirming […] [its] version of hyperorientalized Asians, the novel […] fail[s] to realize […] [its] best intentions’ (2015: 12, my italics). However, it is arguably Valestra who ‘fails’, while an implied narrator critiques his ideology through the epigraphs included in most of the chapters, a distinctive feature of the novel. Valestra’s limited views are pointed out to the reader by an implied author who is revealed through the epigraphs. It is precisely through the inclusion of epigraphs that I argue that a new notion of alterity and community emerges.

Hoyos describes the epigraphs as one of the most original characteristics of the novel, as they invite speculative considerations as well as a less abstract approximation of the story, due to the reader’s identification with the protagonist, a middle class Latin American (2013: 96). He claims that they allow the readers to situate themselves in Valestra’s shoes, while at the same time positioning that experience in the wider context of relations between East and West (Hoyos 2013: 96). For Hoyos, the epigraphs try to reconfigure the relation between readers and that which is Chinese, by showing truth in foolishness, prejudice in children’s songs, or a long tradition of thoughtless assumptions about the East (2013: 96).
It is precisely these epigraphs that create a second narrative beyond the main story, which makes available the ideology of the otherwise silent implied author. These epigraphs establish a narrative distance between the implied author and the narrator, providing a context through which different ideologies can be regarded as being in conflict with each other. In this distance, a Bakhtinian double-voicedness emerges through the epigraphs, which reframe Valestra and his utterances alongside longer and broader histories and essentialist discourses of asymmetry and discrimination. By this exposure, the implied author can be regarded as opposing Valestra’s worldview, while simultaneously taking an ironic stance towards the common usage of Chinese proverbs as stereotypical ‘Chinese wisdom’.

The epigraphs thus reveal new dimensions to the content of each chapter they introduce, as the following examples show. The novel’s first epigraph is a quote by Victor Segalen, in which he states:

Sí, este es el principio del viaje.
O sea, el principio de lo real (2007: 9).

Read in relation to Segalen’s ‘Essay on the Exoticism’, where he proposes that exoticism is ‘nothing other than the notion of difference, the perception of Diversity, the knowledge that something is other than one’s self; and Exoticism’s power is nothing other than the ability to conceive otherwise’ (2002: 19), the novel emphasises the ‘ability to conceive otherwise’ which, for Valestra, seems to be impossible. On one level then, the implied author can be seen to hint at Valestra’s trip to an ‘exotic China’ situated in the barrio chino, while simultaneously revealing this ‘China’ to be a constructed other. Valestra’s unreliable narration contrasts with the recognition of what is ‘real’, emphasising the constructedness of discourses.
Another example is given in the chapter that marks the beginning of Valestra’s relation with Yintai, his Sino-Cuban girlfriend, and which is preceded by an epigraph quoting from a song from the television show Topo Gigio:

En un bosque de la China
La chinita se perdió
Y como yo andaba perdido

Popular in Latin America since the 1960s, many generations have sung this song about a meeting between a lost Chinese woman who encounters a lost (most probably) man in the woods. However, the song’s racialised and gendered naming of the Chinese woman, since the diminutive ‘chinita’ implies a degree of subordination which is not usually accredited as racist, has not been commented upon. Furthermore, the popular Mexican singer Thalía released a new version of the song in 2014, with a stereotyping video to accompany it (2014). In this context given by the epigraph, the implied author draws on the ongoing history of the normalisation of racial constructions in Latin America, which does not consider the use of the term ‘chinita’ or ‘chinito’ as a racist way of referring to Chinese people. Even if Valestra does not use the term to refer to Yintai, or Chinese people, he continues to think of her as a ‘fetishised other’. The epigraphs, in relation to the text that follows, can be seen to demand an awareness of essentialism, histories of power imbalance and racialised constructions, which in turn can reveal the construction of fetishised strangers.

Through the epigraphs and double-voicedness, the novel includes reflections on other migrant communities in Buenos Aires, and the conflicts between them. For example, not only is Valestra’s ex-girlfriend Jewish, but the arsonists behind the fires are revealed to be from the Jewish community, according to what Li tells Valestra. They allegedly intend to punish the Chinese for taking over certain areas of
the city they had previously dominated. Other examples appear through the mentioning of Brazilians, Galicians, and Bolivians in the city. Valestra’s biased and inappropriate appraisals of other cultures contrast markedly with the actual conflicts between migrant communities revealed in the novel:

Mi pálpito es que los porteños en general no somos hacer muchas diferencias entre las nacionalidades, bien lejos están los chinos y un poco más acá los turcos, después vienen en el sur los tanos y en el norte los piratas, de los Pirineos para acá sólo hay Gallegos y del Amazonas para abajo son todos brazucas o bolitas, más de uno ni se debe haber dado cuenta de que en el Once los coreanos ya casi desplazaron a los judíos, mientras sigan vendiendo barato que más da (2007: 148).

In the above quotation, Valestra explicitly outlines the city’s landscape through a self-other dichotomy. In his desire to make all migrant communities equal, he not only presents them in racist and derogatory terms, but he also presents them in contrast to his being ‘porteño’ (from the City of Buenos Aires) which, furthermore, elevates the ‘porteños’ in contrast to the rest of Argentina. This contrast between ‘porteños’ and ‘others’ recalls what Tanja Bastia observes in relation to Buenos Aires, where the city and the nation are often in conflict (2014: 2). As she demonstrates, ‘ethnicity continues to be used to demarcate “others,” particularly migrants, with the purpose to delegitimise their claims to space’ (Bastia 2014: 7). As Bastia shows, while the state has at least in principle improved the conditions of migrants, this improvement contrasts with the way the city’s representatives blame migration from neighbouring countries (which is the focus of her study) for the growth of informal settlements.

In this sense, Valestra’s narration brings new dimensions into discussion, as it exposes conflicts beyond that between the state and the city, and beyond migration from neighbouring countries, in its disclosure of struggles at a very local level. The novel thus emphasises the heterogeneity of Buenos Aires, and how these conflicts
are informed by imaginaries and stereotypes linked to those communities. These imaginaries and stereotypes, as well as the conflicts between different communities in the city emerge again in the following extract, a speech made by an Argentine woman regarding the fires supposedly lit by Li, as she explains why there were no witnesses at Li’s trial,

Por miedo a la mafia. Son gente peligrosa. Hoy te incendian el negocio, mañana te incendian a vos. Eso está en el carácter de los chinos. Yo estuve investigando en Internet y es así, el fuego para ellos es como un juego, está en su cultura, es algo que traen de nacimiento. Es como los judíos, que tienen problemas de estómago y se mueren de cáncer. Bueno, a ellos les gusta el fuego y muchos terminan pirómanos (2007: 188–89).

This extract evokes common myths about the Chinese in Argentina as exposed by Julia Reagan in her documentary Argenchino (2009), such as that Chinese supermarkets sell stolen goods or that they are a mafia.³

Moreover, state campaigns risk essentialising race as visible and biological, and the multicultural discourse of the nation continues to preserve the ‘we’ by requiring ‘strangers’ to fit in modes of difference, as Ko notes (2015: 3). Yet Un chino goes beyond this discourse, and explores not only the coexistence of communities in the city, but also the relationships within those communities. For example, when Li explains to Valestra that the Jewish communities are responsible for the fires, Li refers not only to the conflicts between those communities, but also to how the Jewish community is not aware of the differences between Chinese and Korean communities, and to how the Chinese are not aware of the differences among Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews (2007: 205). In this way, the novel reflects on the constructedness of ‘communities’, which makes the conflicts within them invisible.

³ Practices should not be classified according to a nationality and doing so is discriminatory, as María José Lubertino from the Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo (INADI) states (Reagan 2009).
As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues in the case of Bolivia, multiculturalism has been the concealing mechanism par excellence of new forms of colonisation (2012: 99). The novel thus discloses how discourses of multiculturalism may indeed be hegemonic and dismissive of internal differences and distinct identities.

In this way, through indirect dialogue between the narrator and the implied author, and through the narrator’s and character’s own voices, the novel opens the discussion up regarding the construction and repetition of the stereotype itself. As we saw in the introduction, for Homi Bhabha the stereotype is an ideological operation that constructs people or groups as ‘the other’. Building on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis and semiotics, as well as the ambivalent fetish figure, and though failing to recognise the ‘specific role played by gendered power relations in historically male-protagonized negotiations of cultural and political authority’ as Hilary Owen aptly puts it (2007: 29), Bhabha shows how the stereotype proclaim fixity, while the repetition of the stereotype questions that same fixity (1994: 66). Similar to what Bhabha maintains regarding the stereotype, the novel both recognises and disavows racial and cultural differences. Thus, the novel can be regarded as an ironic and paradoxical rewriting of discourses of otherness. In this sense, the absence of Asians that Ko objects to might be exactly what the implied author denounces. Magnus works throughout this paradox, engaging not only with racial and cultural differences, but also with the literary market.

Magnus wrote this novel after relinquishing his intention to write a realist account of the Chinese community in Buenos Aires; an idea that was rejected by his publishers (Castro 2008). Magnus thus seems to strategically exoticise the ‘Chinatown’ as a way of mocking the lack of interest from Buenos Aires publishing
houses. Regarding his choice, Magnus states that he decided to write on the subject because,

China fue siempre importante. Hasta me atrevería a decir que es el país más importante del mundo. Más que un chino o la China, el protagonista es nuestra (mi) visión de los chinos y la China. Desde ahí está narrada la novela, que además ocurre en el barrio chino de Buenos Aires, que me atrevería a decir que es el menos importante del mundo (‘Premian la novela de un argentino’ 2007).

Magnus thus exposes the relative unimportance of the barrio chino within a global imaginary, while at the same time suggesting that he frames the novel this way for his own reasons. Through Valestra’s narration, China is shown to be perceived as the unknown, a notion reinforced by this book, which exposes how ‘different’ China is perceived to be even while experienced as spatially close. In his appraisal of the novel, for example, Michel Emiliano Nieva states that the protagonist does not have to travel far to find the unknown; he explicitly associates Chinatown with the unknown, yet one that is only blocks away from ‘home’ (2009).

While Magnus explains the relative importance of China and of the Buenos Aires barrio chino, he also seems to maintain notions of centre and periphery. Moreover, the above quotation presents a new, if personal, ‘authorial voice’ on the Chinese and China in Buenos Aires.

However, the fact that Magnus explains that he wrote the novel only after he had tried to write a realist account casts a different light on his statement. Just as Huggan argues for Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, Magnus, through Valestra, can be seen to employ ‘strategic exoticism’, ‘designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates’ (2001: 77). While Roy is an Indian author and Valestra is a ‘white’ narrator, the novel reveals how ‘myths’ are constructed through and beyond white and non-white
exoticisms. The novel builds on the ‘myth’, only to ultimately subvert it. Magnus hence deposits his complete potential imaginary about ‘China’ into the novel, playing with what is ‘expected’ of the Chinese, feeding into an imaginary of ‘China’ in Argentina.

This exposure of imaginaries is emphasised through an unexpected intertextual reference. Valestra is introduced to a Chinese professor, who tells him he is studying the ‘Grupo Buenos Aires de Shangai’, offering an ironic reworking of the ‘Shangai group’ to which, as seen in the previous chapter, Aira and Alberto Laiseca were both linked. The novel turns the global map upside down, a shift that Francine Maisello has explored in Argentine literature, displacing location and knowledge, questioning not only the paradigms and preconceptions of China available in Argentina, but also those of Argentina available to the Chinese (2001: 7). The character then explains the work of this literary group, and amusingly offers altered descriptions of *Una novela china* and *La mujer en la Muralla*. This quote exemplifies the humour that is present throughout the novel, while the implied author plays with and ironically mocks the Argentine tradition of *gaucho* literature,

> [...] después estaba *Una novela argentina* de Po-Fu-Chan, que es la historia de un gaucho gay que crió a un indíeito para hacerlo su esclavo sexual pero cuando el chico tiene edad de servirlo Pu-Toh (así se llama el gaucho) se da cuenta de que lo que en realidad le gustan son las vacas; y por último estaba *La mujer en la toldería* de Lai Ts Chiá, una historia de Argentina en clave gauchesco-pornográfica con muchos pasajes de mal gusto (por ejemplo aquel en que el autor cita uno de sus libros anteriores) pero con una frase memorable: “Cuan grande es el parecido entre un Maestro de verdad y un loco. La única diferencia consiste en que uno es un loco y el otro un Maestro” (2007: 174–75).

As we see here, the narrator makes up names, toying with the masculinity of the *gaucho*, as the name ‘Pu-toh’ brings to mind a male prostitute and can also be used derogatively to refer to a gay man. The novel thus takes *Una novela china* and
subverts the story on every level, by changing genders, events and its title. Regarding
*La mujer en la Muralla*, it also brings the text to Latin America through the figure of
the *toldería* (camp of indigenous awnings or huts), with the ‘Chinese’ name of the
author recalling ‘Laiseca’.

The ‘Shangai’ group, as seen in the previous chapter, may be regarded as a
response to Borges’s essay *El escritor argentino y la tradición* (1976), first presented
at a conference in 1951 and published in 1953, which argued for freedom for the
Argentinean author from using ‘local colour’ in literary expression. If in the previous
chapter the resort to the ‘Orient’ was seen to parody the choice of what could still be
termed ‘foreign local colour’, here Magnus subverts the very concept of ‘local colour’
as a whole by satirically ironizing the Argentine literary tradition and recalling the
misunderstandings of cultural translation. Through the figure of the ‘gaucho’, and its
connotations of ‘Argentineness’, the novel calls into question who is actually
Argentine, what is ‘Argentineness’ and what is ‘local colour’ or ‘local essence’ or in
other words, nationalist stereotypes.

And the novel finds yet another way of altering the map: the epigraph of that
chapter is a quote from the poem *El Go*, by Borges himself:

*y agradezco a mis númenes
esta revelación de un laberinto
que nunca será mío* (2007: 172).

Here, the implied author chooses a poem whose title is the Japanese name of a game
of Chinese origin: Weíqí. The implied author not only refers to the Japanese name
through which the Chinese game is known in Latin America, but the poem itself
speaks of a labyrinth whose path will never be taken, a glimpse of a reality that will

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never be understood. The epigraph thus interrogates both the ‘Shangai group of Buenos Aires’ and the counterfactual, invented possibility of a ‘Buenos Aires group of Shanghai’, and the partiality and limitations that inform each group’s knowledge.

By swapping names, locations, and topics, the professor echoes the cultural misappropriations and misunderstandings that Valestra himself displays. The novel thus allows the reader to view the *barrio chino* as displacing notions of cultural specificity without converting the ‘we’ into a significant and exclusive identity, but rather opening up the meanings and understandings of community, thus evoking Nancy’s being-with. Following Nancy, the novel can be seen to expose how, within the community as a whole, difference, as diversity, ‘is nothing *itself*’ (2000: 151, italics in the original). As Nancy explains, cultures do not mix, but rather ‘encounter each other, mingle, modify each other, reconfigure each other’ (2000: 151). Nancy describes this as *mêlée*, as ‘an action rather than a substance’ (2000: 150); rather than emphasizing an idea of mixture, he favours *mêlée* as a non-definable unity in which each singularity is a *mêlée* of traits. There is thus no essential community and no essentialism available in the Nancean notion of community; in being-with, what is held in common simultaneously differentiates and distinguishes between us (2000: 155). Valestra embodies the discourse of a community that believes in a shared essence, while the novel exposes how there is no shared essence, emphasising the conflict that encounters contain and the relational aspect of Valestra’s being-there.

In this way, Nancy’s notion of the ‘inoperative community’ as a shared experience of finitude, based on ‘being-with’ (1991: 2), sheds light on the ways through which community operates in *Un chino*. As Ana Luszczynska argues, attempting to locate moments when community flourishes ‘allows a glimpse into the possibilities and the power of being, which subverts an often dominating and always
totalizing will to essentialize’ (2005: 167, 204). Although community resists institution, it still allows us to recognise the moments when the being-with emerges. As Hoyos argues, Valestra’s old ‘self’ disappears through his life in the *barrio chino*, immersed in a Chinese life symbolised by the novel’s conclusion, which is presented in untranslated, simplified Chinese characters, a sentence which is grammatically incorrect, as Hoyos also notes (2013: 97). From this perspective, all that is left of Valestra is a hybrid future, symbolised by the baby expected by his Sino-Cuban girlfriend. Even if Valestra continues to essentialise his girlfriend, the pregnancy itself embodies the possibility of openness, made available through love, recalling Nancy’s discussion of love, as it ‘renders the inoperative community more accessible to us’, as articulated by Joseph Twist (2014: 399).

However, the epigraph of the last chapter, a quote from a song from 1967 popularised by a group of Spanish clowns, which ends with the phrase ‘chinito tú, chinita yo; y nuestro amor así sé la; siempre siempre igual’ (2007: 221), recalls us to the sense that although Valestra thinks he has understood the other culture, he continues to differentiate based on a racial interpretation and to rely on a dichotomy of self-other. This constant differentiation is epitomised in the racist use of ‘l’ rather than ‘r’, mocking ‘Chinese’ pronunciation. Although it suggests a happy ending to the story, an ironic reading of the epigraph shows that Valestra is still unable to grasp plurality. The estranged gaze of the implied author, available through the epigraph, condemns Valestra as the colonising white man, as he continues to think of Yintai as a ‘fetishised stranger’. Magnus thus makes the reader aware of the asymmetrical, gendered power implications contained in ‘strange encounters’.

The novel thus suggests the failure of Valestra’s quest to engage with the ‘Chinese’. Valestra subordinates relationships with the Chinese, as the
stranger to a self/other dichotomy, and continues to ontologise the other as Ahmed shows may occur in the recognition of ‘strangers’ (2000: 6). Valestra is even disappointed when he becomes aware of the unexotic nature of the Chinese people he encounters (2007: 143, 146). In dialogue with Hoyos, the novel can be seen to shed light on the less celebrated aspects of globalisation through its depiction of a biased and prejudiced main character who is never able to totally abandon binarial othering. While exposing the vestiges of a colonial white/Latin American binary, the novel simultaneously points to the incorporation of a new ‘other’, which still allows for the building of new discourses of subordination and conflicts between communities. The novel thus sheds light on the failure of a multicultural society which continues to ontologise self and ‘stranger’.

In his analysis of the novel, Hoyos argues that the text presents an original viewpoint on the relations between East and West (2013: 94). Hoyos stresses the way in which this novel, as well as Una novela china by Aira and Los impostores by Santiago Gamboa, engages with the anxieties of globalisation. He sees these novels’ use of humour as a mechanism that reveals social anxiety; itself the result of losing the economic game of globalisation, as well as a number of other factors. These might include a shift in cultural values, or the unpredictable structural changes that globalisation might bring, such as China challenging a representative, multiparty democracy like Argentina’s as the status quo (Hoyos 2013: 102–3). Hoyos shows the ways in which China passes from mystification to banalisation, at once acknowledging that Latin American fiction is aware that these oriental stereotypes are not the ‘Orient’, but that it has not yet constructed any imaginary with which to replace it (2013: 100, 103).
Ko similarly notes the way in which ‘the ubiquity of Asians in contemporary Argentina has permeated the popular imaginary, without inspiring reformulations of nationhood that would include them’ (2015: 11). Ko includes Un chino within a group of novels in which the ‘hyperbolic orientalism’ and ‘deliberate fictionality’ act as critique of a multiculturalism that continues to grant unequal power to the dominant culture (2015: 1, 3). She argues that the novel reveals ‘some uncertainties as to Asians’ place in the current national narrative that, regardless of its appreciation of diversity, does not grant racial or cultural citizenship to Asian-Argentines’ (2015: 3).

However, the novel arguably engages with the prospect of a new imaginary, only to suggest the impossibility of any stable imaginary of ‘China’. Un chino can be seen to reveal the failure of a multicultural and post-racial community, which is shown to continue to define a national identity through essentialist notions of otherness. From this perspective, the novel can be regarded as critiquing this understanding of community, suggesting a new cosmopolitan identity instead as developed by Berthold Schoene (2011), in line with Nancy’s notion of Being, where the I is necessarily constituted in relation to a plurality (2000: 1–99). As we shall now see, a critique of a post-racial, multicultural Argentina is also identifiable in César Aira’s El mármol, although while in Un chino the emphasis is on the community, in El mármol the focus is on the subject.

Although Aira is one of the most best known Latin American authors at the moment, there is limited critical study of his text El mármol. Furthermore, although a first reading of the novel immediately relates to the situation of the Chinese in Argentina (““El mármol”, una aventura literaria de la mano de César Aira’ 2011),
there is only one other text which refers to the novel in terms of the representation of China or the Chinese available in the novel (Fernández Bravo 2015: 61–62).

According to Álvaro Fernández Bravo’s typology, as seen in the Introduction, he defines *El mármol* within his third category, that is, a view from within. In this kind of typology the narrator acts like a trafficker taking information, practices, uses and customs from his local surroundings such as, in this case, the local ‘supermercado chino’ (Fernández Bravo 2015: 61–62). In his essay, Fernández Bravo uses examples from *El mármol* to explore the ambivalent nature of the stereotype, as well as Aira’s work in relation to globalisation and global literature (2015: 62). Indeed, he explores how the stereotype of China available in the text is revealed as fragmented as it is simultaneously confirmed, with *El mármol* conveying different past and historical stereotypes, with an imaginary of China that he states is related to the present and the future (Fernández Bravo 2015: 66–67). However, there is to date no other analysis of the novel, or any analysis in terms of the specific representation of China and the Chinese.

In *El mármol*, a middle-aged man from Buenos Aires tells a story in the first person. He states that he is sitting on a piece of marble, relieved to be looking at his legs, genitals and thighs (2011, loc. 10). The linear narrative, interspersed with pauses indicated by the narrator, begins with the narrator trying to recall what has led him to his current situation. He declares that because he is not able to remember why and how he got there, he will write in order to remember.

The narrator’s incredible and confusing recollections then become chronological. Whilst paying for goods in a Chinese supermarket he is made to select additional, cheap objects to make up for a lack of change. After taking what he describes as an excessively long time to select the objects, the last object he chooses
is a set of ‘glóbulos de mármol’ (2011, loc. 162). As noted by Rafael Arce, the ‘baratijas’ chosen go on to dictate the course of the adventure (2013: 343). When leaving the supermarket, the narrator is intercepted by a young Chinese man called Jonathan. Unpredictably, the reader is then informed that the narrator will later be found riding a moped with Jonathan, while holding a stone toad with a beating heart under his arm. The narration then returns to the original time of the events and, after going to the narrator’s house, Jonathan and the narrator decipher a series of clues for which the objects he has chosen at the supermarket become functional, such as finding a code by zapping through television channels, and discovering a stone toad which ‘pulsates’. Together, they later go on Jonathan’s moped to a second Chinese supermarket, where the tasks and the role of the selected articles continue.

The second supermarket, owned by Chinese people who are present there, is supposedly the prize to be won by anyone who solves a vague, undefined competition made up of specific tasks. This prize is revealed to be what Jonathan is trying to win. In the narrator’s recollection, the Chinese end up being extra-terrestrials from outer space who have started to feel nostalgic for their world, a world exactly the same as Earth. It is the extra-terrestrials who have set up the competition in which participants could collect the elements which would bring the marble globules together, as this is what would allow the Chinese/aliens to return home. After a box containing a collection of images is opened, which the narrator states was the fuel for the space ship, the supermarket explodes, perhaps allowing the ‘aliens’ to return to their ‘world’. Because of the explosion, the narrator and Jonathan are ejected from the store and then travel in the form of images. While placing a ring on his own finger, another of the ‘baratijas’ he bought, the narrator lands next to the supermarket. After helping Jonathan, who has been hurt during the
fall, he sits on a piece of marble. The novel ends with him relieved to see that although they have travelled as images, everything is in the ‘right place’ (2011, loc. 1200).

The novel plays with a posited author who is the narrator in the text, incorporated as the carrier of a ‘particular verbal-ideological linguistic belief system’ (Bakhtin 1981: 312) that distances him from the implied author. Read through Bakhtin’s notion of double-voicedness, the novel reveals the existence of this implied author, who de-authorises the narrator, exposing him as the stereotype of a racist, middle-class Argentina, embedded in discourses of multiculturalism. Stories told about his life, at a hypodiegetic level, have an explanatory function which underlines the character’s social identity as a stereotypically middle-class Argentine who has taken early retirement: married to a psychoanalyst who supports him financially, he sits around in parks, waiting for time to pass. While the entire text of the novel is presented in the voice of this main narrator, his actions, as recounted by himself, contradict his words and thoughts, leading the reader to question the morality and ethical values of the narrator. This contradiction, in turn, allows for emphasis to be placed on a particular belief system that belongs to someone other than the implied author, as this belief system is, using Bakhtin’s words, ‘able […] to show the object of representation in a new light […] and […] illuminate […] the horizon against which the particularities of the teller’s tale are perceivable’ (1981: 312–13).

The reader learns about the male Argentine narrator, whom we can assume thinks of himself as white, and whose name is never disclosed. The nondisclosure of his name points to a certain indistinctiveness; a stereotype; the kind of person whose personality and attitudes can be taken for granted; who is kept by his wife because of
his early retirement due to health issues. Like Aira, he lives in the neighbourhood of Flores in Buenos Aires. His prejudices are on display throughout the novel. His surprise when confronted with a Chinese person who addresses him in perfect Spanish suggests that the knowledge of language can be a way of disavowing exclusive notions of racial difference, revealing the constructedness of race. Furthermore, he never cares to specify whether Jonathan speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, or another ‘Chinese’ language. The narrator’s portrayal of Jonathan, in contrast to ‘other’ well-dressed, Spanish-speaking Chinese people, suggests, as discussed by Fernández Bravo (2015: 62–66), a variation and displacement of the stereotype, simultaneously revealing its contingency. The condescending, racist narrator operates alongside the fantasy of the stereotype of the ‘Chinese’.

The novel’s double-voicedness exposes the conflicts which inhabit the same utterance. For example, the narrator states that he would never go on an adventure, but then he expresses a desire for alterations to his routine. The ideology of the narrator seems to clash with his experience: his reticence to engage with the Chinese cashier, and his racist comments about him are explicitly confronted by his closeness to Jonathan. The disclosure of the contradictions between the narrator’s actions and his own statements reveal how he remains locked in his worldview. In this way, the morally questionable views of the narrator on the Chinese are presented in contrast to the views of the implied author, who engages with the visibility of Chinese migrants.

Aira himself has already been described as engaging with the ‘growing visibility and racialization of the migrant’ in his novel La Villa (Aguiló 2014: 191). Yet when asked about his de-stigmatisation of Chinese communities in El mármol, he responded: ‘no se me ocurrió ni remotamente que los chinos puedan estar
However, the continuous reflection on distance and alienation available in the novel, linked to the explicit racism and xenophobic attitudes of the narrator, sheds new light on Aira’s statement. The novel can be seen to engage critically, as Aguiló notes for other works of the period, ‘with historical representations of race and the way in which these were affected by the crisis’ (2014: 177). Aira produces a critique of historical and contemporary racism in Buenos Aires by focusing on the Chinese as an ethnic group that escapes Argentina’s narratives of whiteness, racial homogeneity and multiculturalism.

As argued above, the rise of multiculturalism and the crisis of 2001 contributed to the emergence of discourses that challenged Argentina’s narrative of whiteness and racial homogeneity. In this sense, the novel points to contemporary forms of exclusion in Latin America (Wade 2016), in which the Chinese are excluded from the discourses embodied by those of the narrator. It is the narrator’s insight into the Chinese as ‘human’ that ‘awakens’ him to his own racism:

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 asombroso cómo aun en alguien más o menos culto, de izquierda (en mi juventud merecí la calificación de “psicobolche” [term which emerged in the 1970s used for students of psychology that were also supporters of the Left], puede caer en las trampas del racismo, que muchas veces, si no siempre, es cuestión de palabras (2011, loc. 718).

As we see in this extract, his amazement at the fact that ‘cultivated’, ‘leftist’ people such as himself can still be racist may be read as an ironising double-voice; while the narrator criticizes racism, an implied author sheds light on how the same narrator continues to perpetuate racialised views. Whilst the narrator realises that the Chinese
are ‘human beings’, the implied author exposes the ignorance of a certain erudite left in Argentina when it comes to racism, communism, China and immigration as a whole. The narrator himself states that the ‘traps of racism’ are linked to the use of words, yet he continues to use ‘racist’ expressions throughout the text. By showing how unaware the protagonist is of his racism, even though he does (partly) recognize it, the text brings racial constructions in Argentina to the fore. The double-voicedness discloses a conflict between two different worldviews which is unresolved, pointing out the continuity of racism within what is expected to be a multicultural context.

This persistence of racism is further enhanced by the fact that throughout the novel there are suggestions that the main narrator might change, and yet he never does. When they go on the moped, the narrator expresses the fact that he feels a kind of awakening, an experience which is evoked through bodily awareness. He feels his body against Jonathan’s body. He states he starts to see events in a different way, but he is unsure if he has changed or if the context has changed. His body is moved ‘towards’ excitement and adventure, as well as difference, embodied in the figure of Jonathan. The physical contact with Jonathan is described as ‘sin resquicios, pegado, animal’ (2011, loc. 462). This elusive desire for Jonathan recalls the historical marginalisation of homosexuals, and exposes the narrator’s alienation from an Argentine ‘macho’ stereotype. Sexual otherness seems to signal towards subjectivity and change. However, even while the protagonist tries to make sense of events, which may be linked to the notion of ‘awakening’, underlined by his statement: ‘El barrio gris y humilde se transformaba, ¿o era yo?’ (2011, loc. 402) his expressions continue to fix him within discourses of otherness and alienation. The novel thus exposes the different discourses at play here.
From this perspective, the protagonist can be read as trying to make sense of his encounter with the Chinese immigrant community in Buenos Aires but, being unable to engage with them, or in other words, to complete any real process of ‘awakening’, he reads them as aliens. The interpretation of the Chinese as aliens suggests the expression of authorial intentions in a refracted sense. Aira’s declaration ironically exposes the failed incorporation of immigrants, especially the Chinese, within the Argentine nation. His stated blindness to the discrimination against and stigmatisation of Chinese in Argentina, included in his statement above, thus appears to be a disingenuous answer to the question posed (‘“El mármol”, una aventura literaria de la mano de César Aira’ 2011). In this way there is available a denunciation by the implied author of an Argentine society which, as Ko shows, continues to construct essentialist stereotypes of immigrants. The novel parodies racist constructions, which are taken to an extreme by the use of aliens.

On one level then, El mármol evidently caricatures views of Argentines who read themselves as non-racist, whilst the Chinese community is presented as an arrival into Argentina from outside and perceived as ultimately different. The process of awakening, which is never completed, also evokes an incomplete awakening of Argentina to the question of its whiteness, both during and after the 2001 crisis. As Ko shows, discourses of multiculturality in Argentina continue to have embedded racist constructions. The narrator’s essentialism can be summarised through his statement, ‘después de todo, estos chinos eran chinos’ (2011: loc. 720); only, in the end, that means that they are extra-terrestrials, or ‘aliens’.

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5 The Real Academia Española does not recognise the word ‘alien’ in the Spanish language (2017a); it does, however, recognise the word ‘alienígena’ (2017b).
The figure of the alien is worth exploring further. As Ahmed explains in her introduction to *Strange Encounters*, the ‘alien, on one hand, is so over-represented in popular culture that it has become quite recognisable’; while on the other hand ‘there is always the possibility that we might not recognise the alien if we see one’ (2000: 1). The double-bind of the alien figure is exploited in the novel, exposing the discursive mechanisms through which the alien is recognised and considered different from a discursive ‘us’, and also exposing how the ‘other’ is designated ‘beyond’ the nation. The ‘alien’ here becomes a fetish in psychoanalytical terms, recovering all that is beyond the human into the singularity of a given form, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis.

Through his narration, the protagonist discloses the mechanisms available for differentiating between humans, while the physical closeness of the ‘alien’ finally reveals that they, as Chinese, are actually contained within the nation. The narrator himself reflects on the presence of the Chinese within the nation in the novel. Not only does he comment on the presence of Chinese youth in Buenos Aires as becoming ‘almost typical’, he also comments on the growing presence of Chinese supermarkets in Buenos Aires, noting changes within the city itself.

The increase in Chinese supermarkets and the changes to the Buenos Aires commercial landscape have been widely registered by the Argentine press (Jordana [n.d.]; Varise 2011; Rodiño 2006). Ko states that in Argentina ‘the word *chino* has become synonymous with “grocer”’ (2015: 2, italics in the original). She even argues that the word ‘supermarket’ has been actually largely replaced by ‘chino’ due to the concentration of Chinese immigrants in the grocery business (Ko 2014: 2538). Although it can be argued that the word ‘chino’ replaces the ‘Chinese supermarket’ instead of the ‘supermarket’ as a whole, this differentiation is still a stereotype, as
this kind of business is associated with the Chinese owners or administrators, although the products sold are largely the same as the ones sold in any supermarket. Highlighting the stereotypical association of the Chinese with ‘supermercados chinos’, Valestra recalls in *Un chino*: ‘al último chino que había intentado abrir una tintorería en Buenos Aires le había ido como al primer japonés que intentó abrir un minimercado’ (2007: 54).

Denardi states that in Buenos Aires there is a Chinese supermarket every two or three blocks (2015: 86). The growth of Chinese supermarkets even led the Carrefour line of supermarkets in 2006 to air a TV commercial that openly criticised Chinese supermarkets (Reagan 2009). The association of supermarkets owned by Chinese residents legally forced Carrefour to edit the commercial and remove the images of Chinese people and supermarkets in it (Zlotnik 2006). In the novel, the narrator expresses the idea that Chinese supermarkets are ubiquitous in the city, stating that ‘estos establecimientos proliferan hasta el exceso’ (2011, loc. 182). The novel thus parodies the discourses that refer to the proliferation of Chinese supermarkets, by producing yet another text referring to the proliferation of those supermarkets. The novel portrays the Argentinean discourse on those supermarkets through a narrator who ultimately repeats the racist stereotypes associated with them.

As Ko expresses it: ‘Asians in Argentina were considered “eternally foreign” […] because of their distinctive condition as “physiognomic outsiders” […] in essence, considered absolutely foreign and unable to assimilate’ (2014: 2533). Ko actualises this foreignness of Asians in Argentina to state that the newly multicultural Argentine nation continues to essentialise race. However, the Chinatown, and the Chinese supermarket, may subvert its own notion of undesirability by embodying the racialised subjects in order to position themselves in the market. Furthermore, and
paraphrasing Huggan, in the simulation of conditions in which dominant cultures perceive ‘minorities’, marginalised groups may reveal the underlying structures of their oppression (2001: 88). The text thus simultaneously reveals the complexities which the staging of ‘Chineseness’ and ‘China’ contains.

Today, Fernández Bravo argues, after Bhabha, that it is Chinese economic productivity which confirms and alters the nature of the Chinese stereotype (2015: 65), as he describes the objects selected at the supermarket as representative of properties associated with the Chinese imaginary:

Dimensiones pequeñas que pueden subdividirse hasta el infinito, calidad dudosa, producción industrial que por su cantidad desafía la misma noción de valor económico, reduciéndolo (y por eso mismo multiplicándolo) hasta casi hacerlo desaparecer (2015: 66).

The cheap objects selected at the supermarket operate as fetishised objects, associated with contemporary, industrial China. Fernández Bravo sees China in El mármol as evoking notions of disproportionate quantity and dimension for the narrator, and thereby summoning terrifying (Latin American) fantasies associated with the Chinese population (2015: 65). The stereotype is simultaneously disrupted and confirmed, whilst also revealing new meanings, which Fernández Bravo reads as a Chinese present-future, into which the world has entered, and of which the supermarket is a projection (2015: 66). As we have seen before, Bhabha explicitly builds on Lacan, to argue that identity is paradoxical, contradictory and constantly shifting, locating the stereotype as a fetishist mode of representation (1994: 5, 57–93). In the protagonist’s recognition of the coherence of the stereotype as an imaginary, the difference is disavowed symbolically through the figure of the ‘alien’.

In this sense, the complexity of the multiculturalism exposed in the novel can be approached through Nancy’s notion of existence, where existence can only ‘be
grasped in the paradoxical simultaneity of togetherness [...] and disseminated singularity’ (2000: 7). Emerging in the novel through the narration and the narrator himself, that which is Chinese is, as a fetish, never totally undesirable, enhancing an idea of coexistence. Simultaneously, and seen via Huggan ‘postcolonial exotic’, the novel exposes and interrupts discourses of multiculturalism and the way in which it continues to operate through an aestheticizing, exoticist discourse, which is far from being resolved (2001: 126). From this perspective, ‘China’ as ‘alien’ is revealed as a fetish, accommodating the social contradictions which the narrator experiences at a personal level. Allegedly secondary to a Latin American mestizo identity, a ‘Chinese’ identity is revealed to have been excluded from Argentine identity discourses. By interrupting the essentialism that may emerge in the lineages of mestizaje, ‘China’ emerges as a performative site for the deconstruction of otherness, challenging the active production and continued management of difference as contained in mestizaje (Wade 2016: 328).

Through this disclosure, the novel’s deployment of double-voicedness toys with notions of distance, boundaries and difference. The specific figure of a toad which blends in with the garden (2011, loc. 401), evokes the notion of a ‘discovery’ amidst a landscape that has been naturalised. It is echoed by the narrator’s surprise at being addressed in perfect Spanish by a young Chinese man; an experience that clashes with the narrator’s own expectations of understanding the Chinese. His growing understanding of somebody he had at first perceived as different transforms his arrival at the second supermarket into an undoing of notions of difference. This is further enhanced by his becoming ‘dis-oriented’ inside the neat, clean supermarket, descriptions that contrasts with government denunciations of Chinese supermarkets as unhygienic and failing to fulfil minimum health and safety procedures, a discourse
also widely disseminated on popular online social networks (‘Clausuran 4 Supermercados Chinos’ 2015, ‘Supermercados Chinos - Taringa!’ [n.d.]). The narrator’s worldview collapses when confronted with the unexpected, while the implied author discloses his critique of stereotypical images of Chinese supermarkets.

This use of a narrator who exposes his biased and stereotyped views, and who is disorientated when challenged by a ‘real’ situation that runs contrary to his expectations, leads to a collapsing of the assumptions that had informed notions of difference. Or, in other words, the ‘stranger’, who he has perceived as ‘stranger’, cannot be defined or read through his own traditional paradigms. The singular is only expressed in relation to others. When the narrator is unable to accept this reality that contrasts with his expectations, he discovers, or convinces himself, that the Chinese are ‘aliens’. His narration allows us to hypothesise that this recognition of the Chinese as aliens results from his inability to incorporate the Chinese into his discourse on the Argentine nation which, read through Ko, arises from the fact that Argentines consider Asian difference both insurmountable and incomprehensible (2015: 2).

Ko ultimately argues that these ‘Asian’ novels do not grant racial or cultural citizenship to Asian-Argentines (2015: 3). However, while it can be argued that the narrator does not grant citizenship to the Chinese and ‘reads’ them as aliens, the novel’s emphasis on the constructedness of the character’s account exposes his bias. This subjectivity, in turn, leads the reader to question the narrator’s moral authority and, in its double-voicedness, it arguably does effectively grant citizenship to the Chinese in Argentina. This granting of citizenship to the Chinese in Argentina, in turn, reveals the narrator as being even further alienated himself.
Although the narrator refers to a relatively comfortable middle class life at the beginning of the text, the narration simultaneously includes darker aspects of his life. His reflections present him as unhappy due to his miserable pension, while he describes being dependent on his wife as ‘una sorda tortura permanente’ (2011, loc. 298). His confessed ignorance about national news underlines his isolation (2011, loc. 189). His description of the places he inhabits shows him as disillusioned and hopeless. He is socially ‘alienated’ and emasculated, which further suggests his projection of the ‘alien’ status of the Chinese. The narrator’s identification with a white, patriarchal Argentine nation contrasts with his life, in which he is economically supported by his wife, and therefore a failure in the eyes of a white, patriarchal, neoliberal society.

The narrator’s ‘failure’ recalls the period before the crisis of 2001 in which, as Aguiló shows, ‘social malaise and impoverishment become more acute as a result of neoliberal policy’ (2014: 179). Simultaneously, the narrator’s racism recalls the post-crisis heightening of racism and interest in images of ethnic cultural products and diversity (Aguiló 2014: 184; Lacarrieu 2002). This post-crisis context suggests that Aira’s depiction of the Chinese is not haphazard. As Ko shows, discourses on the ‘chino’ present them as the most ‘alien’ to Argentina (2014: 2533). And yet the Chinatown is simultaneously marketed as part of a ‘multicultural’ Buenos Aires, and Chinese supermarkets are described as part of the landscape of the city. The novel exposes the ‘alien’ condition of the Chinese, while simultaneously revealing and questioning the discourses that construct and maintain that ‘foreignness’.

In the novel, the description of the Chinese as aliens from outer space by the narrator not only exposes the notions of otherness linked to the Chinese community in Buenos Aires, but also accentuates the primacy of images of modernity and
whiteness in that construction of a white Argentina, which the novel interrupts. Unlike the Chinese who own supermarkets in Buenos Aires, the narrator owns nothing; a fact he acknowledges is his own responsibility, due to his own ‘moral weakness’ (2011, loc. 1114). The better-dressed and apparently more educated Chinese man they encounter at the second supermarket contrasts with Jonathan’s poor Spanish and modest clothes. While Jonathan’s clothes enhance the idea that the crisis has affected the whole of society, including the migrant communities not traditionally included in the discourses of ‘the nation’, the difference between both Chinese men, and between the Chinese and Argentine men, point to forms of exclusion and to the economic asymmetry of neoliberalism.

As *El mármol* shows, re-orientation may reduce notions of strangerness. By offering us the possibility of challenging the figure of the stranger as such, the novel is able to critique ‘stranger fetishism’. Nevertheless, this re-orientation, which allows the character to enter a place to which he has not had access in the past, is shown to occur only when a major event happens (being dragged into an adventure, for instance). Although the narrator acts as the empowered white man, his existence is at the same time miserable, and devoid of all agency. At a certain point, he even states his surprise at the fact that the Chinese man is asking *him* questions, further enhancing his lack of authority as the reader is aware that it is actually the Chinese character who has been making the decisions ever since they met. This critique of stranger fetishism thus enhances the notion of a community that is neither homogeneous, nor an accumulation of differences. Rather, the plural is the collection of singularities, and the novel reminds us that it is still informed by power imbalances. In the novel, the agency and authority reside with the Chinese, ultimately disrupting any set idea of who is the ‘stranger’ in Argentina.
In *El mármol*, the protagonist identifies himself as ‘Western’ and Argentine, and is shown to be displaced from his own ‘imagined community’, to use Benedict Anderson’s term (2006: 6–7), because of his failure within neoliberal structures and his inability to ‘understand’ the changing immigrant landscape of the city. As a result, the novel questions what informs the ‘imagined community’ that the character seems to identify with. The jobless, broke narrator is displaced from society. This sense of displacement informs his encounter with the ‘stranger’, only to ultimately reveal his racist ideology. Through the narration, two different world-views are brought into contact: that of the implied author revealed to the reader via the contradictions between what the narratoy says and does, which reveals a failed multicultural Argentina and acknowledges the racism that still permeates the nation’s discourse; and that of the narrator, revealing an old-fashioned nation, which continues to ‘whiten’ its national discourse. If in *Aira* we find a disruption of the constructions of ‘fetishised strangers’ through the novel’s deconstruction of a racist multiculturalism, in *Verde Shanghai*, by Cristina Rivera Garza, the possibility of any notion of ‘otherness’ is challenged, as well as any naturalisation of gendered, racial and cultural differences.

Although she was raised on the border between Mexico and the United States of America (U.S.), which has caused her to be linked to Mexican ‘narrators of the North’, the position of Rivera Garza within any particular literary group is contested (Cavazos 2012: 3; Salas Durazo 2012: 23, 213–16; Park 2013: 57–58; Regalado López 2014: 55–73). ‘De-territorialisation’ (Palaversich 2007: 24) appears as a central characteristic of her work. Rivera Garza has lived in recent years between Mexico and the U.S. She has taught history and creative writing in both countries, and she writes in both English and Spanish (Samuelson 2007: 135; Rivera Garza

Her work has been described by various critics and academics in terms of the exploration of limits, major and unresolved gaps, impenetrable passages, the challenging of genre and gender conventions, and as an enclave of transgression in contemporary Mexican literature (Estrada 2008: 53; Cruz Jiménez 2010: 5, 62; Estrada 2010, loc. 280; Venkatesh 2011: 106; Lynam 2013: 505–8; Park 2013: 57; Close 2014: 408; Reid-Soucy 2015: 3–4). She has received many Mexican and international prizes. Her novel Nadie me verá llorar (1999) was praised by Carlos Fuentes as ‘una de las obras de ficción más notables de la literatura […] en castellano, de esta vuelta de siglo’ (2002). The madness of the protagonist of Nadie me verá llorar illustrates Rivera Garza’s preference for what Diana Palaversich calls ‘sujetos des-centrados’. That is, as Palaversich explains, characters who unfold continuously, that can be many or one, gradually disclosing gender, and exposing the interplay of different discourses (2007: 15). The disclosure of ‘sujetos des-centrados’ and narratological fragmentation is also present in the novel Verde Shanghai. Aniela Rodríguez Zapata has argued that the feminist alterity available in the novel acts as a symbol for feminist, poststructural perspectives (2013: 141). Eduardo Sabugal has
described it as a Chinese box, and as using language to both conceal and reveal simultaneously (2011).

Rivera Garza's novel *Verde Shanghai* has also been analysed as an exploration of the relation between self and other, and between Latin Americans and Chinese people, demonstrating an interest in the meeting of Hispanic and Asian cultures (Prince 2014: 118–36). Although critics of the novel have noticed its engagement with the Chinese community in Mexico (Cabezas 2011) and Rivera Garza herself has mentioned migration as a theme in the novel (Palapa Quijas 2011), there is currently no critical analysis of the novel specifically in terms of the representation of ‘China’.

Although not stated explicitly, the story is seemingly set in Mexico City as some streets and areas of the city are mentioned in the text, constructed through a main narrative interrupted by different narrators and literary styles, such as prose, poetry, short-stories, extracts from other books, and press notes. The text is fragmented: different sections use different typefaces and are interrupted by quotes from unknown authors whose references are only given at the end of the novel; this is impossible to trace back in a Kindle edition, enhancing the perplexing aspects of the novel. Events in themselves are presented in ways that lead the reader to question if they have actually ‘happened’ or if they are just dreams or thoughts. The settings are also ambiguous. Ambiguity is reinforced by the blurriness regarding the duration of events and the people involved in them, while details of time and place abound in conflicting ways. As Jennifer Prince notes, in the novel names are changed, confused and non-existent, and identities are ambiguous, transient and temporary (2014: 120). The reader is ultimately not allowed to make sense of the text, which questions all
information provided. In this sense, the novel not only questions the ways in which reality is made coherent, but shows that reality itself is not coherent.

*Verde Shanghai* tells the story of Marina Espinoza, a woman married to the medical doctor Horacio Oligoechea. The story opens with a car accident in which Marina breaks her arm, as a result of which she spends time in hospital. After the accident, Marina becomes haunted by the image of another woman whose name is Xian, and although their thoughts seem to intertwine, her identity remains a mystery. Feeling the urge to understand her thoughts, Marina searches for Xian in the Chinatown, moved by a desire which she describes in a letter to Xian as ‘el animal salvaje’ (Rivera Garza 2011c, loc. 1445; Sánchez 2012). The idea that Marina could also be Xian is suggested through phrases such as ‘alguien dentro de ella había tomado la decisión sin consultarla’ (2011c: loc. 476). While Prince has suggested that Xian is an ‘oriental “Other”’ due to her Chinese name, her location in the Chinatown, and the fact that Marina finds similarities between Xian and Chiang Wei (who is of Chinese descent and the fiancée of Marina/Xian in an arranged marriage) (2014: 127), there is nothing in the novel that directly suggests this. Through writing, and through her encounters with other characters, including Chiang Wei, a self who was silenced in Marina’s life with Horacio gradually emerges. From this perspective, and resonant to the fact that the character slides from one to another, the figure of Marina/Xian allows for a re-reading of the figure ‘La Malinche’, not only because she moves along borders, like Malinche does between Aztec and Spanish, but also because Malinche’s Christian name was, indeed, Marina.

*Verde Shanghai* has been described by Alberto Cabezas as a game with time, through which the novel gets close to ‘our most extreme other’: the Chinese community in Mexico (2011). Rivera Garza herself describes the novel as a way of
showing how a city has changed in multiple ways: ‘inicialmente con el fenómeno de la inmigración, después con las críticas radicales al sistema en el México de finales del siglo XX’ (Palapa Quijas 2011). In this sense, the novel engages with the way in which the Chinatown is ‘marketed’, not caring to distinguish between different generations of immigrants. As Bhabha shows regarding colonial discourse in relation to the production of the colonised as a social reality, the Chinatown allows for a reality which is at once ‘other’ and entirely knowable (1994: 101). Thus, a critique of fixed otherness emerges throughout the novel as, through Marina, the novel displays and challenges the Chinatown in Mexico City as a space of otherness, exposing and questioning the power asymmetry of encounters.

The first Chinese immigrants arrived in Mexico during Spanish colonial rule, linked to the Manila Galleons trade route between America and Asia (Dubs and Smith 1942: 387–89). A stronger current of migration developed in the nineteenth century, linked to the Mexican interest in attracting labour for farming and mining, and as consequence of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the U.S. in 1882 (Lee 2007: 541–42; Peña Delgado 2012: 13–40; Hu-DeHart 2013: 100; Seijas 2016). Many of them worked as local businessmen, seizing commercial opportunities resulting from the growth in mining and railroad activities (Hu-DeHart 1989: 91, 96). When the U.S. passed its exclusion law, authorities from both China and Mexico encouraged Chinese migration to Mexico (Lee 2002: 58). The Chinese believed Latin America to be a convenient alternative to the racial hostility and discriminatory laws found in the U.S.; while during the Porfiriato (1876–1910) foreign immigration was regarded as an essential ingredient for the development of the country (Buchenau 2014: 72, 73). Lee explains that although Mexican officials found Chinese immigrants
“undesirable,” they also admitted that Chinese labour was beneficial and necessary’ (2002: 59).

The post-Revolutionary state aimed to build an identity that claimed, simultaneously and without hierarchies, peasants, workers and indigenous groups to be at the heart of ‘mexicanidad’. Nevertheless, xenophobia in general and sinophobia in particular were strong (Hu-DeHart 2010: 67–68, 96–98), reaching a climax during the 1930s. Indeed, even by 1925 the Chinese population had declined sharply (Hu-DeHart 1989: 100–101, 2010: 67–68, 82–91, 96), and in the 1930s almost 10,000 Chinese were expelled from Mexico (Botton Beja 2008: 483–84; Hearn 2012: 112). In 2012, Adrian Hearn suggests that Chinese communities in contemporary Mexico are still made to feel that they pose a threat to national interests, a narrative that resurfaces during times of economic hardship, as also noted by Aguiló and Ko in Argentina (Aguiló 2014; Ko 2014, 2015), and fuelled by China’s growing global influence and the role that overseas Chinese are thought to play in it (Hearn 2012: 112–13).

Within the Mexican nation, Mexico City’s Chinatown defines itself through a discourse based on otherness, as can be seen, for example, on their official website (‘Historia del Barrio Chino CDMX’ [n.d.]) and in other writing aimed at tourists (Cavallero 2013). The website states that in the 1940s, the restaurant Shan Ghai was settled in the ‘callejón de las damas’ off Dolores Street, establishing the barrio chino. The description on the website evokes a mysterious ‘Orient’, stating it to be a place where people can go and ‘deleitarse con las costumbres orientales que en él se realizan’ (‘Historia del Barrio Chino CDMX’ [n.d.]). The idea of ‘oriental customs’ continues racist constructions by relying on a euphemistic cultural specificity. The Chinatown of Mexico City is expected both to ‘contain’ difference and to provide a
space of encounter with the ‘other culture’. The website thus disregards the persecutions that led the Chinese to eventually settle in Mexico City, while remaining within discourses of fixed otherness.

One other way in which Verde Shanghai challenges fixed notions of otherness is through Marina’s acceptance of ambiguity. For example, the impossibility of Marina identifying herself, or Chiang Wei, through race, contrasting with quotes within the text that tells the reader about explicit historical discrimination towards the Chinese in Mexico (2011c, loc. 2026-2210). These extracts, which include a quote from an academic journal (2011c, loc. 2179), echo Ariel C. Armony’s and Nicolás Velásquez’s conclusion regarding the ways in which the symbolic construction of China as the ‘favourite villain’ has served an array of actors behind the notion of China as an ‘evil other’ in Mexico today (2015: 320). In other words, how an ‘other’ is constructed through race is an aspect that the novel exposes and critiques through Marina, as her racial fluidity contrasts with a quoted historical source referring to a stereotyped idea of ‘Chinese race’ (2011c, loc. 2143).

Although the reader is never told Marina’s ‘race’, her body is read racially when doña Aída, owner of Verde Shanghai, the restaurant that Marina goes to in the Chinatown, recognises her as a member of the ‘Chou’ family (2011c, loc. 1131). Another example appears when Chiang Wei talks about his grandfather, who was told to go to a place where ‘todos son como tú […] mientras se estiraban los ojos con ambas manos’ (2011c, loc. 2132), a physically expressed racist insult.

On her arrival in the Chinatown, Marina subverts the distance informed by class and racial discourses. As shown by Ahmed, ‘proximity’ and ‘distance’ come to be lived by being associated with specific bodies as well as places (2006: 112). From this perspective, Marina subverts the limited contact between the multiple layers of
Mexico City. After the accident, her unexplained orientation towards the Chinatown reveals the spatial arrangement of the Chinese in the city, disclosing class divisions, as she needs to leave her upper/middle class house in order to move towards the Chinatown. Marina’s house is described as illuminated and spacious, with ‘sábanas blancas [que] olían a limpio, un leve aroma a limón’ (2011c, loc. 1242), while the Chinatown is described as ‘acumulación de coches, cuerpos, ruidos’ (2011c, loc. 1061).

This slippage between racialised worlds is also enhanced by Marina’s undermining of gender performativity. From this perspective, Marina/Xian can be read in relation to the work of postmodernist feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, who suggests that the gendered body ‘has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ (1990: 136). For Butler, both gender and sexuality are ‘performances’ enacted by continuous repetition. Rivera Garza herself has stated, acknowledging Butler’s influence on her, that ‘el género es sobre todo un performance que varía y se enacta de acuerdo a negociaciones específicas en contextos específicos’ (Hind 2003: 189, italics in the original). The exposure of the performativity that the Chinatown offers Marina rejects clear-cut binarisms of gender and race, playing along the Marina/Xian identity axes. Marina challenges any essentialist understanding of identity, pointing towards the significance of context and subjective experience.

Indeed, Marina can be seen to challenge normative codes by not being restricted to any stable form of gender performativity. In the novel, although presented as a female subject, Marina performs masculinity, as seen through her relationship with Chiang Wei; she also performs femininity, as seen in relation to Xian; heterosexuality as seen in her relationship with Horacio; and homosexuality, as
seen through her desire for Julia, a woman whose identity is never clear (2011c, loc. 3232). However, there is no consistency of any sexual preference, a characteristic also present in other works by Rivera Garza (Castro Ricalde 2011: 244, 250). Marina reveals how normative codes of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality may be shown to be contingent, opening up the possibility that the authority of these normative codes being undermined. This inconsistency suggests that bodies could be more adequately understood as a continuum rather than as clear-cut binarisms between female and male bodies, thus disavowing fixed notions of gendered identity.

Within this context, Horacio’s scientific and rational perspective, characterised by his being a medical doctor, posits him as the male gazer, a role performed through his photography of the ill Marina (2011c, loc. 1254). Prince’s analysis of this novel suggests that the ‘orientalisation’ of Marina through her experience in the barrio chino exposes her as the ‘other’ of the rational and scientific male, Horacio, whilst Chiang Wei is also shown to be her ‘other’ (2014: 124). As Prince shows, Horacio’s control over and desire for Marina allow the reader to think of him as the epitome of the white, male, orientalist gaze (2014: 121–24). In her class-determined existence, Marina is ‘esposa de médico’ (2011c, loc. 378) as she articulates it, invoking belonging and control. And yet Marina escapes the power that Horacio intends to have over her. Her dismissal of Horacio’s hegemony, slipping away psychologically from him while in his house after being dragged there, acts as a critique of and a challenge to male domination over the female subject.

The contrast between Marina’s aesthetic appreciation of shades and tones, and Horacio’s fascination with the static photograph, stresses the differences between them. Marina’s references to green in different sections of the novel, such as in the inclusion of a quote from Rivera Garza’s own poem Conjurar, which
discusses recommendations of colours for different tones of green (2011c, loc. 1062, the poem was published in Rivera Garza 2011b), suggests the relevance that shades, and not fixity, have for Marina. The disavowal of a fixed a subject position in favour of one that slides and refuses any definition acknowledges the centrality of subject position without fixing the subject. In this sense, it opens up the title *Verde Shanghai*, allowing its meaning to slide and evade definition. Furthermore, self and other similarly avoid definition in the novel.

The most extreme problematisation of self and other in the novel is the relationship between Marina and Xian. The possibility that Marina and Xian are the same person is, Prince suggests, one of the most intriguing questions the book raises. While ambiguous sentences or the confusion of names supports the idea of a split identity, it is not actually clear who is ‘self’ and who is ‘other’ (Prince 2014: 127). This uncertainty regarding self and other is explored by the text through a dialogue in which Marina and Chiang Wei decide that the word ‘Yotro’ best describes the concept. This term can be seen to suggest that people exist in common, disavowing a self-other dichotomy. In so doing, it recalls Nancy’s idea that ‘togetherness is otherness’ as described by Christopher Watkin (2007: 61, italics in the original), as we have seen in the introduction. Although Prince emphasises the convergences and blurriness of subject and other, and Orient and Occident, her analysis seems to rely on either the distinctiveness or indistinctiveness of subjects and others, as she focuses on blurriness that does not necessarily challenge the realities of ‘East’ or ‘West’. An alternative reading of the novel suggests that, through the Chinatown, Marina and Xian ultimately let go of any notion of self and other, characterising existence as a kind of being-with. One of the final sentences of the novel serves to illustrate this: ‘Y se hundió en el otro rostro’ (2011c, loc. 4114). The unclear notion
of who the ‘otro rostro’ belongs to unfixes identity and allows Marina to pass between borders while her body is under Horacio’s control, in his house. In this way, Marina’s singularity is exposed as she interrupts Horacio’s hegemonic power over her, escaping his control even if only through her imagination.

Because of her challenge to Horacio’s power, Marina can be viewed as an example of what Alicia Gaspar de Alba has termed ‘bad women’: she is a woman who refuses to comply with the social discourses by which ‘good girls’ and ‘good women’ are constructed (2014: 7). Horacio’s attempt to control Marina is invested in discourses which position her as a ‘bad woman’, but Marina escapes any framing by which bodies are described within ‘a particular discourse and patriarchal imperatives, which are capitalist, racist, and imperialist imperatives’ (Gaspar de Alba 2014: 18). Marina ultimately escapes these discourses or frames by passing through her other selves, which have been present throughout the text and are made available to her via the Chinatown. In Nancean fashion, Marina embodies the mingling, modification and reconfiguration that occurs when different systems of differentiation encounter each other.

This blurriness is reinforced by the description of places that seem to have inexact borders, or to exhibit transparency. Within these border uncertainties, Marina/Xian’s body acts as a reminder of existence. Marina is aware through her bodily existence that she is Marina, as when a doctor touches her to confirm that no bones have been broken in the accident (2011c, loc. 158). The novel’s suggestion of the body as a site informed by histories and integral to the construction of meaning, as noted by Cheyla Samuelson in relation to Rivera Garza’s writings (2010, loc. 725), can be seen in the following quote: ‘Justo en medio de la historia, albergando entre las células la significación violenta de la historia, el cuerpo es uno, sólo uno, no
puede ser más’ (2011c, loc. 2634). But Marina asks, ‘Quien te dijo que la carne es real?’ (2011c, loc. 3613), questioning the notion of existence beyond the body, while also questioning the body and essentialist and racialised understandings of it.

Marina’s inability to identify fully as either Chinese or Mexican, or otherwise, challenges any element that might foster the sustenance of any borders between class, race or gender. Not only does Marina’s existence have traces of both male and female identities, but she embodies different races and cultures. The text suggests a breaking of dichotomies, which locates Marina as a site of Anzaldúa’s ‘borderland’, a ‘vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary’ (2007: 25).

Anzaldúas’ Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza describes the constant collision between two cultures; identity in the borderland is shifting, unresolvable, fluid and in a constant state of transition. Although Anzaldúa’s notion of borderland is specific to a Chicana/o identity in relation to the U.S., Marina can also be seen to stand for notions of borders and unfixedness. Marina embodies the impossibility of ‘hold[ing] concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries’, while showing ‘a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity’, borrowing Anzaldúa’s words (2007: 101).6 However, if Chicana/o theory presupposes the hegemonic gaze of a White Anglo U.S., Verde Shanghai seems to go beyond this theory in order to challenge the validity of any hegemony. In this sense, Marina/Xian sheds light on the parameters of Mexico’s sociocultural identity. Marina can be interpreted as what Nancy terms the ‘interruption of myth that reveals the disjunctive or hidden nature of community’ (1991: 58). By displacing borders, the novel suggests a redefinition

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6 This challenge of rigid boundaries certainly describes Rivera Garza herself, who not only grew up on the Mexican-U.S. border, but continues to travel between the U.S. and Mexico. Verde Shanghai itself is signed off ‘Mexico, 1987 – San Diego, 2001 – Tijuana, 2010’.
from an indigenous/European mestizo identity to a transnational, transcultural, beyond hybrid, ‘borderland’ identity. Although the characters write and speak in Spanish, the language of the conquerors, Marina pronounces Chinese correctly, in contrast to Horacio’s incorrect transcription of it (2011c, loc. 1306-1307).

Before continuing, I will briefly return to the figure of ‘La Malinche’ to further emphasise the challenge to essentialist understandings of mestizaje available in the novel. Little is known about the historical figure herself, also known as Doña Marina, Malinali Tenépatl and Malintzin (Anzaldúa 2007: 19). She was one of twenty women given as a gift to the conqueror Hernán Cortés after the Spanish victory at Potonchán in 1519. According to chronicles of the Mexican conquest, she was the daughter of an important noble from Veracruz, then under control of the Aztecs. She spoke Maya and Náhuatl, and later learnt Spanish. Her knowledge of languages led her to the role of translator of Cortés; she also became Cortés’s lover and the mother of his child Martín, usually referred to as the first mestizo. As a historical figure and a continuously recreated myth, Malinche is a name which is historically charged with meaning. Her name has been made to stand for the betrayal of the Mexican race and the danger of female sexuality, while at the same time it has been re-read as the history of women and the feminine betrayed (Godayol 2012: 61–62). In her book Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Anzaldúa articulates Malinche as persecuted by the Spaniard, the Anglo and the Mexican people, and she simultaneously articulates herself as the voice of this ‘bad’ woman. She reclaims the place of Malinche and chicana/o culture, updating her role (Anzaldúa 2007: 44–45). In dialogue with Anzaldúa, my reading of Marina as Malinche allows for a nuanced version of mestizaje to emerge: as mother of the first mestizo, Marina as Malinche challenges any essentialism as contained in mestizaje. Indeed, as Denise Kripper
explains for chicano, feminist and postcolonial readings of ‘La Malinche’ (2015: 9, 12), Marina as Malinche can be studied in her role as contained by her rupture of colonial and racial binarisms, and as celebrating her role as challenger of binarisms, labels and definitions.

With regard to racial or gendered positions, Marina exists as shifting and blending points on a continuum. In passing between races and genders she is shown to be aware of the histories that inform her body. The novel reveals the racism and violence to which the Chinese in Mexico have been subjected, as we saw in the introduction and earlier in this chapter. From this perspective, Marina uses the Chinatown to open up the possibilities granted by less rigid distinctions of gender and race. Ambiguity allows Marina to be represented not as an assemblage or addition of identities, but as the coexistence of identities, in line with a Nancean understanding of the subject the “with” at the heart of the Being’ (Nancy 2000: 30).

As we can see through Ahmed, in the encounters informed by histories and affectivity that are simultaneously positional and impossible to grasp in the present (2000: 9), it is the relation itself which is given primacy. Indeed, Marina reminds the reader that ‘strangerness’ is not intrinsic to the subject, but results from encounters between persons.

The fact that the novel takes its title from the restaurant ‘Verde Shanghai’, which references ‘Shan Ghai’, the first restaurant in Mexico’s barrio chino, suggests a return to the foundational moment of a space, which recalls the encounter between cultures and the histories of racism that inform these cultures. The Chinatown stands for a difference that is shown to have no ‘essential’ foundation. By challenging hegemonic constructions around gender, class and race, Verde Shanghai offers a critique of essentialism, interrogating the paradigms around which cultural
definitions have been structured. By using the Chinatown as a resource, this novel exposes the fictionality of the borders between cultures, race and gender, and the narratives those discourses contain. In doing this, it exposes precisely the economic and racial realities that the novel aims to challenge.

Although access to ‘truth’ is denied, the novel nevertheless reveals how history may be ‘real’ in that it affects not only discourse but people themselves. The novel does not expose history as another discourse, but explores the effects that specific historical discourse can have on people’s lives. Rivera Garza has stated that immigrants, other than the Spanish Civil War exiles, are poorly regarded in Mexico (Cabezas 2011). However, the novel goes beyond the traditional idea of the migrant, and emphasises the notion of displacement within the self and at home; the novel reveals the various discourses at play through which Marina/Xian can define herself. In this sense, the text exceeds Anzaldúa’s concept of the border in its discussion of internal otherness in Mexico, with the Chinatown as a space of disidentification. As originally defined by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, building on previous writings, disidentification ‘both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications’ (1999: 31). The novel thus exposes the racial discrimination towards the Chinese, and the dominant culture’s need for subaltern others, at the same time as it reveals the means through which those subject positions can be evaded and subverted. In so doing, Verde Shanghai both uses and displaces the barrio chino, challenging an idea of ‘China’ as different or distant.

Indeed, Verde Shanghai challenges any carefully orchestrated setting of the Chinatown and recalls instead a history linked to migration and racism. The Chinatown, therefore, is the place in which Marina’s multiple identities are
uncovered, without erasing or ignoring the histories of her past. The denial of a stable identity is reiterated by the way she is named, or recognised, differently by different characters: as Xian, as Marina, as Mar. The Chinatown becomes the place where she is able to slip between worlds, being able to ‘[…] mirar como ellos, como hombre y como mujer’ (2011c, loc. 2487).

From her ability to slip between worlds, and in relation to the complex understandings of mestizaje as seen in the Introduction, Marina comes closer to Norma Alarcón’s explicit critique of Nancy’s ‘imprecise and universalising gesture’, as noted by Debra Castillo (1995: 192), of the mestizo as someone on the border of meaning, where (‘his somewhat loose use of the term’ (Castillo 1995: 192)) mestizaje is not the basis for identity because, he argues, everyone is a mestizo (Nancy 1994: 113–23). While reminding us that ‘anti-essentialist theories of race [are] dominated by men who do not bother to remark [upon] gender’ (1994: 131), Alarcón puts forward a middle ground between a traditional notion of ethnic identity and unbound heteroglossia. She thus suggests the presence of a continuous recreating of subjective identities through ‘differences’, and not through correspondence to an ‘authentic core’ (Alarcón 1994: 125–38). Furthermore, the novel precisely embodies a challenge to a contemporary problem in Mexico, denounced by Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka: that a ‘raceless’ ideology of mestizaje can become a concrete strategy of power, overlapping with current post-racial politics, and thus concealing the workings of racism (2016: 516–17, 527–28). Marina’s dismissal of any notion of fixity through racial slippage disavows race as a category of identity whilst still acknowledging the histories of racial discrimination and violence that the Chinese have suffered.
Rivera Garza offers a re-writing of the history of the *barrio chino*, where the descriptions available in the novel are far from the idealised and essentialised descriptions of the Chinatown’s own website and other tourist sources, and closer to what Héctor de Mauleón describes as ‘relato horrible de xenophobia’ (2013).

Focusing on the Chinatown, and addressing a historical target of Mexico’s racism (Chang 2011: 332; Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016: 14), the novel brings to the fore notions of inclusion and exclusion, and of racial politics in Mexico. Read in dialogue, Nancy and Anzaldúa’s conceptualisations illuminate Marina’s radical unfixedness, reformatting ideas of community and ‘in-betweeness’. While Aira and Magnus point to the fictitiousness of stable and essentialist identities, by depicting Marina’s embracing of ambiguity and the borderland, *Verde Shanghai* reveals a preference for a Nancean being-with and coexistence as constitutive of the subject and the community.

As Elena Barabantseva argues, Chinatowns can create a restrictive delineation of space, associated with a narrowly conceived cultural tradition, evoking limited images of Chineseness (2016: 2). In her study on Chinatowns as heterotopic spaces in the U.S., Li Bidlingmaier argues that the myths associated with them as separate places within the city continue to render them as ‘exotic, dangerous, uncanny, and perpetually other’ (2011: 280). Building on Butler, she argues that Chinatowns are performative spaces, affirming and perpetuating spatial otherness, as well as commodified ethnic spaces creating consistent products for consumption (Li Bidlingmaier 2011: 281). In her exploration of how the image and myth of Chinatowns has evolved into a transnational fantasy based on ‘invented traditions’, Mayer shows how literary and filmic narratives act as particularly powerful means of mediation across cultures and continents (2011a: 1–2). Within this context, literature
acts as a platform for subverting and demystifying these same images and myths. If the Chinatown is now changing in light of the growing influence of the PRC, at the expense of dissidents, undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, the Chinatown fantasy is very much alive (Mayer 2011a: 20).

In Latin America, Mexico City’s and Buenos Aires’ barrios chinos can be seen to invoke the cultural imaginary around ‘China’ and the Chinese in a manner that resonates with Chinatowns worldwide (Mayer 2011a). As seen in the introduction, Kathleen López argues that Chinese immigration played a central role in the construction of the nation in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and specifically in Mexico, Peru and Cuba, where they were at once ‘promoted as efficient workers for progress and prosperity and criticized as harmful to the physical and moral well-being of the nation’ (2014: 182–83).

Although Chinese communities have had a limited role in the recent economic engagement of China with Latin America, this presence has deeply impacted their social and political position in the countries in which they are located, as Ellis shows (2014: 179–81). Ellis states that distinctions between ‘new’ Chinese, linked to the import-export business of China in Latin America, and the ‘old’ Chinese in Latin America, are ‘fuzzy’, tainted by a combination of respect for the perceived work of Chinese people, but mixed with prejudice over their ‘perceived otherness’ (2014: 181–82). As López states, ‘much of this discourse echoes the anti-Chinese voices that filled newspapers and speeches across the region a century ago’ (2014: 201).

Through their echoing of anti-Chinese voices, and through their portrayal of the Chinatown and Chinese, the three novels studied in this chapter demand the acknowledgement of race as central to the power dynamics in Latin America today. In this sense, the use of China can be linked to the real presence of China both in
Mexico and Argentina. Building on the findings of Armony and Velásquez (2015), it can be argued that China, as a mirror, can also trigger questions concerning issues of identity, regarding both subject and community. In line with Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the supplement, ‘China’ here shows how ‘what is no longer deferred is also absolutely deferred’ (2016: 167). As the Chinese stand out from other immigrant communities because of their ‘perceived otherness’ and construction as ‘fetishised stranger’, the novels expose the impossibility of locating them within stable, known cartographies such as East/West, North/South or West/non-West. In their choice of Chinese communities and Chinatowns, and precisely because the implied authors do not see the ‘Chinese’ as ‘fitting’ these cartographies, the novels expose and critique how Latin America continues to rely on fixed discourses of self and other, however nuanced they may be, such as those contained in the discourses of mestizaje. Indeed, and referring once again to the Introduction, mestizaje in Latin America may still be considered as homogenizing and reducing difference through cultural and racial mixing, while in reality essentialist racial distinctions remain (Siu 2016a: 176; Wade 2016: 323–24). In this exposure and critique, the novels hint towards a community close to that described by Nancy, disavowing race, and exposing and challenging the mechanisms for the construction of ‘strangerness’.

In the novels studied here the image of ‘China’ as different or distant is challenged through characters who disturb those discourses, and who engage with the Chinese at home, also challenging the myths of a ‘white’ Argentina and opening up the meaning of a ‘mestizo’ Mexico. As Jane Hiddlestone argues, ‘with its capacity for experimentation and singular invention [literature can constitute a discourse that may] remove any ground, or any essential content, from terms such as “the subject” and “the community”’ (2005: 119, 121). The novels can thus be read as
engaging with Nancy precisely because ‘it is the interruption of myth that reveals the disjunctive or hidden nature of community’ (1991: 58). In this sense, as Masiello explores in *The Art of Transition*, these novels’ imaginings of China ‘alter the paths of citation that depend on a northern center’ (2001: 17). Although Masiello refers to Argentina specifically, her analysis can be extended to other Latin American cultural expressions.

In their incorporation of the Chinese into discourses of the nation, the novels subvert and alter a North/South binary, interrogate fixed relationships between stable categories, and reconstruct those categories removed from a North/South lens as explored by Masiello (2001: 7, 146). In this context, the novels may be said to ‘test the boundaries of home and foreign and chart courses for racialized bodies’ (2001: 156) as Masiello puts it. While *Un chino en bicicleta* and *El mármol* mostly disclose and dismiss fixed discourses, *Verde Shanghai* seems to explicitly embrace unfixedness. The novels thus produce city landscapes in which the *barrio chino* and the Chinese supermarkets are intrinsically constitutive and transformative, revealing the changing cultural, economic and political landscapes of Buenos Aires and Ciudad de Mexico (Zhou 2014: 11), and beyond that unveiling varying notions of alterity and community in Latin America.

As Caren Kaplan notes in *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, since the twentieth century ‘increasing numbers of people have become disengaged or dislocated from national, regional, and ethnic locations and identities’ (1996: 101–2). She goes on to explain, ‘in the midst of these displacements, new concerns over borders, boundaries, identities, and locations arise’ (1996: 102). Kaplan warns that to conflate migratory experiences may lead to ‘mythologized narrativizations of displacement [that do not question] […] the cultural, political, and economic grounds of […] different professions, privileges, means and limitations’ (1996: 2). In other words, the conflation of different displacements can veil power imbalance.

Indeed, Kaplan demonstrates how approaches to travel offer a range of accounts that go from the overemphasising of difference, to the overemphasising of similarities, both of which risk losing sight of a world where ‘new subjectivities’ produce ‘new relationships to space as well as time’ (1996: 142). It is these new subjectivities that this chapter aims to explore. Along these lines, my analysis focuses on Latin American novels whose main theme is travel to contemporary China. The storylines of *Los impostores* (2002) and *Hotel Pekín* (2008), both by the Colombian Santiago Gamboa, recount tales of male travellers to contemporary China. Mexican author Ximena Sánchez Echenique’s *El ombligo del dragón* (2007) narrates the story of a woman who travels to rural China and Hong Kong. Since the main characters of these novels are mostly privileged travellers, their experiences in China set them apart from and in contrast to other travellers of more precarious means.
Like the novels studied in the second chapter, the ones studied here also seem to disclose forms of contemporary othering. However, here the emphasis results in the equivalence of different locations in the world, challenging hegemonic Eurocentric structures and ‘national’ epistemologies. While the novels critique essentialist views on culture, they will be shown to negotiate subjectivities beyond fixed global cartographies (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 1–33). These novels can be seen to emphasise subjectivities, while simultaneously campaigning for a sense of fluidity and open-endedness. In this chapter, I argue that the novels reveal the limitations of essentialist bounded identities, while calling for a reconsideration of community and potentially a ‘new cosmopolitanism’ (Werbner 2008: 2), as an existing practical stance that is provisional and can lead to strategic alliances and networks across borders (Cheah 2011: 218).

In Los impostores, through the stories of a Colombian journalist who lives in Paris, an unsuccessful Peruvian academic who lives in the United States of America (U.S.), and a dedicated German sinologist, all of whom travel to China, the novel plays with stereotypes and suggests the failed attempts to access the ‘essence’ of a country. In Hotel Pekín, the interaction between the three main characters, a (Latin) American ‘self-made man’, a Chinese businessman and a journalist of Brazilian origin, also exposes and critiques stereotypes. Unlike Los impostores, the emphasis here is on ‘cultural knowledge’, displayed as a token for economic exchange and revealed as ultimately empty. El ombligo del dragón focuses on the overall contrast between a scientific and a literary ethos. Exploring the possibility of the ‘other’ within the self, as through the figure of the protagonist’s son, who turns albino, the novel turns the notion of the ‘exotic’ on its head, challenging fixed alterities.
As I demonstrate in this chapter, travel to China as depicted in these novels leads the characters to reflect on their idea of ‘home’ and belonging, as well as culture, community, and cosmopolitanism. As Sara Ahmed shows, it is precisely the opposition between ‘home’ and ‘away’ that must be questioned, and which can only ‘be addressed by considering the question of affect: being-at-home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*’ (2000: 89, italics in the original). While Ahmed’s text informs this thesis as a whole, this chapter focuses specifically on her examination of narratives of migration and estrangement. Ahmed’s position, which attends to the effects of globalisation, migration and multiculturalism in the relationship between communities and strangers (2000: 13), is particularly useful to my analysis because it pays attention to the intersection of multiple factors in the articulation of strangerness. Furthermore, approached through the theme of travel, these novels reveal that while ‘the experience of cultural difference is now internal to a culture’ [...] it is implacably also a question of different others in distant lands’, borrowing Massey’s words (2005: 194, italics in the original).

According to Debbie Lisle, in her study of contemporary travel writing, the spatial coding of home/away appears as a means of entrenching complex and multilayered views regarding cosmopolitanism (2011: 42). Following Mary Louise Pratt’s argument that Enlightenment travel writing reinforced a ‘planetary consciousness’ (1992: 4–5), which silenced or justified the less palatable effects of colonial rule, Lisle argues that when travel writing ‘reproduces spatial divisions between here and there as if these cartographies were unproblematic or somehow neutral, it willingly reproduces the prevailing discourse of modern cartography’ (2011: 138, italics in the original). Although Lisle seems to rely heavily on a critique of a world divided into the West versus the ‘rest’ (2011: 164), it ought to be possible
nonetheless to productively extend Lisle’s critique of cartographies to a Latin American context and to the notion of travel in narrative fiction.

From this perspective, I argue that the novels’ various explorations of the relationship to the ‘other’ become a means through which they challenge the binarial and fixed notions of centre and periphery. By viewing literature as a discursive strategy from which to discuss Latin America’s and China’s position in the world, the novels disclose an engagement with cosmopolitanism. In order to refer to these novels as ‘cosmopolitan’, my analysis focuses on the ways they depict a global community. However, as I will argue by following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Berthold Schoene, this notion of a global community is not informed by the embracing of a utopic united community. On the contrary, the analysis of these novels will be seen to show not a future ideal, but rather a diagnosis and an understanding of contemporary forms of alterity in Latin America and beyond.

As I aim to show here, Nancy’s formulations of being-in-common and community as inoperative shed light on a literature that suggests a global community, beyond an essential notion of the subject or the community, such as fixed ideas on the nation, and beyond fixed frames of reference. This non-identitarian and non-foundational notion of community is presented by Nancy in opposition to a fusion of individuals with an allegedly common identity. As seen in the introduction and in chapter two, while Nancy dismisses the term ‘cosmopolitan’, his theoretical reconceptualization allows for a new, non-identitarian understanding of cosmopolitanism.

It is from this Nancean perspective, and following Schoene’s ideas developed in his book *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2011), that I suggest that a new
cosmopolitanism is available in these novels, one in opposition to a traditional notion of cosmopolitanism, which overlooks power imbalance by conflating cosmopolitanism with privileged circumstances of travel. In sum, what I argue here is that these novels do not suggest the excision of local affiliations, but rather that they are receptive to Schoene’s Nancean understanding of cosmopolitanism, a ‘radical unlearning of all definitive modes of identification’ (2011: 21), which can accommodate the whole world.

The theme of travel here thus appears to interrupt narratives on ‘China’ by revealing that the ‘East’ is a signifier that can be displaced, while at once emphasizing Latin America as being shaped by its interactions with the rest of the world. The novels thus explore what Doreen Massey refers to as ‘the challenge of our constitutive interrelatedness […] the radical contemporaneity of an ongoing multiplicity of others […]; and the ongoing and ever-specific project of the practices through which that sociability is to be configured’ (2005: 195), suggesting new understandings of cosmopolitanism in relation to the Latin American subject. It is precisely this idea of community which seems to be displayed in Gamboa’s *Los impostores*.

I argue that, by exploiting the descriptions of a Colombian journalist, a Peruvian academic, and a German sinologist, and their experience of travel in China, Gamboa destabilizes and complicates national and regional subjectivities. By emphasising that all fixed points of reference have to be acknowledged as fictions, questioning the position of Latin America and highlighting the hegemonic power dynamics which have established paradigmatic antinomies such as North and South, East and West, *Los impostores* sheds light on the imaginary which, as Jan Campbell argues, ‘is always embodied within culture’ (2000: 218). By showing how
North/South, East/West or self/other are hegemonic constructions, the novel questions the position of Latin America in a worldwide context regarding fixed cartographies of reference, altering paradigms of identity and literature. Building on Ahmed’s formulations of ‘home’, I argue that the characters in Gamboa’s novel expose the ways in which a concept of global citizenship obscures power imbalances. Thus, on one level, the novel indicates power imbalance in a global context. On another level, it highlights a community in the terms defined by Schoene in which, from a global outlook, thinks of community as finite, with subjects in relation to each other, and without a fixed teleology (2011: 179).

Part of a generation of writers that rebuffs the celebration of the magical realist specificity of Latin America based on the fact that the construction of a differential identity legitimates its marginality (Hubert 2014: 138–42, 147), Los impostores broadly queries the position of the Latin American subject in a global setting. Usually considered and analysed within the genre of crime fiction (Ardila and Grupo de Especialización en Hermenéutica Literaria Eafit 2003; Ardila 2013; Jaramillo Morales 2007; Marinez Belandia 2017), Catalina García García-Herreros (2007), Héctor Hoyos (2013) and Hubert Pöppel (2010) explore Los impostores in terms of globalisation and travel, the latter specifically in relation to crime fiction.

The novel has been taken by Hoyos to signify the anxiety of globalisation, directly related to the uncertainties of cultural globalisation (2013: 83). For Hoyos, Gamboa explores how otherness dissolves through different superimposed layers of identity and experience (2013: 93–94). Rosario Hubert sees the choice of an ‘Oriental’ setting as a response to a ‘dislocation of the role of the marginal site of enunciation of the contemporary Latin American writer’ (2012: 46). Simultaneously, she argues, the novel ridicules all reference to specific particularities of the ‘Oriental’
and the ‘Latin American’ and critiques a European Orientalist travel writing tradition, thus reclaiming a Latin American point of enunciation (Hubert 2012: 54, 64).

However, such readings overlook the broader, non-referential cosmopolitan ethos that I see available in the novel. By exposing the fictitiousness of the stereotype as a way of making sense of ‘other’ subjectivities the novel critiques discourses of cosmopolitanism which build on essentialism. Instead, I argue, the novel suggests forms of new cosmopolitanism closer to that developed by Schoene, in which cosmopolitans ‘must stay alert to their own positionality as well as the complex enmeshment of other people’s historical legacy, economic capital, and ensuing degree of cosmopolitan competence and ambition’ (2011: 5). This form of cosmopolitanism, rather than claiming a homogeneous arena, calls for the recognition of the unevenness of such arena.

As Ahmed explains, transnational journeys and detachment from a particular home grant the nomadic subject an ability to see the world that becomes the basis for a new global identity and community. However, identity may develop as a fetish in such narratives since, as Ahmed states, it becomes ‘detached from the particularity of places which allow for its formation as such’ (2000: 86). There is thus no inevitable link between forms of travel and, Ahmed continues, the ‘transgression and destabilisation of identity [due to] migration can allow identity to become a fetish under the sign of globality’ (2000: 86). In order to explore Los impostores’ critique of power imbalance in textual detail, I will build on the figure of the fetish as it informs my reading: through its structuring of the notions of stereotype and identity.

Indeed, for Homi Bhabha, stereotyping is an ideological operation that occurs through the construction of signs, oscillating between what is already known and
what must be anxiously repeated (1994: 94–95). As explained in the Introduction, this paradox is what Bhabha calls ‘productive ambivalence’, as stereotyping involves both the recognition and disavowal of differences. A psychoanalytical dimension emerges as Bhabha sees the stereotype discourse as fetishistic, where the subject being stereotyped and those making use of the stereotype are thought to be essentially coherent. Building on Jacques Lacan’s Imaginary, Bhabha shows how this coherence, however, is recognised as a fantasy. In other words, difference is constituted through discourse, thus remaining unstable.

Bhabha therefore identifies hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety, where identities are constantly shifting. In this hybrid third space, hegemonic practices can be rearticulated, allowing for new identities to emerge. While Bhabha’s reworking of the fetish is concerned with the male body, Anne McClintock shows how the ambivalence of the fetish can involve multiple contradictions (1995: 200). Building on McClintock, the hybrid space allows for new identities beyond binary oppositions, male-centred understandings of fetishism and essentialist understandings of identity.

Arguing that hybridity, as a noun, can essentialize the nature of Being, Wolff-Michael Roth suggests using Nancy’s concept of the mélée (2007). While arguing that Bhabha’s notion of hybridity does not in any way essentialize the nature of Being and, on the contrary, allows a questioning of the idea of an essential nature, Nancy’s conceptualisation of the mélée is indeed useful for my analysis. In reference to culture and language, among others, Nancy uses the mélée to theorize the processes of mixture, as opposed to purity and essence; as mixture is action, not substance (2000: 145–58). As Angharad Closs Stephens shows, the idea of the mélée points towards imagining ‘community as encounters’ (2013: 120, italics in the
original). From this perspective, subjects cannot be understood as ‘on one side of identity or the other, or on one side of the community or the other’, borrowing Ahmed’s words (2000: 94). Drawing on Ahmed, for whom being at home involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them, but that overlap (2000: 89), enables my understanding of subjects as being-in-common and community as complex and diverse.

Born in Bogotá in 1965, Gamboa studied Literature in Colombia, later studying in Madrid and Paris. He published his first book in 1995 and since then his work has been widely translated. García García-Herreros has described Gamboa’s novels as ‘novelas del movimiento’, where characters physically move or travel (2007). He has published three texts related to China: in 2001 a travelogue entitled Octubre en Pekín; in 2002 the novel Los impostores; and in 2008 the novel Hotel Pekín.

Los impostores tells the story of a lost manuscript and the quest to find it undertaken by three foreigners in China: Suárez Salcedo (Suárez), a Colombian journalist, based in Paris and working for a French radio station; Gisbert Klauss, a German sinologist who has never been to China; and Nelson Chouchén Otárola (Chouchén), a Peruvian academic of Chinese ancestry based in Texas, who has been suspended from his university. In China, their paths cross due to a manuscript that belonged to the ‘Yi Ho Tuan’ movement, a real historical moment that gave rise to the Boxer rebellion in 1899. The main storyline focuses on the relation that each of these characters has to the manuscript, which can best be described as a ‘MacGuffin’. Alfred Hitchcock’s cinematic term is useful to our understanding of the role of the manuscript in the plot, as a MacGuffin is a plot device which is under-explained within the narrative and largely irrelevant in and of itself, yet essential to the plot.
(Digou 2003: 270). Although they are strangers at the beginning of the novel, the three characters’ stories intertwine in pursuit of the ‘MacGuffin’ manuscript.

The novel is divided into three main sections and an epilogue. The first section is made up of ten chapters in which the narrators vary and so does the focalisation. The story is introduced by a certain Régis Cerard who addresses an implied narratee and relates his guarding of a mysterious manuscript. The following chapters introduce the three main characters through a first person narrator called Suárez, and an undisclosed narrator who writes in the third person. This undisclosed narrator identifies with the ‘Western’ world and is gradually revealed to be Cerard, who the reader learns is a French priest. A complex narrator, when the story ends, Cerard unveils his omnipresence, beyond time and space. Inconsistencies throughout the narration emphasise the sense of imposture and deception, as an instance of pretending to be someone else in order to deceive others, recalling the novel’s title.

In the first section, the reader learns that Suárez is travelling to Beijing at the orders of his superior, thinking that he has to write an article on Chinese Catholicism, but he is actually sent to get hold of the manuscript. Chouchén wants to explore his Chinese heritage and write a novel, but is really escaping from the humiliation of the sanction imposed on him by his University. Finally, Klauss is travelling to experience what he has studied all his life. This first section ends with their simultaneous arrival at Beijing airport at 12:30 am, each unaware of the others’ presence. Their arrival at this symbolic location of the contemporary world occurs in what the French anthropologist Marc Augé would call a ‘non-place’, a space in which human beings remain anonymous and is not significant enough to be called a place (2009). With their arrival, a series of coincidental events is set in motion. The second section informs us about the characters once they have arrived in China;
narrative voices are differentiated by leaving extra space between paragraphs. The text gives ‘voice’ to other narrators by including the transcriptions of Klauss’s recorded diary or including copies of the letters of Chouchén’s grandfather.

In the third section, the focus is on those characters still active in the plot. The text abandons Klauss as he has been kidnapped and disappears from view. When all the characters meet up at a warehouse, the different viewpoints become one. The novel cryptically ends with Cerard addressing the narratee from a different story-time or dimension. The questioning of what is ‘real’ in the narration is reinforced by the embedding of fictional elements based on historical facts and ‘real’ events. This metafictional aspect is further emphasised by Gamboa’s Suárez, the first-person narrator, who is also a Colombian journalist who has lived in Paris.

The characters’ engagement with the places they actually do visit and their opinions of other travelogues reveal how their expectations of China are mediated by the travel writers they have read, evoked in the novel through Pierre Loti, André Malraux, Victor Segalen or Henri Michaux, among others. The novel thus summons the discourses of travel writing, in a way that reveals a double coding of their understanding of the present (Dentith 2000: 183). In this sense, it reveals the impossibility of detaching Latin American travel to China from the dominant European narrative of travel to the ‘East’, exemplified by mentioning specific real travel writers and their texts as guides to the characters’ experience in China (Hoyos 2013: 94; Hubert 2012: 55–56). The novel reveals and critiques this travel writing by depicting non-Westerners in the position of the ‘traditional Western traveller’, as ‘imposters’. From this perspective, the novel intervenes in what James Clifford describes as ‘long history of travel’: ‘predominantly Western-dominated, strongly male, and upper-middle class’ (1997: 66).
Indeed, the writers that the characters read, as well as the characters themselves, in some way fit Clifford’s description. Throughout this text and, as we shall see later, particularly in *Hotel Pekín*, we find a parody of the writings and experiences of previous European travel writers in China. For example, both Loti and Segalen were employed by the French government (Hsieh 1996: 3), like Suárez. Likewise, Loti was in China precisely during the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion, when the country lay open to Westerners, and would have known about the manuscript, as Klauss deduces from his reading of Loti’s *The Last Days of Pekin* (1902). Indeed, Klauss can also be described in the terms Yvonne Ying Hsieh uses for Loti, as representative of Eurocentric perceptions on China (1996: 6). Furthermore, when Klauss reflects on publishing his thoughts on China it brings to mind Michaux’s *A Barbarian in Asia* (2016), which aims to explain to a European public the countries he visited, including China (Hsieh 1996: 6). Michaux also travelled to Latin America and published a travelogue about his trip in Ecuador. This intertextuality reveals how hegemonic European worldviews, of both China and Latin America, emerge through reference to these authors in the novels.

On another level, Chouchén’s expressions, such as when he hopes to have a ‘chinita bien rica de compañera’ (2002: 100) on the airplane, coincide with Loti’s ‘excessive sentimentalism, his egoism, ethnocentrism, and sexism’ (Hsieh 1996: 2). However, Chouchén’s utterance appears to the reader exaggerated and in a spirit of ridicule. The novel thus revises an ‘imperialist nostalgia’ which, according to Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, manifests particularly clearly in travel writing (1998: 29). Through stereotyping and preconceived ideas on China, and through the disjuncture between the travel accounts they read and their real experience in China, the novel reveals the ‘Orient’ the characters expect to encounter to be entirely
constructed. The novel thus parodies and questions any existence of the ‘Orient’ as such. Gamboa rejects generalisations regarding identity, as Hubert also shows (2012: 54), and exposes their constructedness by marking the excess of stereotypes and deploying humour.

Hoyos and Hubert both note that stereotypes are applied to all nationalities using the style of text specific to each character, as related to their profession. The stereotypes emerge as preconceptions about places and people beyond China itself. For example, the text reveals Klauss’s understanding of China, as when he thinks of the places and buildings having a ‘sello de Oriente: en la forma de los techos, en los colores, en su estructura’ (2002: 116). An ‘oriental’ stereotype also emerges when Suárez states that he hears a voice ‘con un lejano acento oriental’ (2002: 126). The notion of an ‘oriental’ aura or accent exposes the generalisations regarding ‘Far Eastern cultures’, showing how China is made to represent the ‘orient’.

Asian stereotypes are also reiterated throughout the novel, such as when Suárez states: ‘En esto de la comodidad y el lujo, la verdad es que los asiáticos son insuperables – recuérdese, si no, la expresión “lujo asiático”’ (2002: 126), evoking the notion of Asian luxury, the sensual and the decadent; in Sheridan Prasso’s words, an ‘Asian mystique’ (2006: xi). Another example is when the narrator describes Chouchén as being dressed with a ‘bata de seda con brocados que le daba un vago aire de filósofo taoísta’ (2002: 342), associating a certain kind of clothing with a philosophical tradition and recalling the kind of Imperial clothes that Loti describes (1902: 119). Simultaneously, the layering of Asian and Chinese stereotypes discloses a certain vision of China and Asia in Latin America, which is conflated under the notion of a fetishistic and stereotyped ‘oriental’. Frequently occurring throughout the text, these stereotypes are exposed as parodic. Gamboa thus rejects generalisations of
Misunderstandings regarding the Orient are forced on the reader in comical ways, as also noted by Hoyos (2013: 89). For example, a hilarious dialogue in a sex scene between Suárez and a stereotype of Cuba, the independent doctor, Omaira Tinajo:

Entonces le dije [...] “Omaira, emperatriz de Oriente,” y ella me respondió, [...] “¿Cómo supiste que soy de Gibara, chico, ay dios, esa pinga tuya me va a matar,” y yo, [...] pregunté, “¿Qué es eso de Gibara?,” a lo que ella, [...] respondió, “Gibara, provincia de Oriente, Cuba, chico, dale, esa pinga tuya es un lingote de oro, no pares,” y yo seguí, [...] y murmuré, “Yo decía emperatriz de Oriente por Pekín, no por Cuba, pero es lo mismo, Señora de Gibara, Podestá del Oriente,” y ella, [...] me dijo “Ah, ya entiendo, creí que lo decías por Cuba, [...]” (2002: 255).

Suárez addresses an exotic Cuban woman as an ‘Oriental’ empress, revealing his preconceptions regarding a powerful, sexually attractive woman. Her response to him is banal, as she explains that ‘Oriente’ is the name of eastern Cuba. At a moment in which rational thought is replaced by desire and instinct, the novel displaces the location of the ‘East’ and places it in Latin America. It is provocative that in China it is an ‘Eastern’ Latin American, not a Chinese woman, who catches Suárez’s attention. In order to question Western mythologies, as Hoyos discusses (2013: 91), Gamboa parodies the search for authenticity that is characteristic of Orientalist travel writing, and empties the term ‘Oriente’ of mythical connotation.

Stereotypes beyond China also arise when Suárez proposes a toast with other Latin Americans he has met at his hotel, and recites a long list of Latin American clichés, celebrating a ‘Latin American unity’ (2002: 194–95). In his words, the stereotype, while reductive, is not necessarily portrayed as negative. From this
perspective, a cosmopolitan desire for community close to what Jacques Derrida
defines as unconditional hospitality emerges in their evocation of national
stereotypes, ‘offered *a priori* to every other [...] *whoever they may be*’(2001: 22,
italics in the original). However, the toast’s reliance on stereotypes reveals the
nation-bound nature of their cosmopolitanism, simultaneously parodying discourses
of ‘integración latinoamericana’ (González Miranda and Ovando Santana 2008:
266–79), emphasised by the lengthy wording of the discourse. Indeed, the fact that
the discourse is delivered under the influence of alcohol allows the reader to question
the genuine feelings of solidarity. Following Derek Hook, the quote reveals a
‘paradox of otherness’ to be operating at the levels of discourse and identification
alike (2005: 701).

In this sense, as discourse and as a form of identification, the stereotype
continues to reduce the other to an ontological essential other. As the toast’s desire
for unity relies on essentialist views of culture and self-exoticisation as an alibi that
does not recognise power imbalance, cosmopolitanism as a supposed shift of
perspectives and a questioning of one’s openness to the other is itself interrogated.
However, the impossibility of ultimately fixing the subject discloses the layering of
identities made available throughout the text.

More precisely, all of the characters are linked by displacement, their
identities becoming disarticulated between countries, occupations, dreams and
aspirations. For example, Suárez’s anxiety when arriving at the Chinese border
reveals the persistence of a Colombian stereotype linked to drugs and violence
(Gamboa 2002: 110). The narrator links the feeling to a nationality rather than to a
personal feeling. This linking of stereotypes with nationality also emerges through
Suárez himself, as what he first does when he learns he will be going to Beijing is ‘lo
que haría cualquier francés, es decir, sacar de la biblioteca esa vieja edición en Gallimard que todos tenemos de Un bárbaro en Asia, de Henri Michaux […]’ (2002: 24–25). At once, this quote sheds light on the power imbalance contained in the process of stereotyping, since by taking it for granted that all French people would have an edition of the book, he overlooks differences in education levels and interests.

The displacement of fixed cartographies and hegemonic relationships between people and places, and the movement through those places, is also found in the novel’s layering of literature, narrative voices and experiences, which never allows a single layer to predominate. This layering discloses new subject positions that emerge through the intertwining of beliefs and practices, which bear the traces of the feelings and practices that inform these subject positions (Rutherford 1990: 211). For example, layering occurs through Chouchén’s literary ambitions, when he imagines a phrase and immediately thinks, ‘se parecía un poco a Rulfo, pero qué importa, se dijo, ¿Quién es dueño de las palabras?’ (2002: 102). His consideration of plagiarism is enhanced by his question, which is in itself a cliché. In this respect, Hoyos views Chouchén’s orientalist fantasies and delirious recreations and daydreaming about authors from the Boom as a questioning of the Latin American Boom literary tradition (2013: 91). He sees this daydreaming about authors of the Boom as suggestive of an isomorphic relationship between a vision of the ‘East’ as a place of wonders and luxury, and a view of the Boom as the epitome of sophistication. As Hoyos argues, through Chouchén’s distorted vision of the Latin American Boom literary group as a jet set taking place in China, Gamboa provides a way of thinking of the prestige of Latin American writers beyond a Europe-Latin American axis. In other words, it demands a reflection on the effects of globalisation.
According to Pöppel, globalisation makes verisimilar and generalises stories that used to be considered exceptional (2010: 373). Indeed, this context allows Gamboa to set his novel in Beijing, playing with what may be considered ‘foreign’. In this respect, Hubert argues that the novel, ‘do[es] not exoticize the Oriental but instead use[s] the Oriental setting as a rhetorical device to discuss the notion of exoticism, that is, the treatment of any cultural particularity as distant and fixed’ (2012: 48, italics in the original). To write against Orientalism, she argues, is a way of criticising the self-exoticisation of Latin American magical realism. Hubert argues that the choice of an Oriental setting constitutes a critique of the legacy of the Boom and its excessive accentuation of Latin American specificity (2012: 46).

From this perspective, we can see how superimposed layers are displayed in order to explore how we make sense of places and people in the novel. For example, an exploration of Latin American identities is represented by Chouchén, whose combination of Hispanicised Chinese and Basque surnames mirror a Latin American mestizaje that goes beyond a Spanish-indigenous mix. This mestizaje is flagged up by Chouchén himself, who considers himself discriminated against because of his looks, which he describes in the following words: ‘Tal vez a la vista de su piel oscura y achinada – la sangre india confluyendo en el torrente sinológico –, creyó que era un filipino vietnamita, y se quizo burlar’ (2002: 122–23). A Latin American mestizo identity, which has traditionally excluded the Chinese (López 2016: 125), is imagined as interpreted to be ‘Filipino Vietnamese’, thus adding to the superimposition of layers which inform identities.

Furthermore, this superimposition of layers also transpires through the novel’s challenge to the traditional genre of detective novel. As Clemencia Ardila shows, the novel builds upon but goes beyond the traditional detective genre,
combining a detective style novel with a metafictional reflection on literature itself, and constructing a fiction (the resurgence of a conflict centred around the manuscript) based on an historical event (the Boxer uprising). Ardila explores the former through her analysis of the novel’s two epigraphs: a quote from Graham Greene, novelist, travel writer and spy (Dann 1999: 159–60; Hulme 2011: 361–62), and one from Witold Gombrowicz, a Polish writer who migrated to Argentina before the outbreak of the Second World War. The epigraphs, Ardila argues, warn the reader of the impostures or deceptions that the novel will disclose: such as the impostures of the characters, the imposture of the narrative voices or the imposture entailed in the obtaining of the manuscript and how what happens with the manuscript in the future is resolved (2003: 122–24).

Greene’s quote comes from an interview in which he claims that he never wanted to belong to the secret service and did not want to be a spy; it was the result, he states, of ‘las circunstancias, la guerra, un vago interés por las atmósferas oscuras, el hastío…’ (2002: 8). Indeed, his words insist on the fact that circumstances are central to events, beyond desire, and that one sometimes ends up in places one did not intend to be in the first place. Broadly reminding us of Greene, Suárez is a journalist-cum-spy in China. As such, Ardila notes, he challenges a stereotype of the literary spy, as he is not good-looking or elegant, he is not successful with women, does not know how to use a gun, and he is easily frightened (2013: 77).

Gombrowicz’s quote is from his book Ferdydurke (2000). The extract discusses the role of the second-rate writer: repudiated by the common reader, repudiated by his own reality, which exposes him as the imitator of the great authors, and repudiated by Art for being incompetent and deficient (2002: 8). In this case, the quote explores the formation of identity, and the way in which time and
circumstance have real effects on people’s lives. While its reference to the second-rate writer is echoed in the figure of Chouchén, the statement itself allows that reality may be more complex, and points instead to its hegemonic stance, uttered by a narrator with the power to judge and decide. By revealing this powerful narrator, the novel opens by suggesting the existence of other possibilities for this secondary writer. Furthermore, Ricardo Piglia once stated that Gombrowicz was the greatest modern writer in Argentina; while Ernesto Sábato and Juan José Saer, among other Argentine authors, also discussed Gombrowicz in relation to the Argentine literary canon (Kobylecka-Piwonska 2012: 333–35). The epigraph thus also questions what is ‘Argentine’ or ‘Latin American’, as well as authenticity and the position of the writer in a global context, evoking Jorge Luis Borges’ essay El escritor argentino y la tradición (1976). Indeed, this authenticity is further emphasised by the fact that, in the end, the reader learns that two copies of the manuscript have been made, so each character can retrieve a version. The manuscript is thus never again a unique original document.

Resolving the conflict by producing copies, the novel references China’s economic productivity (Fernández Bravo 2015: 65), while also allowing a playful and open interpretation. In the style of postmodern narrative, these new copies of the manuscript involve the reader in a process of conjecture. In the postscript to his novel The Name of the Rose (2004), Umberto Eco argues that the appeal of detective fiction is conjecture, where a hypothesis is formed by speculation that also works through narrative. Eco explains the ‘rhizomatic maze’, building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari use the rhizome to picture the way ‘things’ relate to other ‘things’, providing an alternative to linear models of interpretation, and suggesting that language also works in this way (1987: 1987:
While they argue that in language there are always numerous meanings suggested, Eco argues that ‘the rhizome is so constructed that [it has] no centre, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite’ (1985: 15). From this perspective, the production of copies evokes Borges’ parody of detective fiction; when the manuscript is found, copies are produced, offering closure to the detective story, but not in the way expected from the classics of the genre (Nicol 2009: 175). Indeed, the novel offers a structure, but it simultaneously reveals that it is never definitively structured (Eco 1985: 15).

Hoyos also notes how, throughout the novel, layers of identities and experiences come to be superimposed (2013: 93). In this sense, he argues, Gamboa signals how, for Latin Americans, the encounter with China is never a ‘direct relation’, and thus is always mediated. The manuscript, according to Hoyos, is a metonym for the Orient itself, and does not resolve the enigma of otherness, but rather dissolves it (2013: 94); he states that finding the other means getting over misunderstandings. However, otherness cannot be dissolved, as the novel does not permit China to be discovered by the characters. Instead, I argue, they become aware of the constructedness of the ‘other’. Gamboa thus offers a critique of the negative connotations of imposture, positing it instead as part of a new kind of cosmopolitanism, one which takes into consideration power imbalance. Layering is thus not rejected but rather embraced as part of identity. The novel thus defies exclusive identities, as in the following words, uttered by Suárez: ‘[…] todos aquí son ex algo. Ex jesuitas, ex sacerdotes, ex alcohólicos. Al fin y al cabo todo el mundo fue antes otra cosa’ (2002: 182). In its challenge of exclusive identities, the novel intervenes in discourses of belonging and identity.
Precisely at the moment when the Latin Americans restore the peace, with each group possessing a copy of the manuscript, the novel dismisses any hierarchical differentiation through which Latin America could be posited as peripheral. Hoyos states that the fact that the Latin Americans restore peace can be read as a strengthening of Sino-Latin American relations, or as recognition of how rare and almost impossible these relations now are. He also notes how Chouchén and Suárez go to China because of the positions they occupy in Texas and Paris, as if indicating that a South-South relation would need the mediation of the First World (Hoyos 2013: 93). However, while the novel sheds light on the histories of engagement between China and Latin America, mentioning the Peruvian exploitation of Chinese workers for example, it suggests an unmediated link between them. The fact that the manuscript belonged to the group that led the ‘Boxer rebellion’, which was countered by a military campaign led by a multinational coalition involving eight countries (Ouellet 2009: 507), seems ironic: it is foreigners again who restore the peace, albeit this time by non-violent means and through people who are not nationals of major Western powers.

Hoyos goes on to argue that in the novel a direct relationship between Asia and Latin America seems fragile, mediated by travel permits and language barriers, as material conditions affect the characters’ freedom to roam around the world like early-modern European adventurers (2013: 93). This mediation, he argues, recalls the precariousness of Latin American cosmopolitanism in real life. However, I contend that instead of pointing to a fragility linking Asia and Latin America, or to the precariousness of a Latin American cosmopolitanism, Gamboa emphasises the power imbalance contained in the relationship by making the novel’s characters aware of this. In other words, Gamboa shows how the Latin American characters are
aware of the historical and material conditions that mediate their freedom to roam
the world. By emphasizing subjectivities, he grants agency to the Latin American
subject, making him (the male characters in his novel) aware of the surrounding
power imbalance and thus establishing a cosmopolitanism that accounts for such
difference. In this cosmopolitan context, the connection between Asia and Latin
America is relational and contingent, as ‘no one person or group of persons is
ultimately in charge in the sense of plotting or controlling the general course of
events’, borrowing words from Schoene (2011: 2).

The characters and the ways they relate to China are defined by their
diasporic displacement and by being ‘between cultures’, as Hubert also notes (2012:
55). This ‘third space’ reveals their cosmopolitan condition: for example, Chouchén
is a Peruvian of Chinese origin who lives in Texas and Suárez is a Colombian
journalist settled in Paris. The novel thus displaces the notion of belonging,
continuously deferred, or made available, for example, by Chouchén and his
fetishistic attachment to Peruvian themes. The superimposition of layers, as well as
the hybrid or interstitial emergences of identity, might correspond to the notion of an
‘impostor’ divested of its negative connotation.

According to this reading, ‘imposture’ emerges instead as a script of
superimposed layers, accessible not only through the character’s identities but also
through the narrative structure. By acknowledging the contradictions contained in
the imposture, the novel uncovers the power imbalance inherent in any encounter.
Thus, Gamboa questions binary alterities, removes a fetishistic notion of the other,
and discloses the fetishistic impulse of the stereotype as developed by Bhabha.
Simultaneously, he engages with Ahmed’s critique of the fetishised stranger cut off
from its histories of determination (2000: 6). The ‘impostor’ and ‘imposture’ when
separated from the intention to deceive, and combined with the embodiment of the multiple aspects that inform our identities, might be seen in Gamboa’s writing to characterise a different form of cosmopolitanism.

In this sense, Gamboa may be read as engaging with Charles Hatfield’s critique of Latin American cultural and literary studies, for their repudiation of universalism and their commitment to identity and difference, as presented in his book, *The Limits of Identity* (2015: 1–10). While Hatfield’s view of the cosmopolitan is restricted, since he considers it reliant on the occupation of ‘vast, cosmopolitan’ subject positions (2015: 6), his call for non-identitarian readings sheds significant light on my interpretation of the novel as a call for a new Latin American cosmopolitanism. Hatfield notices how solving issues of economic injustice entails erasing difference, while solving issues of cultural injustice entails celebrating and indeed preserving difference (2015: 108). As he observes in Latin America, ‘the politics of cultural dehierarchization has created a machine by which hierarchies are endlessly redescribed as difference, which in turn is celebrated as such’ (Hatfield 2015: 108). Hatfield explains that to distinguish between economic injustice and cultural difference remains difficult, and proposes instead that we think of an alternative future for Latin America in terms that are no longer identitarian (2015: 109). From my perspective, Hatfield’s emphasis on the challenge that an understanding of a Latin American identity entails indicates a notion of community that is ‘inoperative’ in Nancy’s terms: non-essentialist, complex and diverse. Indeed, Hatfield’s arguments coincide with Kaplan’s awareness of how ‘discourses of location can be used to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of sameness’ (1996: 187). What Hatfield seems to be calling for is, if not explicitly, an acknowledgement of Ahmed’s
notion of ‘stranger fetishism’ that is inscribed in difference; this stranger fetishism, I argue, is central to Gamboa’s understanding of cosmopolitan identities.

From this perspective I agree with Hubert, who argues that the choice of an Oriental setting in Los impostores, and the challenge to Orientalism, is a critique of the legacy of the Boom and its accentuation of Latin American specificity and the self-exoticising operations of magical realism. She sees this critique as entailing an affirmation of ‘the potential expression of literature, understood as a cosmopolitan sphere where national boundaries of enunciation are overcome and the discursive space is de-centered, [and] it is imagined universal’ (Hubert 2012: 46). This affirmation, she argues, establishes a homogeneous arena which allows for the Latin American writer to embark on a discussion of the ‘European tradition of Romantic travel writing that forwarded the orientalist imagination they deconstruct’ (Hubert 2012: 46). However, Hubert seems to dismiss the power imbalance embedded in the cosmopolitan call that the novel shares with the reader. As emphasised by Kaplan there is always something beyond historical specificity at stake when valorizing a generalised hybridity that is presumed to construct a cosmopolitan identity, without considering the ‘diverse and complex shifts in the organization of capital, geographies, and populations’ (1996: 136). The novel, I argue, does not take a homogeneous arena for granted, but rather emphasizes the power imbalance it contains. Instead of pointing to the precariousness of Latin American cosmopolitanism specifically (Hoyos 2013: 93) or claiming a homogeneous arena (Hubert 2012: 46), I argue that the novel informs us of the precariousness of cosmopolitanism per se, when it masks the power imbalances that being a free traveller conceals, as Hoyos also notes when he discusses the freedom of characters to wander the world (2013: 93).
Throughout the text the reader learns about different kinds of travellers whose experience abroad discloses power imbalances. On the one hand, the main characters are shown to be privileged travellers who choose to go to China and mostly move through spaces which are usually used by foreigners. Simultaneously, the novel itself suggests differences between these same travellers. For example, there seem to be no material restrictions to Klauss’ experiences in China, facilitated by his knowledge of Chinese, which allows him to navigate the city freely. A limitation to his movement is the French Embassy’s requirement of a permit to access their archives, and yet this restriction is easily resolved by his secretary in Germany, who arranges everything for him.

Chouchén also emerges as privileged, as a Peruvian academic with a career in the U.S. at the prestigious ‘Austin University’. While he self-exoticises his Latin Americanness, such as by drinking Inca Kola and pisco sour, or the fact that his e-mail is elcondorpasa@yahoo.com, the reader is told he is an internationally recognised literary critic. When he is suspended from his academic post for his unscrupulous attitudes, he still has the option of flying to China, showing that the change in his career does not have a major effect on his personal finances. However, the reader is told that his hotel in Beijing is not as impressive as Klauss’ one. While this difference in hotels could be due to their relative academic positions, the characterisation highlights the construction of a stereotypical ‘Western’ academic in contrast to a ‘not-so-Western’ one, pointing to a power imbalance between East and West. In the case of Suárez, while he also emerges as a privileged traveller, his choices are limited, as French officials remind him that his status in France depends on their authority, so he must travel to China at their request.
The characters’ subject positions are thus disclosed as historically informed and dynamic, where just to ‘articulate multiplicity is not enough’ (Kaplan 1996: 176). Indeed, the circumstances of the different characters emerge within different subject positions and are never narrowed down; their subject positions are instead revealed as multiple, constructed out of the complex positioning of different kinds of ‘nomads’. For example, while Tinajo can travel to China to an international conference, she discusses with Suárez the limitations preventing others from travelling around the world.

As Ahmed shows, the ease of movement or transgression of borders becomes a mechanism for the reproduction of social privilege, granting ‘particular subjects with the ability to see and to move beyond the confined spaces of a given locality’ (2000: 85). While the privileged travellers in the novel have somewhat limited agency, they are still able to travel. And, furthermore, they have access to spaces to which they can retreat. In Los impostores, the hotel acts as a ‘neutral’ space where there are apparently no language barriers or threats. While at first the hotel room also emerges as Augé’s ‘non-place’, in the novel it is closer to Peter Merriman’s critique of Augé, which argues that Augé ‘fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity and materiality of the social networks bound up with the production of such environments’ (2004: 147). The threats within the city that appear in the novel, such as the secret societies that want to get hold of the manuscript, intervene in this protected space, as rooms get broken into, and their privileged condition is interrupted. Indeed, the unevenness of their privilege is also reflected in the situations in which the travellers find themselves.

Chouchén is also presented as conscious of power imbalances beyond his frantic hyper-awareness of the racism he experiences. While he blames his
nationality for his problems (2002: 20), he admits that the country cannot be blamed, suggesting a non-essentialist view of community. This awareness of subjectivity is further emphasised by the novel’s contrasts with other characters that are not aware of their own privilege, such as when Klauss is described in a matter-of-fact way that seems to parodically highlight the power distribution contained in privilege. He is described as having

Un salario que le permitía adoptar con calma ese aire de persona retraída, alzada del suelo, nefelibata que deambula en el mundo de las esencias y por estas groseras trochas de la realidad, senderos de tierra por los que arrastran sus insulsas vidas la mayoría de los mortales (2002: 42).

The pace of the utterance reinforces the difference between a normal life and those who face the world from a privileged perspective. And awareness of this difference seems to exist when the power is lacking, rather than when there is an excess. As a German ‘ivory tower’ academic, Klauss seems unaware of power inequality. Following Ahmed, who argues that communities become established ‘as a way of moving through space’ (2000: 34, italics in the original), the novel reveals a cosmopolitan calling that emphasises power imbalance, and makes the reader aware of it. By suggesting this new cosmopolitanism, the novel emphasises that there is no ‘level playing field’ (Deckard and others 2015: 22) for either the Latin American subject, or the Latin American writer. This emphasis on the lack of a level playing field, in turn, reveals an uneven cosmopolitanism which sheds light on the ways in which communities, and specifically Latin American communities, are thought about.

Following Kaplan, the age of telecommunication and transnational cultural production requires the imagining of distance, and I would add, epistemological enunciation, in complicated ways. This situation, she explains, leads to ‘new subjectivities that produce new relationships to space as well as time so that distance
is [...] a terrain that houses new subjects of criticism’ (Kaplan 1996: 142). While stressing the unevenness of epistemological enunciation can also lead to the essentialising of difference, I argue here that it is more useful than the notion of a homogenous arena, as it demands the acknowledgment of uneven distribution of power.

In the novel, new subjectivities appear informed by the characters’ awareness of the distribution of power implicit in the description of ‘others’, such as when Suárez reads Michaux’s description of the Chinese and states,

¿En qué año escribió Michaux esta estupidez? Todo el mundo ha visto un chino. En todas las ciudades grandes de Europa y América hay chinos, y entonces, ¿qué sentido tiene describirlos? No lo entiendo. ¡Es un acto arrogante y burlón que no estoy dispuesto a tragar! (2002: 25)

By telling the reader that the travellers are aware and are critical of canonical Western travelogues of China, the novel shows it is not China itself that the characters have previously engaged with but rather a mediated representation of it. As Lisle suggests, ‘the travelogue is an excellent illustration of how discursive power is always characterised by an antagonism between the articulation of hegemony and the inclusion of difference’ (2011: 277). In their reading of travelogues, the characters are exposed to this antagonism of hegemony and difference. So while Suárez stereotypes the Chinese, he simultaneously demands a revision of those precise representations. Gamboa thus appears wary of “thin” cultural cosmopolitanism approaches that tend to conflate certain cultural phenomena that are typical of the current global condition [...] with mundane and everyday expressions of cosmopolitanism’ (Rovisco and Nowicka 2011: 7). Indeed, these ‘thin’ approaches to cultural cosmopolitanism can remain oblivious to the
hierarchies of power and material conditions underpinning any encounter (Gilbert and Lo 2007: 8–9).

The need to be aware of subjectivity also emerges in the words of a Chinese priest who tells his story to Suárez, ‘Estuve en la policía secreta que luchó contra la revuelta de estudiantes, en Tiananmen, y le digo una cosa: ustedes, en Occidente, no entendieron nada de lo que pasó aquí’ (2002: 178). Interrupting the narration with a serious, non-parodic moment, the novel does not go on to explain what actually happened. A key ellipsis, the utterance is revealing of the difference between an event that has been perceived as a mere object of study and a defining image of Chinese Communism in the ‘West’, and an event that was experienced intimately by a real person. By not explaining what it is that actually happened, the novel leaves the interpretation open, offering the possibility of new readings of past events, emphasising subjectivity and concealing a defining moment from ‘Western’ consumption and global appropriation.

However, the novel does not endorse relativism. On the contrary, it emphasises the importance of what Ahmed terms ‘histories of determination’ (2000: 7) which inform our experiences in the world, alerting us to the interpellation of the past in the present. Indeed, the novel seems to emphasise the different aspects of life and the impossibility of privileging one over the other. Suspension of judgement and the problems of generalisation are recalled, for example, in a discussion between Tinajo and Suárez. When he questions her decisions, she replies, ‘no es el momento de dar lecciones morales, sweet heart. Pronto ambos estaremos muertos y nuestros cuerpos serán devorados por hordas de gusanos cuyas larvas ya viven en nuestro intestino’ (2002: 343, italics in the original). Just as the novel exposes the illusion of an essential notion of community, with death as the reminder of this illusion, the
narrator of the final section interrupts the laws of physics, addressing the reader from an unknown dimension which he calls ‘la nada’ (2002: 349). From this perspective, the novel embraces Nancy’s notion of community, with death as the figure through which a non-essential condition of community can be apprehended. As Nancy explains, community is revealed in the death of others; as community presents its members with their mortal truth, death reveals the impossible, ‘inoperative’, community (1991: 15).

In this sense, the novel discloses a Nancean-informed notion of cosmopolitanism, aware of power imbalances in which the Chinese setting extends and questions the geographical boundaries of Latin America. Linking it to Borges’s call for no boundaries (1976), Hubert argues that Gamboa’s choice of an Oriental setting ‘responds to a relocation of the subject position of the Latin American writer from a point of repression (marginal) to one of emancipation (cosmopolitan)’ (2012: 46, italics in the original), thus inverting the prescriptive formula of the peripheral writer who presents a vision of Latin America to the world, and offering instead a Latin American vision of ‘the world’. Hubert’s approach sheds significant light on the Latin American writer in relation to his/her position in the world, but locates him/her according to contrasting terms — the marginal and the cosmopolitan — a difference that I do not consider to be fixed in the novel or in Borges’ essay. Hubert sees the novel as rewriting travel literature into fictions of travel, and sees this rewriting as evidence of the cosmopolitan attitude of the Latin American writer, who intervenes from a peripheral point of enunciation (2012: 56). However, I see the writer as challenging the bearing of any point of enunciation, developing a critique of the hegemonic ideas of centre and periphery, suggesting an idea of community that is no longer nationally or essentially bounded.
From this perspective, the novel opens up to Schoene’s understanding of cosmopolitanism, as he states that this ‘new cosmopolitanism promotes an open and flexible practice of community that can accommodate the whole world’ (2011: 21). The novel insists on a de-centred space, yet is still historically informed by power imbalance. From this perspective, Gamboa exposes power imbalance, while evoking a specific cosmopolitanism that acknowledges imaginaries, and myths working at both individual and social levels.

Like *Los impostores*, *Hotel Pekín* also plays with stereotypes and emphasises the failures of an essentialist understanding of a ‘China’ as a fixed community. Gamboa’s novel *Hotel Pekín* has received, as far as I am aware, no critical attention. The novel has been mentioned to be neo-Orientalist without further exploring the term or the novel (Gutiérrez-Mouat 2016). Another commentary praises the writing of Gamboa but appears disappointed with the story itself (Montaña Cuellar 2011).

Indeed, there is no comment in relation to the depiction of ‘China’ available in the novel. *Hotel Pekín* (2008) recounts the main character, Frank Michalski’s trip to China for professional reasons. In his encounters with other characters, Michalski’s stereotyped constructions fall apart, revealing his self-acknowledged ‘cosmopolitanism’ to be precarious, while pointing to the power imbalance of these encounters. From this perspective, and through the idea of mixture and hybridity in Nancy’s conceptualisation of the *mêlée* (1991), the novel also seems to expose the failure of globalization as integration.

The story commences with Frank Michalski seated on a United Airlines flight taking off from New York, on his way to Beijing. The reader is told by a heterodiegetic narrator that Michalski is a middle-aged Colombian national who has settled in the U.S., and whose original name was Francisco Munévar. He is sent to
China by his company *Enhancing the Future* to lead a course for Chinese businessmen. His mission is to enlighten them on the ‘Western’ ways of doing business, including how to serve wine or how to dress. On the flight he meets Bordewich, a journalist of Brazilian origin who has also settled in the U.S. In China Michalski is met by Ming Cheng, a woman who assists him during his time in Beijing. There he also meets Li Qiang, a rich Chinese man taking his course.

Michalski’s identity is revealed to be torn three ways between the ‘West’, Latin America, and exotised notions of the ‘East’. His simplistic views on China, made available through his notes, reveal him to be naive regarding human nature; he believes, for example, that by following his company’s manual he can change the way people think (2008: 43–44). The narrator knows all about the characters, and is also judgemental, making jokes and showing off his/her knowledge of China. The novel also includes Bordewich’s adventures in Beijing and tells us about Li’s personal life. Michalski’s interactions with these characters will lead him to question his life until that point, thus affording him a new perspective.

Throughout the novel, Michalski perceives China as standing for a certain way of being that is different from a ‘Western’ existence. Because he ultimately changes as a result of his encounters with other persons, and not because of China itself, the novel reveals ‘China’ to be a fetish of difference and distance. In this sense, the text emerges as somewhat similar to existing texts and discourses on obtaining knowledge on China, revealing itself as a parody of these texts and discourses. Parody, as defined by Simon Dentith, ‘includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice’ (2000: 9). To understand parodies, one must think of them in terms of a chain of utterances situated in discourse (Dentith 2000: 4). Parody can be seen to destabilise
essential knowledge, revealing that there are no secure grounds for certainties (Dentith 2000: 3, 9, 37). This understanding of parody is especially relevant to my argument here, as it sheds light on how the text is able to reveal essentialism at work through the figure of ‘China’, while it simultaneously deconstructs and critiques it.

In order to develop these ideas, I will now focus on the exchanges between Michalski and the other characters, and the metafictional aspect disclosed through the apparent conflation of Bordewich, the narrator and Gamboa himself. Ultimately I argue that the novel challenges essentialist positions on culture and identity, evoking what Kaplan terms ‘new subjectivities’ (1996: 142). From this perspective, the novel seems to explore the potential of the transnational, suggesting a new understanding of the subject. To my mind, it is in the encounter that these new meanings are created.

Bordewich is Michalski’s first interlocutor during his trip. On the aeroplane where they meet, Bordewich tells Michalski that he is a journalist writing for magazines including Selecciones of the Reader’s Digest, the same magazine that Lu Hsin, the protagonist of Una novela china (Aira 1987: 73), liked to read. In common with contemporary travel writers as described by Lisle, Bordewich ‘fashion[s] a self characterised by solitude, masculinity and irony’ (2011: 77). His personality emerges as a very good interlocutor for the philosophical views he discusses with Michalski. With different worldviews, they both think they know how to conquer or truly know the Chinese (2008: 27). Both Michalski and Bordewich seem to build and indeed rely on prejudice, thus setting the tone for the rest of the novel. For example, as they discuss globalization, Bordewich insists on the importance of local culture and the impossibility of a global culture. In contrast, Michalski seems to embody a universal worldview in which ‘cualquier individuo puede ser sensible a los dramas de Shakespeare, la música dodecafónica o el pecado original’ (2008: 19).
Most of the exchanges with Bordewich occur in the hotel bar, a place that Bordewich ‘adores’ (2008: 29). The hotel, as a temporary home, can be considered a paradigmatic chronotope (time and space image) of globalisation. Augé has described the hotel run by international chains as one of the emblematic non-spaces of postmodernity; as a transit space without historicity or any specific original characteristics (Augé 2009: 79; Bournot 2015: 142). According to Augé, the hotel becomes a cosmopolitan space by containing different cultures in one space, yet it concurrently undermines its cosmopolitanism by offering isolation from the culture that surrounds it. In this sense, it is especially interesting that the hotel in the novel is the famous Hotel Beijing on Chang’an Avenue, in the novel described as ‘con una gran leyenda y mil anécdotas’ (2008: 31), and where the footage of the famous Tank Man near Tian’anmen Square was filmed from. Augé’s theory is challenged by this underlining of the iconic historicity of the area. Simultaneously, it evokes a globally recognised image from history.

However, if we follow Augé, the ‘Beijing Hotel’ in the novel is certainly a suspended place; while being, on one level, a symbol in China, it is also a place where China is not present. For example, Michalski drinks Lagavulin and Talisker whiskies there, and international music is played (2008: 83, 109, 202). Furthermore, the characters seem unaware of the local labour force employed in the hotel. From this perspective, it also seems to evoke the consumer culture that has developed in China since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. In this capitalist China, the hotel evokes a ‘neutral’ and ‘international’ space where there are no apparent language barriers. From the point of view of Michalski and the narrator, the hotel is a calm and protected space, where illegal topics in China, such as Falun Gong, can be talked
about freely. Beyond the hotel, Michalski is always aided by Ming Cheng, disclosing his need for a guide in China.

Michalski acts arrogantly in his attempts to seduce her. While he tells her that he has no stable partner and that this kind of relationship can happen between ‘personas lo suficientemente cultas y cosmopolitas como para saber que no sólo hay un modo de vivir la vida’ (2008: 144), revealing a ‘liberal’ attitude towards relationships, he also states that a woman needs a man, and he then pays the bill, a classic ‘macho’ trope. His lack of sensitivity is depicted through his relationship with Ming, as he uses expressions such as ‘la economía global experimentará un gran salto adelante, como se dijo aquí hace cuatro décadas’ (2008: 117), decisively ignoring the history of Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward as he uses the term as shorthand for economic development in general.

While Ming initially rejects him, they later get closer, and she ends up acting as his confidant. Ming seems to be the only person with whom he is honest, while she criticises him directly for his paternalistic, biased and stereotyped approach to China (2008: 184). In relation to his meeting with Ming, the narrator tells us how Michalski had an inaccurate idea of how Chinese woman looked (2008: 115), in his recognition of the ‘other’ as ‘other’ on the basis of how they appear. The ‘stranger’, as Ahmed explains, is produced precisely as that which we already recognise as a ‘stranger’ (2000: 3). Michalski conceptualises ‘strangers’ as different from his own essentialised ‘Western’ persona, establishing a boundary between him and them. However, Michalski’s Colombian origin, disclosed by the novel, allows the reader to question the character’s own ‘Westernness’ in terms of Ahmed’s critique of multiculturalism which, she warns, ‘implies that differences can be reconciled through the […] framework which has historically defined Western values as neutral
The novel thus seems to signal the reigning Western epistemology that blinds Michalski’s own ability to consider himself non-Western. By pointing towards Michalski’s blindness, the novel seems to hint at a preference for a non-Western centred epistemology and a non-essential notion of identity or community.

Ming’s words also seem to echo the way Li thinks of Michalski. Li is *nouveau riche* and while wealthy and successful, he has continued to be traditional and relatively austere. While both men have certain experiences in common, including their status as ‘self-made men’ (2008: 11), their worldviews clash throughout the novel. Li’s aversion to change does not fit with Michalski’s welcoming of change, progress and universal values. Michalski is revealed as naïve, in that he is unable to convince Li to endorse his project. Li explains to him instead, ‘usted debe saber adaptar sus teorías a nuestra cultura, de lo contrario fracasará’ (2008: 127). In their relationship of opposites, Michalski defines Li as a ‘reticent actor’, a term that he uses in his work for people who are difficult to convince. Indeed, this use of the word actor reveals his role as leader of the course as a theatrical one; a performance which assumes its audience will be convinced. Indeed, Michalski seems to use very ‘technical’, ‘rational’ language to approach his relationship with Li, who in contrast, is presented as instinctive. This contrast emerges as a mapping process in terms of gender stereotypes onto national differences. This mapping of the relationship also appears when Li invites Michalski to his country house, where the ‘Colombian-American’ is surprised at the beauty of the place as he judges it with hegemonic authority, further revealing his self-sanctioned, prejudiced ideas on China.
Li continuously disagrees with Michalski, emphasizing China’s difference while Michalski believes in ‘universal’ methods, as he states ‘China no puede ser tan diferente del resto del mundo’ (2008: 128). Michalski’s ‘overemphasizing of similarities’, while relying on differences, reminds us of Ahmed’s warning in her explorations of multiculturalism: that the dominant subject retains its normativity and requires the stranger to inhabit degrees of subalternity. In Ahmed’s words, ‘the act of welcoming “the stranger” […] produces the very figure of “the stranger”’ (2000: 97). This contradiction is highlighted by Ming, as she states, ‘curioso que admires culturas diferentes cuando tu trabajo es hacer que todas se parezcan’ (2008: 141). As Ahmed warns, markers of difference can become barriers that ‘restrict the movement and capacities of essentially disembodied individuals’ (2000: 107). Both Li’s and Michalski’s construction of the ‘stranger’ reveal the way in which the ‘mythologized narrativization of displacement’, does not ‘question[…] the cultural, political, and economic grounds of […] privileges, means, and limitations’ (Kaplan 1996: 2).

For example, Li explains to Michalski how teaching the Chinese how to deal with the ‘West’ can be just as important as teaching the ‘West’ to deal with China. Li emphasises the differences between them, as he depicts a communal aspect of Chinese politics and society, which continues to reinforce binaries such as communist/non-communist (2008: 169). Following Mariano Siskind’s ideas, I see the novel as denouncing the nationalistic patterns of self-marginalization that reinforce hegemonic ‘Western’ centric structures (2014: 6). In Michalski’s change from an essentialist view on culture to a sensitive awareness of its nuances, he eventually seems aware of what Lisle describes as the ‘the distinctions between here and there with familiar binary oppositions between a safe, civilised home and a
dangerous, uncivilised elsewhere’ (2011: 137). The novel thus challenges all ways in which a ‘Western’ centre is maintained, simultaneously questioning the relevance of locations and identities bound to nationhood, and instead hinting at what the transnational might allow.

This preference for the transnational emerges with particular force when Michalski discusses his origins with Li and Ming. Michalski admits to his nationality, stating: ‘soy colombiano de Colombia, Sudamérica, no confundir con Colombo, Sri Lanka, ni con Columbia, Estados Unidos’ (2008: 94). Li retorts to Michalski saying:

[…] habría que ser muy estúpido para confundir a Colombia con Colombo […] Usted es alto, fornido, de tez blanca. Nada que ver con un srilankés, que es de piel cenicienta y estructura filiforme, producto de una ingesta calórica baja por razones culturales, caso del vegetarianismo, entre otros. Y lo de Columbia […] es francamente ridículo […] (2008: 94).

The novel thus suggests the effect that an exchange with others can have on the subject, reminding us of Ahmed’s point that in ‘meetings with others, subjects are perpetually reconstituted: the work of identity formation is never over, but can be understood as the sliding across of subjects in their meeting with others’ (2000: 7).

While Li is cultured and knowledgeable, he explains that he can distinguish Michalski through racialised features, remaining within essentialist structures of identity. The parodic representation of a nationality thus exposes the contradictions that essentialism contains. As Li and Michalski continue to construct ‘fixed’ others, the novel reveals the impossibility of resolution that emerges from their exchange.

The notion of unresolvability emerges mostly through Michalski’s experience of change. His change while in China is exemplified also in that Michalski more regularly thinks of Latin America. Michalski’s change seems complete towards the end of the novel as he tells his boss he wants to take a
sabbatical, and as he thinks of China as a deforming structure, as a place of 
estrangement which has had the effect of changing him (2008: 213). Michalski’s 
changes materialize in his anger when his boss states, regarding future operations in 
China, ‘Podríamos poner a todo esto un nombre chino, algo así como “Operación 
Viento del Este,” ellos adoran ese tipo de tonterías, ¿no es así?’ (2008: 147). And yet 
Orientalist views such as those of Michalski’s boss continue to be present throughout 
Michalski’s utterances. In this sense, Michalski’s loss of belief in the relevance of 
essentialist cultural knowledge leads him to a critique any essentialist view. That 
essentialist cultural knowledge is exposed as an empty token of exchange, concretely 
manifest in his ‘failed experience’, highlighted to him by Bordewich, Ming and Li, 
who expose his prejudiced views of the Chinese.

At the same time, the novel also discloses and questions the ‘essentialist’ 
identities and views of the other characters, including Li as the wise sage, by telling 
the reader about his relationship with his children and wife, who lead him to abandon 
his ‘traditional’ views and even consider a visit to the ‘West’. Not provoking a crisis 
as in Michalski’s case, these ‘traditional’ views are able to coexist with more modern 
ways of life. Thus, the unresolved conflicts between different worldviews do not 
imply the disavowal of conventional positions, but point to the pervading presence of 
stereotypes and essentialist otherness, while simultaneously deconstructing China as 
a place of deformation, estrangement and otherness.

As in Los impostores, a continuous feature of Hotel Pekín is the use of 
stereotyped descriptions. Michalski is presented as the ‘typical’ Latin American who 
‘made it’ in the U.S.; while Bordewich is the ‘typical’ journalist who travels the 
world, Li is the ‘typical’ traditional Chinese businessman of contemporary China 
who has had a meteoric career and has made his fortune on his own. Multiple
stereotypes regarding the Chinese emerge through both Michalski’s and Bordewich’s utterances, such as when Bordewich advises Michalski that the Chinese are a ‘pueblo orgulloso […] debe darles a entender que los admira’ (2008: 26). Michalski and Bordewich discuss how the Chinese ‘son muy simbólicos’ (2008: 83), and they both notice ‘particularidades chinas’ (2008: 111). Not only do the characters hold stereotyped views, but also the narrator who describes Michalski as having a ‘poblado bigote que delataba su origen sudamericano’ (2008: 10), reduces a South American identity to a thick moustache.

In this regard, the novel calls attention to the fetishised views of Michalski regarding China, at the same time as it sheds light on how essentialist, stereotypical constructions are brought about. Michalski’s exchanges with other characters emphasise the different experiences informed by power imbalance. China’s economic growth has not meant an equal distribution of capital, which is made explicit in the novel through travel itself. For example, through Bordewich, Michalski learns about experiences of poverty in China. The material differences that inform the distribution of power emerge as the reader learns that Li is a rich, important and influential Chinese businessman, while Ming explains how she needs to work to support her son, reminding the reader of the permeating logic of capitalism.

It is precisely by showing how difference is articulated through stereotypes, and the effects of the accumulation of capital on the material lives of people, that the novel makes the reader aware of the distribution of power and its real, tangible effects. In other words, it is not their experience of ‘China’ that changes the characters’ perceived identities, but what they experience in relation to other people during the trip. By showing that there is no essential identity, the novel demands an
acknowledgment of those discourses of difference as fictions that are imposed on experience in order to make sense of reality and community. The novel does not conceptualize new notions of nationhood; instead, it suggests new subjectivities of the (Latin American) subject. These new subjectivities, situating new relationships in space as well as time, are further explored through the metafictional aspects of the novel.

Metafiction and intertextuality abound in the novel, constantly recalling texts and events that Gamboa had already included in his non-fictional travel account *Octubre en Pekín* (2001). For example, the story of David Crook, supposedly written by Bordewich for the magazine ‘Selecciones’ is a reproduction of a section of Gamboa’s travel account (2001: 150–57). In *Octubre en Pekín*, the story is introduced as told to the writer by Carl, the son of David Crook, both real historical figures. Metafiction also emerges within *Los impostores*, as Michalski goes to a Caribbean bar at the Kempinsky Hotel, where he bumps into a Russian prostitute, who reminds the reader of Chouchén’s affairs.

Likewise, Bordewich replicates Gamboa’s visit to Baoshan cemetery (2008: 70, 74, 79, 2001: 195). What the narrator tells us about Bordewich’s visit is a third-person narration that Gamboa has already provided in the first person in his travel account. Indeed, the novel ends with Bordewich telling Michalski that he might write his story down (2008: 217). The wholesale repetition of paragraphs across the two books leads the reader to question the authenticity of the material, and thus what is ‘real’ in the novel, as well as to question the differences and borders between fiction and reality, as the ‘implied’ author becomes intertwined with the ‘real’ one. From this intertwining, the novel seems to demand to be read on one level as autobiography.
Indeed, Michalski’s ‘success in China’ and the role that Chouchén ascribes to the Chinese market, as a place to become famous, recalls Gamboa’s own experience. Gamboa’s first literary experiences in China were as part of a residency financed by the Spanish-Italian (at the time) publishing house Mondadori. In 2001, Mondadori asked seven young Spanish Language writers for a travelogue; the publishing house financed their stay in the city they were asked to write about. The collection, called Año Cero, was intended to show Spanish and Spanish-speaking Latin American visions of the world. As Estefanía Bournot states (2015: 140), these texts are revealed as engaging with the marketing dynamics of publishing houses, but they also reveal the expansion of the fictional spaces that are being written about.

Within this context, Gamboa’s statement: ‘Yo no quiero que nadie lea un libro mío por ser latinoamericano, sino porque le gusta lo que escribo’ (Ordaz 2012), expresses a desire to belong to a literature valued for itself within a global context. And regarding his interest in China, he states:

Después de muchos viajes, en este momento lo que más me interesa es llegar a un lugar donde todas tus referencias ya no funcionan. En China nadie sabe quién es John Lennon y ellos te miran con sorpresa si tú no sabes quién es el campeón de ping-pong. Es divertido ver que todos los iconos de nuestra cultura occidental son figuras de paja. Es un extrañamiento total y a mí eso me gusta, se aprende mucho (Zarzuela and García [n.d.]).

It is precisely the notion of ‘total estrangement’ that Michalski seems to experience in Hotel Pekín in his exchanges with Bordewich, Li and Ming, as well as a closure that is ultimately incomplete, as the reader never learns what Michalski does with his future. By remaining open to speculation, the novel challenges any closure of identity, emphasises interrelations and makes us question an essentialist understanding of community. Simultaneously, by situating the crisis of the Latin American subject in China, the novel exposes how internal conflicts are created and
recreated by interactions with other spaces as articulated by Massey (2005: 183). In this way, the novel reminds us of Massey’s caveat that while cultural difference may be internal to a culture, it is also a question of different others in distant lands (2005: 194). By discussing the position of the Latin American subject in the world, the limits of national identities and new imagings of global communities, the novel takes a cosmopolitan stance.

Through this cosmopolitan positioning, and as the characters continue to make sense of their experiences through stereotypes, the novel emphasises the mechanisms through which the idea of difference shapes the experience of the subject. In this sense, Los impostores suggests a call for a new vision of cosmopolitanism, which aims, at least in theory, to address the experience of subjects in contrast to a ‘traditional cosmopolitanism’ in which an elite bystander travelled under privileged circumstances (Schoene 2011: 3; Smith 2016: 171–73, 188). Hotel Pekín, on the other hand, presents a diagnosis of the Latin American subject within a globalised context. By denying the audience closure, the novel seems to build on Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as the in-between space where hegemonic and normalised practices can be re-articulated, allowing for new identities to emerge (1994: 53–56, 296). From this perspective, the embracing of uncertainty by Michalski might represent his experience of the mêlée, where unity is abandoned and the ‘being-in-common’ of subject and community is revealed.

Both Los impostores and Hotel Pekín emphasise togetherness, and the impossibility for the main characters to find any real centre to their identities, revealing the denial of inequality that discourses of difference and distance conceal. The novels uncover and remind the reader of historically and culturally embedded material inequality. From this perspective, the novels reveal their awareness of
Ahmed’s warning: a narrative that equates geographical movement with the transgression of identity ‘conceals the complex and contingent social relationships of antagonism which grant some subjects the ability to move freely at the expense of others’ (2000: 86). Recalling the dynamic and unfixed nature of the encounter as articulated by Ahmed (2000: 7–14), both Hotel Pekín and Los impostores challenge the notions of geographical bearings, centre and peripheries. This challenge, in turn, allows for the possibility of different geographies of affect and loyalty as developed by Massey (2005: 188), which, as we shall now see, is precisely the arena in which Sánchez Echenique’s El ombligo del dragón intervenes.

Read through Ahmed’s explorations of how differences, otherness and strangeness can become ‘properties’ of bodies and spaces over time, I argue here that El ombligo del dragón (2007) discloses various ways through which bodies can be read and recognised as different. Kaplan warns that an overemphasis on difference and similarities risks us losing sight of a world in which ‘new subjectivities’ produce new relationships with space and time. Read alongside Ahmed, Kaplan’s ideas allow us to explore the pervading regimes of difference which are shown to continue to inform Mexican society. From this perspective, through its exposure of the colonial history of epistemological classifications as arbitrary, the novel discloses the dynamics that establish ‘strangerness’ and community in Mexico. In what follows, I will explore the ways in which the novel emphasises the contingency of ‘strangerness’; this will entail drawing attention to the contrast between scientific and literary epistemologies, explored through the role that ‘China’ plays in a child’s albinism, and through the protagonist’s journey to China, both of which are experiences that turn the notion of the exotic on its head.
As with Gamboa’s Hotel Pekín, there seems to be no previous criticism or longer commentaries on Sánchez Echenique’s El ombligo del dragón. I have found two commentaries on the book: Valeria Luiselli’s review in Letras Libres (2007), an online critical journal, and the text of the book’s presentation by Pepe Vázquez (2007). In relation to the role of ‘China’ as a multidimensional signifier available in the novel, Luiselli states that China in the novel is revealed as an imagined space ‘que entraña lo otro, lo lejano’ which allows for the ‘vieja consigna del turismo spiritual – viajar a Oriente para buscarse a uno mismo’ (2007). And although the novel is set in contemporary times, Vázquez states that the novel is a trip that takes us to ‘la antigua China’ (2007), invoking through his comment a ‘China’ which recalls the fetish figure that I explore in this thesis. As far as I am aware, the specific role of China in the novel has not been commented upon further.

While Gamboa’s novels are in a sense realist novels, El ombligo del dragón includes indeterminate fantastical texts and interjections. It tells the story of a Mexican woman whose child, Elio, becomes an albino after the arrival in her home of an ivory crocodile statuette sent from China by his father, Ermilo. The woman may be Ale, a name only revealed towards the end of the novel. Ermilo, a biologist, is in China studying the origins of albinism. In search for answers regarding her son’s albinism, the woman visits Ermilo’s parents in Acapulco. She then travels to rural China, reuniting with Ermilo, who has discovered a cure for melanoma. Ermilo is then kidnapped and taken to Hong Kong where he is forced to give up the patent on his discovery. The end of the novel shows Ale back in Mexico and the indeterminacy of the ending reopens questions concerning the events narrated.

The reader is reminded of the contrast between scientific and literary epistemologies throughout the text as it evokes, through its notions of classification
and ordering, a type of colonial taxonomy. The novel is divided into forty-six chapters, resembling a chromosomic structure. It is organised in two sets of twenty-three chapters that share the same title format: a number followed by an ‘x’. The only exception is the final chapter, ‘23y’. As in Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela (1966), Luiselli notes (2007), there are two sets of chapters. The first set of chapters is narrated by the woman and includes the main story, while the second set includes various types of ‘texts’, such as poems, games with words, and a blank page. In the first set of ‘x’ chapters, the story is chronological. However, events can be told in a different order within the same chapter, confusing the reader regarding the chronological sequence. In the second set of chapters, events are temporally intercalated, and it remains unclear whether what the reader has read has actually occurred. Luiselli suggests that this second set of chapters evoke blogs and scrapbooks, and can be read as notes from a travel account (2007). Unlike Rayuela however, the reader is not offered the possibility of reading the novel in any non-consecutive way, but a particular order is imposed instead.

The scientific layout is interrupted by emotions that are not chronologically tethered, the impulsive reactions of the main character, and by anachronistic elements in the story. For example, the first set of chapters includes comments in parenthesis that could be utterances of the woman narrator, or of an implied author who could be the figure who has included the second set of chapters in the novel. The text continuously incorporates multiple contradiction-ridden voices and ideologies (Bakhtin 1981: 272). This inclusion of contradictory discourses is especially evident by the fact that the last chapter is not 23x, but 23y, representing an alteration in the chromosome’s structure. However, the interruption of this ‘y’ at the end also evokes sex determination, as human females have two of the same kind of
sex chromosomes (xx) while males have two different sex chromosomes (xy). While it simulates sex determination, the novel simultaneously challenges systematic fixity. The two sets of chapters play a fundamental role in exposing the scientific and literary ideologies available in the novel, ultimately not allowing the methodical scientific system to hold sway. While the main story-line is chronological, the second set of ‘x’ chapters suggests that these may be dreams, the product of the woman’s imagination, or the intervention of other ‘voices’ or worldviews.

Since fantastic events are not actually developed or explained, the novel shows up the notion of order and classification as fictitious and imposed. As noted by Luiselli (2007), events seem to occur because of the feverish desire of the protagonist, disconcerting the reader. As the dogma of science contrasts with emotional and impulsive reactions, and as this dogma of science is never allowed to rule, the novel sheds light on what informs the woman’s histories and her reactions. In this sense, not only science but also emotions are revealed as central to the woman’s subjectivity. Simultaneously, the novel also sheds light on the distribution of power that informs her subjectivity, questioning the power that class, gender and race have historically embodied. The shift from a fixed to a haphazard notion of the subject ultimately signifies a dislocation of where the ‘other’ is located, acting as a critique of power imbalance. Following Massey’s approach, space is thus exposed as a product of interrelationships, as the sphere of possibility for the existence of multiplicity, and as being always under construction (2005: 9). Furthermore, as articulated by Ahmed (2014), the novel reminds us how strangers are constructed in the encounter, and that the recognition of the stranger is an affective judgement. Indeed, order and classification as fictitious and imposed are emphasised in the novel
through the figure of the albino child and through the woman’s geographical movements.

The book commences with the erratic thoughts of the woman narrator, which gradually go on to disclose the existence of her three-week-old son and the arrival of the ivory crocodile sculpture sent by Ermilo. Because of the crocodile, the reader learns, her son has become albino. Through her son’s albinism the novel challenges racial distinctions, and questions the ‘difference’ they imply, revealing its preference for nuance and indistinctiveness. His albinism is for her less a condition than a mystery to be solved, and only briefly does she reflect on the practical problems it might cause him in the future. By not believing in the fantasy of a coherent self, the novel reminds us how differences, otherness and fetishistic strangeness may become the ‘properties’ of bodies and spaces over time.

Non-belief in a coherent and essential self is also recalled in the novel through its treatment of class distinctions. The woman’s position within the complex structures of power governed by race and gender is disclosed in the relationships she has with other characters. She is shown to be aware of power distribution as she states: ‘Conque madre soltera, hija de un político, con un niño color de muerte y en una casa donde tal vez estén conspirando en mi contra’ (2007: 54). The utterance also reveals an ironic and defiant attitude, challenging the normative heterosexual nuclear family through the figure of a single mother suspicious of those around her. However, while she criticizes her parents she lives in their house, and while she acknowledges the social injustice that allowed her maid, Luz, to remain illiterate, and led to her become a maid, she continues to rely on Luz’s help to take care of her son.
Yet this inconsistency is not presented in simple terms; its complexity is the result of a contradictory first-person narrative. For example, while she explicitly criticizes classism, such as when she describes her father, her own classism is revealed through her description of her maid as ‘una niña vieja’ (2007: 28), infantilizing a grown-up woman. On the other hand, her defiant outlook towards racial and class structures, while sometimes limited, is explicit on her trip to find Ermilo. Indeed, in her travel, racial and class borders seem suspended because of her ability to move between places. She is able to get a driver and car to get to Acapulco, and a boat and a sailor to get to the middle of the sea. The reader learns that she easily acquires a visa for China. When she arrives in Dali with her travel companions, they have no problem taking a bus, walking in swamps, and finally arriving on the island where the scientists live. All of these actions seem to go smoothly with no major disruptions. When they arrive in China, language does not seem to be a barrier because an interpreter is provided, while her stated limited knowledge of English allows her to communicate with the scientists in the camp.

This idea of fluidity across borders and distance is reinforced through other characters’ actions, through events and descriptions. For instance, distance is subverted by the recollection of similarities between China and Mexico, as in this e-mail from Ermilo: ‘La montaña de jade verde y el lago me recuerdan un buen a México. Quién iba a creer que en este pueblo perdido de Asia iba a existir una copia de la Quebrada’ (2007: 113). However, the ability to transcend borders discloses an ironic take on the ease of global travel. Indeed, the similarities here presented between countries are highly ironic, leading the reader to question how ‘different’ from Mexico China actually is in the novel; or whether Ermilo and the woman are simply unable to apprehend China’s difference because of their own biased attitudes.
From this perspective, the novel seems to acknowledge the importance that descriptions of ‘place’ have in relation to the ‘idea’ of China, thus recalling a notion of ‘China’ as a shifting signifier. When the woman travels to China, the novel displaces the geographical location of ‘China’ as a place for change, and instead suggests that all changes happen within the character herself. However, by providing the ivory crocodile that makes the baby albino, it is ‘China’ as a place of ‘otherness’ which causes the change to take place. In other words, the novel does not allow any exclusive notion of hegemonic sameness or otherness to prevail. This latter aspect emerges most notably in the text’s presentation of the woman’s awareness of power imbalance, later questioning that awareness through intertextuality and parody.

Indeed, the woman’s awareness of the histories that determine encounters appears through the different topics upon which she reflects. For example, she describes herself and those who accompany her to China — Ermilo’s friend and Ermilo’s sister — as not ‘looking Mexican’. While she explains that this is true of Ermilo because his green eyes make him look European, revealing Mexican racial systems of difference, she does not explain why she and her friends do not ‘look Mexican’. Her appraisal of the class system in Mexico sheds light on the context that would make them ‘different’ from the traditional Mexican stereotype, as she explains the different social classes in Mexican society (2007: 118). Her awareness suggests an attitude of condemnation towards Mexican society and classism, and yet she still has a mistress-servant relationship with Luz. The same mistress-servant relationship is maintained with her driver, whose existence she acknowledges and yet she continues to give orders to him, as if he were detached from his own subjectivity. Both relationships betoken her middle-class status. Ahmed’s naturalization of histories that render ‘things’ invisible, functioning to conceal forms of social
difference (2000: 3, 86), comes to mind. The character’s biased views are exposed by the text itself, contrasting thoughts and actions, as is evident through the differences between the first and second set of chapters.

Although the woman seems aware of what informs her encounters in the first set of chapters, the reader learns about those she is not aware of in the second set of chapters. Her privileged background is exposed through her access to material objects, houses, and places, such as her visit to her parents-in-law’s house in Acapulco, which has big rooms, a swimming pool, a library, a piano, and a ‘vieja nana de la familia’ (2007: 35). Similarly, her background is recognisable through her knowledge of languages, like when she laughs at a misunderstanding regarding a Chinese name — Hu — and a word in English — who — (2007: 81). However, the characters’ privileged backgrounds are no guarantee of knowledge concerning China, as an undefined narrator describes Ermilo as the kind of tourist to which ‘los Bai del sur le resultan idénticos a los Han del norte’ (2007: 22). The unknown yet authoritative narrator denounces Ermilo’s ignorance and underlines his/her own knowledge of China. And while the woman openly reflects on the power imbalance in Mexican society, she continues to be part of the system she criticizes. As the novel reveals its awareness of the ‘histories of determination’, it also reminds us of the embedded practices which continue to establish regimes of difference beyond national contexts.

The woman’s awareness of her own subjectivity is also available in her descriptions of Chinese cultural specificities, presenting them in a stereotypical fashion, such as when she describes herself as being like ancestral China, ‘pasiva, pasiva, pasiva’ (2007: 134), emptying not only herself but also China of agency. Her stereotyped views also emerge in her descriptions of China, as she states: ‘Me apena
decir que la vida de estas personas parece una antología de anécdotas al pie de una fotografía. Sí, para sus párpados colgantes, yo también he de provenir de una guía de viajero’ (2007: 115). While she admits that exoticism lies in the eye of the beholder, the reader can see that she is not completely aware of the racism that her words exude, in using a physical feature to mark the difference between Chinese women and herself. Simultaneously, she subverts such stereotyping, equating her foreignness with the foreignness she also perceives in the Chinese. This double mirror demonstrates that subjective identification is constructed based on structures beyond our explicit awareness, again emphasizing the histories that have led her to think of China and the Chinese through such specific images.

From this perspective, the experience of travel to China in the novel seems to turn any notion of the ‘exotic’ on its head. The novel apparently critiques essentialist differentiation, as emphasised by its overt denouncements of imperialism and its classificatory systems, such as that by which Ermilo is thought to ‘be European’ because of the colour of his eyes. These classification systems are shown to be informed by gender, and are constantly (re)created through history and the written word. A critique of imperialism is revealed in the novel, echoing the woman’s awareness of what informs her own position of power. For example, she speaks about an English scientist called Johnny Walker and his wife, a parody that begins with his name:

The extract introduces Walker as the ultimate imperialist scientist. The text accuses Walker of being racist, while the abusive language that is used to describe the conditions of his work as perceived by his wife, reveal the utterance as ironic on several levels. In this sense, the mimicry of abusive racist language allows not only for the constructedness of the words used, but also the narrator’s critique of Walker’s worldview. Furthermore, the novel devalues the exclusivity of a scientific outlook on the world. The choice of a name that coincides with a whisky brand simultaneously recalls patterns of consumption, shedding light on the regimes of difference established through consumption itself; Johnny not only drinks whisky, but has the opportunity to drink ‘too much whisky’. Ultimately, Walker is eaten alive by an albino alligator in China. That Walker received a prize from the Plinian Society in Edinburgh, the club to which Charles Darwin belonged, reminds us of the travels of European scientists to the Americas. The metafictional aspects of the novel thus emphasise the pervading elements of Enlightenment classification systems. The novel sheds light on how history is to be understood as a matter of interpretation and not an objective account. In its critique of history as objective accounts, it critiques the hegemonic structures through which certain histories have been chosen to be told, as the narrator states, ‘contar esta historia y no otra, un suceso totalmente arbitrario’ (2007: 153) while also describing pictures of white men, a white baby and a Chinese woman smoking opium. As she critiques hegemonic structures, she simultaneously refers to a display of fetishised otherness.

The main narrator’s critique of hegemonic structures also extends to gender differences as she tells the story of Rosalynd [sic] Franklin, explaining how her role in the discovery of the DNA double helix was usurped by James Watson and Francis Crick, who later published ‘their discovery’ in Nature (2007: 167). As the narrator
states, her colleague Maurice Wilkins showed Franklin’s X-ray photograph to Watson without her permission. Her discovery is introduced in the novel through a citation from their paper, in the original English, as the novel’s second epigraph.

When Watson and Crick received the Nobel Prize in 1962, together with Wilkins, Franklin had already died, and the Nobel Prize is never awarded posthumously. According to the National Library of Medicine’s website, it was only after people challenged Watson’s caricatures of Franklin in his memoirs The Double Helix, and that Franklin’s friend Anne Sayre published a biography in rebuttal of Watson’s account of Franklin, that Franklin’s role in the discovery became better known (‘The Rosalind Franklin Papers: Biographical Information’ [n.d.]). Read in tandem with the first epigraph — Lewis Carroll’s parodic poem How Doth the Little Crocodile, from Alice in Wonderland, also quoted in English — the novel warns the reader in advance of deception and predation, describing the ‘gentil smiling jaws’ of the crocodile that ‘welcome little fishes in’ (2001). While focusing on the female subject, the text shows that power distribution organises social forms. From this perspective, fixed classification systems and decisions based on them are shown to hold the potential to embed, conceal and justify injustice.

The injustice embedded in fixed classification systems also appears in the narration that explains how Ermilo’s discovery was stolen from him by those with more power. His kidnappers make him cede the rights of his discovery to a multinational pharmaceutical company in Hong Kong. Ermilo holds the knowledge, but he is unable to claim power over it because, as the narrator states, ‘a pesar de que los tres podemos testificar, ninguna corte internacional ni ninguna comunidad científica apelarán a su favor’ (2007: 167). We thus find Ermilo himself, previously a model scientist, questioning his own systematic certainties.
It is interesting to apply the studies of two female academics to the fictitious Ermilo’s participation in the male enterprise of discovery: Anne McClintock (1995: 29) and Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 204). Ermilo’s research is the result of his own academic interest and is financed by the journal ‘Genographic’ (2007: 112).� Pratt’s analysis of travel writing by Europeans about non-European parts of the world sheds light on how ‘domestic subjects’ of Euroimperialism were, and continue to be, created (1992: 4). Ermilo’s scientific enterprise is that of what Pratt calls ‘imperial men reinvent[ing] a moment of pure (male) origin’ (1995: 30). Within this male enterprise of discovery, Ermilo appears to be a sort of continuation of the elites of Spanish America whose identities and decisions were shaped in relation both to Europe and to non-European subjects, as articulated in mestizaje. As Pratt explains, the ‘liberal creole project involved founding an independent, decolonized American society and culture, while retaining European values and white supremacy’ (1992: 175). Imperialism is thus acknowledged as part of the ‘histories of determination’ of the Latin American subject, as told by the narrator’s partner.

As McClintock shows, race, gender and class were fundamental coordinates of Western modernity, coming into existence in and through each other, ‘existing in intimate, reciprocal and contradictory relation’ (1995: 184). Ermilo’s lack of power, as he loses the rights to his discovery, contrasts with the male scientific enterprise, further developing the complexities of what determines subject positions, shedding light on new forms of subjectivity. While Franklin lost out to her male colleagues, Ermilo, although male, loses to a big transnational pharmaceutical company. The role of a male-controlled international scientific community is denounced. Indeed,

� An interesting intertextual reference: ‘Genographic’ is a National Geographic magazine project launched in 2005 which uses advanced DNA analysis to explore where humans originated (‘The Genographic Project by National Geographic - Human Migration, Population Genetics’ [n.d.]).
Ermilo’s experience, as a young Latin American subject, emerges as analogous to Franklin’s ‘loss’. The novel thus questions imperialised, gendered and racial epistemologies, through which injustices have historically been committed. Simultaneously, it exposes how essentialism remains central to the paradoxically hybrid articulation of *mestizaje*. Indeed, the novel not only explores race and class, but also explores comparative imperialism, and history, as contained in articulations of identity and community in Latin America.

As Patience Schell shows, Latin American scientific discourses have been shaped by and shared dialogue with international intellectual discourses that privilege elite, European knowledge (2010: 477, 2013: 3). According to Schell, scientific imperialism collected and produced knowledge about other parts of the world, claiming it was objective, scientific and definitive (2013: 3). From this perspective, the novel can be seen to question the epistemological structures through which Latin American countries, first as colonies and later as republics, were and continue to be established. This questioning of fixed structures is further emphasised as Ermilo states towards the end of the story: ‘lo menos es preguntarse si existe o no China, eso ya lo hicieron los decimonónicos’ (2007: 190). Ermilo’s question interrogates the role of transnational enterprises, both of the nineteenth-century (males) who questioned the existence of China, and of the contemporary transnational companies that steal his discovery.

Indeed, within the ‘discoveries’ of places by scientific communities, it is worth considering the figure of the crocodile, which features in the novel’s title, whose presence is a catalyst for events. According to Spencer J. Weinreich, the discoverers’ idea of the ‘New World’ as an extension of the Old led new animal specimens to be thought of as within ‘models of morphological normalcy’, shaped
on the Old World animals (2015). Indeed, he argues that the crocodile performed the
cultural work of bridging the New and Old worlds well, as it indicated deeper
geographical connections. Weinreich explores how this culturally and religiously
significant animal could shape discourses in which it was deployed (2015: 238). As
he shows, quoting Louise W. Lippincott:

No clear taxonomy distinguished crocodiles from dragons or snakes – to the contrary, both dragons and crocodiles were considered “large, exotic snakes,” a kinship that bestowed upon the crocodile elements of the dangerous and the fantastic (1981: 3).

The novel thus not only explores the semantic field that an animal such as the
crocodile can evoke, but also explores the continuity of the epistemologies and
histories at play during the processes of globalization which began with Columbus’
expedition.

In this regard, the woman is shown to defy the versions of history to which
she has access and on which she reflects, such as when she states ‘¿Pero, qué pasaría
si la Historia plasmada en los jarrones de flor de loto fuera un mero invento de
nuestros ancestros?’ (2007: 83). Her utterance recalls the multiple uses and
deployment of the word ‘chino’, as we have seen previously. Her words reveal an
idea of commonality between herself as a Mexican, and China, as the pottery
mentioned simultaneously brings to mind traditional Chinese ceramics and Mexican
Talavera poblana. The latter is influenced by the white and blue Ming ceramics that
arrived in Mexico via the Manila Galleons trade route during the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries (2000). This articulation of a worldwide commonality is
recalled in the novel with the disappearance of ‘all texts’ announced on the radio
(2007: 79). As the narrator explains, people lose their minds, not knowing who they
are anymore, while still acting in ways learnt from texts and following practices and
traditions that are not relevant any longer without the texts themselves. The constructedness of the fixity that the text provides is further emphasised by Luz’s illiteracy, as she would therefore be unaffected by the disappearance of text. The novel thus reminds us that not only do written histories lead to power imbalances, but also practices, traditions and word usage, beyond national borders.

The importance of text is also highlighted when the narrator ‘plays’ with the word ‘Chinese’ and the idea of ‘China’ in Mexico. She states, ‘Si China fuera una mentira, entonces ya nada estaría en chino y la vida sería más sencilla. […] Pero si los cuentos chinos fueran falsos, tampoco se habría inventado la tinta […]’ (2007: 83). The novel’s challenge to official histories is also present through the play on the stereotypical ideas of what the Chinese do, such as illegally copying objects, or are, such as being contemplative. In particular, ‘cuentos chinos’ is an expression used in the Spanish language to mean ‘false stories’. On various occasions terms that use the word ‘China’ go beyond the specific, such as when she describes her skin turning ‘chinita’ when listening to a song (2007: 66). ‘China’ emerges as a fetishised place in the woman’s descriptions: a term that can be used loosely, inhabited by contemplative people and copiers.

Yet at the same time her utterances are revealed to be ironic as she mentions a Mexican chilli pepper resulting from la ‘China poblana’ (2007: 112). The narrator plays with images and words such as ‘China poblana’, a traditional style of dress worn by women in Mexico, but also the name by which Catarina de San Juan, a slave of possibly Indian or Chinese origin who arrived in Mexico in the seventeenth century, is known (Germeten 2015: 1531–32; Seijas 2015). Indeed, the myth goes that the ‘china poblana’ dress was popularised because of Catarina de San Juan. The potential Chinese origin of the word ‘china’ is a common belief (‘La China Poblana
en 12 comentarios’ 2013) that has been contested by academics such as María del Carmen Vázquez Mantecón (2000: 123) and John Charles Chasteen. Chasteen states in his introduction to the translation of ‘La China’ by José María Rivera (1854): ‘although chino/china means Chinese in Spanish, the meaning of china here is from an indigenous language and has nothing to do with Asia’ (2011: 91). The novel thus recalls the hegemonic imperialism embodied by identity constructions in the Spanish colonial period in Latin America, where Asians were collected under the category of ‘chinos’ (Seijas 2015). In its questioning of imperialistic epistemologies, the novel allows for the scrutiny of the meaning-making powers of human relations, and denies fixed alterity and immutable boundaries.

The novel thus comments on classification systems as guarantors of difference, such as those that Edward Said exposes in Orientalism (2003: 49), or that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms ‘epistemic violence’ (1988: 280–83). Both Said and Spivak build on Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse as an entity of signs which assign and communicate specific relations to, between and among objects, subjects and statements. While Spivak thinks of ‘epistemic violence’ as the infliction of harm against subjects through discourse, Said’s idea of ‘otherness’ builds on his observations that the ‘Orient’ worked in negative oppositional terms for the ‘West’. Foucault’s conceptualization of the power of discourse sheds significant light on my reading of El ombligo, as the complexity and conflicts embedded in the globalised commercial and scientific structures, as well as the epistemologies used since the ‘discovery’ of America, become available, and are subverted in the text. This challenge to reigning epistemologies appears explicitly in Ermilo’s reflection on Columbus’ arrival to the Americas:
Baste como ejemplo el 12 de octubre de 1492. Entonces, según el calendario gregoriano, un puñado de hombres desembarca en las costas de un supuesto sitio que como después se comprobará es en realidad otro. A continuación se topa con una población – no sólo un hombre, sino una población –, se dirige a ella en buen castellano y, al no recibir respuesta, decide adueñarse de su territorio. Descubrir es, como afirma O’Gorman, hallar lo que estaba ignorado (2007: 39).

By mentioning the Gregorian calendar, Ermilo emphasises the European framework underlying the Spanish expedition. By not mentioning Columbus, his utterance extends responsibility and appropriation of the ‘discovery’ to Europe itself. The text also challenges scientific assumptions, as it states that the place they think they have arrived at will later be proved to be another. The silence of the locals sheds light on the violence of the imperial conquest. Indeed, science as practice is revealed to be ordering and naming, and the intersection of the scientist’s works, institutions, objects of study and the money that funded their projects (Schell 2013: 2–3). In addition, the mentioning of Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman, considered one of the earliest and most influential of historical revisionists to the narratives of the Spanish colonial period in Latin America, critiques those same narratives. O’Gorman challenged and objected to the expressions ‘discovery of America’, ‘encounter between two worlds’, and ‘cultural fusion’ (1958, 1977: 4–5, 8–9). From this perspective, the novel reveals the continuities of the scientific epistemologies between those of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Furthermore, insofar as the novel reflects upon the complexities of the ‘discovery’, it simultaneously discloses the characters’ awareness of the injustices they see and experience, not only through Ermilo’s denunciation of the ‘discovery of America’ but also through the woman’s awareness of her upper-class privilege. Like Marina/Xian of Cristina Rivera Garza’s Verde Shanghai (2011c), she seems aware of
the existence of at least some of the racial, class and gendered social constructions that inform her experiences. Like *Verde Shanghai*, the novel also shows how histories of determination in encounters can go beyond one’s own awareness. Indeed, the story simultaneously reveals how their critique remains an intellectual project, as they are ultimately unable to act upon it. The characters’ awareness and unawareness shed light on how it is ultimately impossible to escape the epistemological frameworks that shape a subjects’ experience.

The novel thus exposes the complicity between, and continuity of, scientific epistemologies and power, recalling the way in which, during the nineteenth century, both were linked to Empire and a Western and Eurocentric notion of the world. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the novel reveals, are a period dominated by the transnational flow of economic globalization, embodied by the pharmaceutical company that steals Ermilo’s patent. Furthermore, the theft of Ermilo’s patent sheds light on the relevance of epistemology beyond the violence itself, as it is his interpretation of and control over the data which has been taken away from him.

In this sense, the emphasis on the interpretation of the data, rather than the data itself, suggests that it might actually be possible to contest epistemologies. Indeed, the novel does not focus on the figure of the albino alligator or the ivory crocodile. Instead, it focuses on what it can do, such as eating Walker or making a child albino. By having a Mexican protagonist travel to China, the novel discloses the mechanisms at play in epistemologies and scientific structure. It concurrently discloses the intellectual awareness of those mechanisms and the impossibility of escaping from them, allowing the reader to reflect upon the possibility of a decentred world, embodied in the idea of the exotic turned on its head, and in ‘China’ itself, a decentred world that allows for a new epistemology. Orientalism and an essentialist
notion of ‘China’ is thus subverted through a redistribution of geopolitical power as knowledge is gained by, and stolen from, Mexican scientist Ermilo and his discovery. The embracing of the exotic and, furthermore, the acknowledgment of the ‘exotic within’, symbolised by the attachment of the mother to her son, turns the notion of the exotic on its head. Mysterious events, such as the albino transformation, serve to exoticize Mexico; in this process, the exoticness of China is equated to that of Mexico.

The novel thus discloses how injustice and scientific discourses are linked. While the novel shows the characters’ awareness of injustices, illustrated by the upper class Mexican woman’s consciousness of her privilege, it also shows how her critique of injustice remains an intellectual project, as she does not act upon it. Furthermore, her unawareness is presented in parallel to the victory of globalization, as Ermilo’s discovery is ultimately stolen from him. Moreover, the novel shows continuity between old globalization and new globalization, led by the endurance and complicity of scientific epistemologies. The figure of the double helix thus represents the problem the novel describes. As the novel is arranged scientifically, after the structure of the double helix, the text reveals how even the ‘aware’ implied author is also part of the problematic upholding of scientific epistemologies.

From this perspective, the novel’s DNA structure leads the reader to question if it is actually possible to go beyond epistemology. Indeed, even while the novel tries to challenge fixed structures it ultimately still conforms to the textual structure of literary narrative. In other words, no matter how aware the implied author might be of the epistemic structure, the DNA structure of the text discloses the persistence of scientific discourses and the difficulty, and maybe even impossibility, of going beyond epistemologies. Indeed, the novel shows how this problematic is inscribed in
our DNA, revealing the lack of a space from where the mind can be decolonised. In postmodern style, the novel ‘acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs […]’ (Hutcheon 1988: 41). However, as Rosi Braidotti states, ‘belief systems and their rituals are perhaps not incompatible with critical thought and practices of citizenship’ (2013: 35). In this sense, the novel recalls Braidotti’s appeal for a review of the segregation of discursive fields (2013: 43). *El ombligo del dragón* emphasises and exposes the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at play in ‘encounters’.

It is necessary here to find a place for the albinism of the child, and to consider whether it is justified to interpret his condition as exemplifying the lost cause of the scientific method. For this I draw on Bonnie TuSmith, who explores the stereotype of the albino, considering the ways in which authors represent what she terms the ‘multi-ethnic possibilities of the albino’ (1993: 85). According to her, albinism offers ‘depths and nuances […] which the tag of white American versus black ethnic has not been able to accommodate’ (TuSmith 1993: 99). In this sense, the child’s ‘becoming’ albino after the arrival of the sculpture challenges science, as well as recalling the fact that the discourse of *mestizaje* has also been unable to accommodate everyone. In contrast, the mother’s embracing of otherness, as embodied by the albino child and ‘China’, towards the close of the novel hints towards a more inclusive notion of community beyond the fixed borders of nation, class and of race.

From this perspective, the novel tells us of the exhaustion of scientific classification systems imposed by a Western colonial ideology, suggesting instead a relationship between Mexico and China not mediated by imperial histories and conquests, summarised in the following quote: ‘A estas alturas del partido México-
China, no hay mal que por bien no venga. Ni cancha que lo resista’ (2007: 181). And yet, as expressed here, it also condemns the relationship, leaving an open-endedness that perhaps suggests a convergence of the powerful beyond regional borders, reminding us of the power imbalance involved in encounters, and recalling the illusoriness of closed systems of interpretation, classification, and alterity. By emphasizing the interstitial and unfixed experiences in contrast to the powerful scientific dogmas, and denying agency to a fetishised notion of China, the novel sheds light on aspects that go beyond current nation-state structures. Furthermore, the novel not only questions the persistence of fixed class, race and gender differentiations, but simultaneously challenges the relevance of the nation state. Latin America, like ‘China’, thus becomes ‘another’ imagined space in a world context, ultimately interrupting essentialist understandings of ‘China’ and ‘Latin America’’. Thus, ‘China’ here disturbs hierarchical understandings of Latin American identity and community based on mestizaje. As Derrida’s notion of the supplement (2016), the role of ‘China’ here discloses the lack of ‘China’ in essentialist definitions of Latin American identity.

The characters in the three novels studied here thus think of home from beyond specific locations and beyond the idea of ‘difference’. The idea of home is rather constructed around subjectivities. Travel to China is shown to be an experience for estrangement, and yet the characters reject otherness, instead embracing ‘being-in-common’. In terms of identity, the novels in this chapter seem to call for a Latin American identity in terms of what Braidotti has termed ‘nomadic subjects’. In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Difference*, Braidotti offers a way out of the dilemma between essentialism and poststructuralist contingency through the figure of the
mobile subject. According to her, the nomad is a ‘transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all’ (1994: 35). As she explains, nomadic politics is thus a ‘matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections’ (Braidotti 1994: 35). As Alexandra Ganser notes (2009: 176), we must keep in mind that figures like the nomad cannot be utilised without accounting for them as site of colonial discourses, and as constructed by specific power relations, as Kaplan has concluded.

Braidotti’s views, alongside her emphasis on the experience of what she terms ‘non-Onenness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject’ (2013: 100), echo Nancy’s notion of being singular plural. While for Braidotti the non-Oneness anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the “self” (2013: 100), for Nancy ‘what is at stake is […] thinking, absolutely and without reserve, beginning from the “with,” as the proper essence of one whose Being is nothing other than with-one-another’ (2000: 34). According to Nancy, subjects are never atomised individuals that can exist outside any relation to those around them; they are always part of this series of relations. And it is precisely because they are part of a relation, that they are a relation (Simpson 2015: 67–68). Taking this emphasis on relation into consideration, the novels seem to come close to the notion of identity of Chantal Mouffe, in permanent contact as others, and as a process of ‘permanent hybridization and nomadization’ (1994: 110). According to Mouffe, if identity is based on difference, it is also based on exclusion, and thus hybridity emphasizes the importance of others in a subject’s identity, while the nomadic expresses the need of agency to move between identities.
Ultimately, *Los impostores*, *Hotel Pekín* and *El ombligo del dragón* demand that one think of the subject in relation to others as they disclose the global as being intrinsically formed by the local. These novels thus advocate for greater specificity in the relation of the local and the global. Rather than reflecting on China as a country itself, ‘China’ in these novels becomes a setting through which to explore philosophical considerations. The theme of travel relates to the judgement whereby different places in the world become equivalent, in line with a Nancean cosmopolitanism, thus challenging hegemonic structures and the bearing of sites of enunciation. As borders and difference continue to shape public discourses and to generate discourses of violence, these novels seem to call for a Nancean community, ‘the reality of being-in-common as such’ (2000: 55, italics in the original).
Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to analyse how ‘China’ emerges as a third term that redefines discourses of alterity. Through a close reading of nine novels published in Spanish in Latin America between 1987 and 2011, this thesis has sought to illustrate the value of bringing together multiple genealogies for a multidimensional understanding of ‘China’ in Latin America. From my analysis it is clear that the novels rely on ‘China’ as a shifting signifier that interrupts notions of otherness in Latin America.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, philosophy, literature and history, in Chapter 1 we saw how ‘China’ is used to subvert notions of difference and distance, and to introduce the question of what defines identities. In Chapter 2 I analysed how ‘China’ interrupts Latin American definitions of community by raising the question of who is included in the nation/community. In Chapter 3 we saw how ‘China’ is used as a figure through which hegemonic distinctions can be challenged in a global context. The ways in which these works engage with ‘China’ do overlap, and therefore it is fruitful to consider them together, as they all use ‘China’ to comment on Latin America. As we can see, ‘China’ changes as different use is made of it, while still containing the capacity to disrupt fixed discourses of otherness. By exposing the different imaginings of ‘China’ in Latin America, my analysis thus reveals the fetishistic construction of ‘China’ in Latin America. My original contribution to knowledge is, therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the way in which ‘China’ is imagined in contemporary Latin American literature, that reveals how ‘China’ is used to interrupt discourses of otherness, while allowing us to rethink new understandings of identity and community in Latin America.
Analysing and describing the role that a fetishised ‘China’ plays in the articulation of notions of identity and community in contemporary Latin American novels, this thesis has suggested that ‘China’ is a symbolic figure that plays a specific role in Latin America. Deployed as a fetish figure, ‘China’ in these novels interrupts discourses of otherness in Latin America, evidenced through an analysis of the strangerness that the novels convey. Ultimately, the novels reveal their ‘China’ to be beyond the traditional racial access points of *mestizaje* in Latin America. In other words, the novels studied here use ‘China’ to resist racial essentialist constructions of Latin American identity and *mestizaje* and its nuances.

Because of the emphasis on the ‘otherness’ of ‘China’ revealed here, Sara Ahmed’s theorisations on strangerness (2000) have been central to my understanding of how ‘otherness’ is employed, constructed, and critiqued in these novels. As we have seen, ‘China’ is made to adopt different forms of ‘strangerness’ in the different chapters, and also within each text. Indeed, not only does ‘strangerness’ query an ontology of ‘China’ as other, but it simultaneously evokes and enacts different forms of strangerness which include, but are not restricted to, an ‘exotic’, ‘different’ or ‘distant’ ‘China’. Read in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy’s understanding of the subject as being-with and community as inoperative (1991, 2000), Ahmed’s notion of strangerness emphasises the importance of the active process of encounter. As a Nancean reading reveals, the novels emphasise relations between people, pointing broadly to a cosmopolitan attitude that is non-essentialist, as developed by Berthold Schoene (2011). Drawing on specific theories in each chapter, ‘China’ emerges here as a kind of literary/imaginary ‘third’ term which reframes Latin American discourses of alterity.
It is necessary to keep in mind that the cosmopolitan outlook I see emerging in these novels does not necessarily argue for bonds of solidarity that assume that ‘the other’ has universal experiences, an assumption Judith Butler warns of in her text ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’ (1988: 523). As I build on Nancy’s notion of the inoperative community, this thesis shows how the novels assume the specificity of local experiences and differences in the establishment of transnational bonds. Despite the nuances among them, the novels examined in this corpus present coinciding tropes and themes that establish recurring patterns in the way ‘China’ is represented. The novels construct and challenge fetishised otherness through the figure of ‘China’, thus suggesting a regional imagination of ‘China’ to be available across a group of Latin American novels.

In Chapter 1, which looks at novels set in China, I analysed César Aira’s *Una novela china* (1987), Alberto Laiseca’s *La mujer en la Muralla* (1990), and *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* by Mario Bellatin (2001a, 2005). I showed how these novels displaced ‘traditional’ images of the ‘Orient’ by acknowledging and subverting the stereotypes of ‘China’ as antipodal and unknown in Latin America. Through Linda Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction’ (1988), Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia (1981), and Jeremy Tambling’s idea of ‘postmodern allegories’ (2010), ‘China’ appears as a fetishised stranger, a figure that is retrieved and then destabilised through the act of narration.

In *Una novela china*, we saw how the text portrays ‘China’ as alien, drawing on cultural specificity with imagery and descriptions that evoke a notion of ‘China’ as a hermetic world. While the narrator recalls a despotic China, deliberately misleading aspects of the narration suggest more than one discourse on ‘China’. The novel thus interrupts ‘master narratives’ from Argentina exploring different
discourses on China. This interruption contests any specific ontology of ‘China’ within the text itself by making available a worldview which cannot lay claim to an ‘absolute truth’ (Bakhtin 1981: 263). The novel thus portrays how ‘differentiation’ happens at the level of the encounter and not because the ‘stranger’ is different. In *La mujer en la Muralla*, we saw how cultural and historical imagery is used to (de)construct a stereotyped essential ‘China’, which is later undermined by the narrative construction that provides ironic reworkings and contradictory information. Through descriptions of power structures that simultaneously evoke China and Argentina, the novel questions the validity of the information it provides, reflecting on the differing discourses at play. The novel offers a critique of academic representations, undermining characterisations of what is typically ‘Chinese’ by exposing contradictory possibilities, and thus challenging the role a fetishised ‘China’ can play.

The last novel analysed in Chapter 1 was *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán*, where ‘China’ is continuously evoked and yet never mentioned, revealing the contradictory possibilities the imaginary contains. Questioning overarching discourses through its fragmented narrative, the novel can be seen in a broader sense as an allegory of power, disclosing the ways in which ‘otherness’ and differences among ‘strangers’ can be continuously (re)produced. By uncovering conflicting representations of ‘China’ the novels in Chapter 1 open up a space of ‘encounter’ between China and Latin America, demonstrating how ‘China’, as both a physical space and discursive context foregrounds negotiations of power in the histories of both China and Latin America.

With the first two novels published in 1987 and 1991 respectively, and the last one in 2001, Chapter 1 thus highlights the transition from imaginaries of China
which seem to point out to the reader how ‘China’ has been imagined at a moment in which the influence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, in both economic and discursive terms, was still perceived to be limited; and how this imaginary is based on a preconception of ‘China’ as other, which continues even when the presence of the PRC and Taiwan grows exponentially in Latin America. While *Una novela china* and *La mujer en la Muralla* interrupt discourses of an exotic and constructed ‘China’, in *La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán*, ‘China’ is deconstructed to reveal ‘China’ as a fetish for Latin America. Following this emphasis on a constructed ‘China’, the ensuing two chapters focused on how ‘China’ remains a fetish even though the presence of China and Chinese communities has grown strongly in the region since the late 1980s and 1990s.

In Chapter 2, analysing novels whose stories are linked to Chinese communities and Chinatowns in Buenos Aires and Mexico City, I argued that Ariel Magnus’ *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007), César Aira’s *El mármol* (2011), and Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel *Verde Shanghai* (2011c) critique discourses of a racially homogeneous Latin America. The novels depict city landscapes in which the Chinese communities are revealed as constitutive and transformative of the cultural, economic and political landscapes of both cities. Working through Nancy’s ideas on the subject, Graham Huggan’s ‘postcolonial exotic’ (2001), and further developing the theory of Ahmed’s ‘stranger’ (2000), I demonstrated that the novels challenged and condemned essentialist conceptions of race, gender and national identities, suggesting instead contrasting views on alterity, the state of being different or other, and community. On another level, I showed how ‘China’ is informed by the economic and political role of China in contemporary Latin America, disclosing the changing demographic landscape of Latin America, while simultaneously pointing
towards the historical heterogeneity of Latin American identity, which has silenced the ‘Chinese’ from within discourses of *mestizaje*.

*Un chino en bicicleta* uses the exposure of the contradictions between the main character Ramiro Valestra and an undisclosed implied author to let the reader recall the diversity contained in the Chinatown, challenging the ‘we’ of an exclusive identity. Valestra is shown to embody the discourse of a community that believes in a shared essence, while the novel exposes the fact that there is no shared essence, by emphasising the conflict that encounters entail. Throughout the text, Valestra continues to differentiate based on racial interpretations and to rely on a dichotomy of self-other. The novel engages with the prospect of a new imaginary through the impossibility of any fixed imaginary of ‘China’, thus suggesting a cosmopolitan identity in line with Nancy’s notion of being-with (2000: 1–99). In *El mármol*, a racist narrator reveals the primacy of images of modernity and whiteness within that construction of a white Argentine community that the novel interrupts. Although the narrator expresses himself as an empowered white man, his existence is at the same time miserable, and devoid of all agency. Both novels make the reader aware of the asymmetrical gendered power imbalance contained in encounters, through protagonists like Valestra and *El mármol*’s main character, who embody stereotypical ‘white-male’ discourses. As attention is drawn to the dynamics contained in encounters, the reader perceives the interruption of an imagined Argentine community, exposing the essentialism that underpins the construction of the ‘Chinese’ as fetishised ‘strangers’ and thus deconstructing and revealing the failure of multiculturalism when it continues to ontologise the subject.

In *Verde Shanghai*, the main character, Marina, moves across boundaries of race and gender within the Chinatown, exploring the possibility of less rigid gender
Marina reminds the reader that ‘strangerness’ is not intrinsic to the subject. Using the Chinatown as a resource, this novel displays the fictionality of the borders between cultures, race and gender, and the narratives those discourses contain, while simultaneously taking historical events into account. In this way, the novel offers a critique of essentialism, interrogating the paradigms around which definitions of Chineseness and otherness have been structured. Through ‘China’ represented by the Chinatown, the novel brings to the fore notions of inclusion and exclusion, and of racial politics in Mexico. In this second chapter, and through the cultural imaginaries that resonate in Chinatowns worldwide, both the Chinatowns of Buenos Aires and Mexico City are used to expose the presence of the Chinese as part of the changing landscapes of the city.

In Chapter 3, on novels in which the underlying theme is travel to China, I analysed *Los impostores* (2002) and *Hotel Pekín* (2008) by Santiago Gamboa, and Ximena Sánchez Echenique’s *El ombligo del dragón* (2007). Building on Ahmed’s understanding of strangerness, Nancy’s concepts of being-with and inoperative community, and Schoene’s understanding of cosmopolitanism, I showed how the emphasis in these novels on transnationalism and mobility make different locations somehow equivalent, thus calling for a reconsideration of community and cosmopolitanism. My analysis shows how the novels make available new subjectivities that are aware of difference and power imbalance within a global context.

In *Los impostores*, the contrast between the characters’ experiences and the suspension of judgement articulates new possibilities of community. Informed by a Nancean cosmopolitanism that is aware of power imbalance, the choice of ‘China’ here questions the boundaries between regions and nationalities in relation to
discourses that articulate difference. I evidenced how the novel defies any notion of centre and periphery, while acknowledging imaginaries such as ‘China’, operating at both individual and social levels. In Hotel Pekín, the main character’s internal conflict arises on a trip to China, emphasising the relationship between transnational experience and affect — how he feels or fails to feel— through which new subjectivities and communities emerge. As the characters continue to make sense of their experiences through a stereotypical vision of ‘China’, the novel emphasises the idea of difference as shaping the experience of the subject positioned in a global context. El ombligo del dragón exposes different discourses at play, revealing the exhaustion of scientific classification systems imposed by a Western colonial ideology, suggesting instead relations not mediated by imperial histories and conquests. By emphasizing interstitial experiences in contrast to powerful scientific dogma, and denying agency to a fetishised ‘China’, the novel questions the persistence of fixed class, race and gender differentiations, while it simultaneously interrogates the relevance of the nation state.

Making use of Ahmed’s examination of narratives of migration and estrangement and Doreen Massey’s notion of cultural difference being simultaneously local and global, travel to ‘China’ is exposed as an experience of estrangement in Chapter 3. Focusing mostly on privileged travellers, the novels disclose forms of contemporary othering and strangerness, and question hegemonic Eurocentric structures and nationally-bounded epistemologies. Los impostores, Hotel Pekín and El ombligo del dragón contest the notion of geographical bearings, and reveal the failure of bounded identities, allowing for the possibility of different geographies of affect and loyalty in the terms defined by Massey (2005: 188).
Simultaneously, the novels show a preference for a nomadic identity, a being-in-common, thus rejecting fetishised understandings of the stranger.

A multidimensional ‘China’ thus interrupts discourses of the essentialism available in Latin American discourses of identity, such as that of mestizaje, via Jacques Derrida’s notion of the supplement (2016). If in Chapter 1 this interruption occurs via the use of multiple narrative voices and fragmentation, in Chapter 2 the stereotypical ‘Latin American man’ and an ambiguous woman serve to interrupt what emerge as stereotyped and gendered notions of ‘Chinese’ communities in Latin America. ‘China’ thus appears as a haunting supplement to the mestizo racial and cultural narrative mix: an additional element that simultaneously disturbs the mix itself. As is shown throughout the chapters, the authors both establish and interrogate the idea of China as ‘other’, revealing the new forms of community being imagined in Latin America.

And yet, even though the novels studied in this thesis disclose and interrupt ‘China’ as fetish for otherness in Latin America, the fetishisation of ‘China’ seems to endure through their very titles, covers and the marketing processes that recall an exoticist imaginary of China. One could argue that the ‘rise of China’ has brought more attention to China, thus increasing the number of novels on China being published in Latin America and made available in bookshops and libraries. However, it is not necessarily a contemporary China as an economic power that is primarily recalled in the novels’ paratextual aspects, but rather the evocation of a traditional and exoticised ‘China’. Whilst this depiction is arguably performative, and the novels themselves subvert it within their texts, it also runs the risk of reinstating essentialist differences.
Thinking of the paratext as a ‘threshold’, to use Gérard Genette’s term (1991: 261) — as the means through which a text makes a book of itself for the readers and public — the corpus of novels selected here display an exoticised imaginary of ‘China’, further disclosing the mutual tropes and themes which are established and subverted within the texts themselves. Regarding the paratextual aspects of the novels we can see how, on one level, ‘China’ is presented through racialised stereotypes as the ‘racialised oriental’, embodied by the figure of the ‘chino’ across the different texts. On another level, a gendered representation of ‘China’ is another major theme across the different texts, contrasting overt representations of hegemonic and public expressions of masculinity with domestic and private spaces usually occupied by the ‘chino’. A further pattern that emerges in these representations of ‘China’ is the notion of spatial distance, which tends to locate ‘China’ on the other (geographical and cultural) side of the world.

Indeed, we find a visually encoded construction of difference and exoticism throughout the paratextual aspects. A mysterious ‘China’, which blends into an indistinct ‘orient’, appears on the books’ back covers, in quotes and marketing. For example, El ombligo del dragón’s back matter description of the novel not only evokes the mysteriousness of China, but also describes an aspect of the book as being part of the ‘mitología oriental’. In Los impostores, the recommendation on the back cover tells us that the story occurs in ‘el corazón de la remota China’. And in Un chino en bicicleta’s back cover, the recommendation states that the protagonist will see himself immersed in the ‘desconocida cultura china de las calles de Buenos Aires’; while the recommendation of La mujer en la Muralla suggests that the novel is about, among other things, the ‘distintas corrientes eróticas, religiosas y filosóficas que bullían en la China altiva y fascinante de aquella época’. The recommendation of
Hotel Pekín describes how the novel is set within the ‘complexas relaciones entre China y Occidente’, recalling a binarial East/West division of the world. This binary is also echoed in the ways the books are marketed and commented upon; for example, in the online literary blog Lecturalia, Una novela china is described as a ‘fábula erótica, intemporal y eterna aunque ineludiblemente china’ and calls China ‘Imperio de la Porcelana’.

The covers of the novels studied here show how the literary market continues to appeal to stereotypical images of China, with mostly figurative covers that depict iconic Chinese objects, using ochre and red tones. Another element that repeats itself is the use of Chinese characters; we can find them on the covers of Una novela china, La mujer en la Muralla, Un chino en bicicleta, Los impostores, Hotel Pekín, Verde Shanghai and El mármol. Another aspect that is striking in these books’ covers is the somewhat limited relevance given to particular places: they rather depict a suspended place, evoking a broad notion of a mysterious and faraway ‘China’ represented by pictures of the Great Wall, as in the case of La mujer en la Muralla; the representation of a road, in the case of El ombligo del dragón, or a door in semidarkness, in the case of Un chino en bicicleta. We also find repeated images of ‘Chinese’ women whose faces are partly covered or hidden from us. For example, in Verde Shanghai, a ‘Chinese’ couple is seated at a table, but the scene is occluded by a Chinese style carved window or door. The marketisation of Verde Shanghai presents the novel as one that is to be recognised as ‘Chinese’ by the Latin American public.

Indeed, on a superficial level of reading, the texts themselves may seem to reinforce otherness and difference as central to the articulation of identity. From this perspective, some of these novels could be seen to reinforce a Latin American
‘Westernised’ narrative and the construction of Chinese ‘otherness’. The novels could arguably be accused of essentialising ‘China’. Moreover, while the novels have been published by major publishing houses, some of their features seem to be clues aimed at local readers, such as the use of slang, obscuring their ironic reworking of ‘China’ for a broader public. As Huggan reminds us, it is ‘strategic essentialism’ that runs the risk of reinstating the same differences it aims to challenge (2001: 14). A further analysis of the paratextual in these novels might reveal the ways through which ‘China’ continues to be produced, exchanged and consumed in Latin America. And beyond this process production and commercialization, how the paratextual itself is being altered in relation to new technologies, and their effect on readership and distribution, as well as the intensification of the links between China and Latin America.

On one level, the growing presence of ‘China’ in public discourses in Latin America can be seen as a result of increased economic engagement. According to Carlos Malamud, there is today a ‘true rediscovery’ of Latin America by China, sparked by the interest in energy, metals and natural resources (2006: 104–5). The impact of China’s economic growth can be exemplified through the production of soybeans in Argentina, which since 1987/88 became the major crop, displacing wheat (Borregaard 1992: 123), and is now roughly half of the total production of grain in the country (Paz 2014: 162; Oviedo 2015: 244), precisely because of the quantities exported to China. According to the International Organization of Immigration, while not yet relevant in quantitative terms, African and Asian migration to Latin America has shown a clear growth-trend since 2008 (Mazza 2016; Texidó and Gurrieri 2012). This growth could be due to privileged entry facilities provided by Latin American states, combined with the relative improvements of their
economies, labour markets and the material/symbolic migratory barriers of developed countries (Texidó and Gurrieri 2012: 34). As Gonzalo Paz notes for Argentina, Chinese communities have spread throughout the different cities of the country (2014: 169). And in terms of investment, Chinese companies can be found throughout Latin America (Pérez Ludeña 2017; Urdinez and others 2016: 2).

However, and on another level, the role of ‘China’ as presented in the novels goes beyond the economic and geopolitical growth of China. Up until today, words such as ‘mutual ignorance’ or ‘thin’ are still deployed regarding knowledge about China in Latin America (Armony 2012: 179; Tzili Apango 2014: 207). Notwithstanding a long history of engagement, China is still sometimes described as a ‘new and unknown actor in Latin America’ (Creutzfeld 2013: 599–607). David Shambaugh has expressed that his ‘impression is that there is an extremely low level of understanding among the region’s people and governments about China’ (2008: xii). Ariel Armony suggests that Latin American ideas regarding China are based on an “‘imported Orientalism’ which tends to be dominated by misrepresentations of Chinese society and culture [which include] a combination of timeworn images of China as “mysterious” and the projection on to China of changing beliefs and interests in the West […]’ (2012: 179). These statements reveal the ways in which China is still misrepresented or its presence in Latin America silenced. In this context, the novels show an awareness of the common negligence as regards recognition of China in Latin America. The novels’ depictions of China expose the mechanisms that produce and inform those silences, such as the generalisations by which hierarchical knowledge has been maintained.

While recent public opinion polls depict a mildly positive opinion of China in Latin America, anti-Chinese attitudes are persistent in the region, as ‘China’s rise’
has generated anxieties due to the perceived threats posed by environmental impact, migration and the demand for natural resources (Armony and Velásquez 2015: 342). In their study on Mexican perceptions of China, Romer Cornejo, Francisco Javier Haro Navejas and José Luis León-Manríquez show how historical and contemporary views of China are mostly based on prejudice and oscillate between frustration, indifference, and envy (2013: 58, 72). According to them, unfavourable contemporary perceptions of China in Mexico mostly spring from an uneven economic relationship with China boosted by mass media, business, and politicians. They state that ‘unlike the 1910s or the 1920s, when anti-Chinese rhetoric in Mexico grew into expropriations of Chinese business and even physical aggression, contemporary conflict has mostly been symbolic’ (Cornejo and others 2013: 63). While the Chinese are spared physical violence, in this scenario the latter observation nevertheless reflects the persistence of a different kind of aggression against the ‘Chinese’.

As we have seen, representations of ‘China’ in Latin America can be profoundly exoticist and racist. For example, in her tweet ‘Más de 1.000 asistentes al evento… ¿Serán todos de ‘La Cámpola’ y vinieron sólo por el alocó y el petróleo?’ former President of Argentina Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, replaced ‘r’ for ‘l’, in what has been described as a ‘cartoonish Chinese accent’ (Osnos 2015). Her tweet elicited different kinds of reactions, many of them as essentialising and stereotyping as the original tweet, but with others openly critical and condemning (‘Medios de todo el mundo criticaron a Cristina Kirchner por burlarse del acento chino’ 2015). Unfortunately, Fernández de Kirchner’s comments are not isolated, as stereotyped views of the Chinese continue to emerge every day in Latin America, such as in the
popular Mexican singer Thalía’s cover of the song ‘En un bosque de la China’ (2014), as seen in Chapter 2.

And yet, according to Pew Research, there is a high positive opinion of China in Latin American nations that have become large commodity exporters to Beijing (2013); overall, Latin American views of China are more positive than negative, although many of those queried offered no opinion (2014). In spite of the paratextual aspects, Kirchner’s statements or Pew Research’s findings, the corpus I studied reveals how China’s role and presence in Latin America is much more complex than being simply ‘positive’, ‘distant’, or ‘unknown’. A broad poststructuralist and deconstructive approach allows me to show how ‘China’ appears as a symbol of ‘otherness’ in Latin America, from racist, condescending and admiring perspectives all at once. ‘China’, as a symbolic figure, becomes a site of otherness that discloses, replicates and challenges discourses of strangerness in Latin America.

Through Ahmed’s figure of the ‘stranger’, and Nancy’s being-in-common, the books studied in this thesis reveal the complexity that the term ‘China’ embodies. Overall, my chapters show how ‘China’ is a multifaceted signifier which on one level is used as a way to perform ‘Chineseness’, maintaining, for example, titles and covers that recall an exoticist imaginary of ‘China’. The rhetorical use of ‘China’, however, may also be read as a covert parody of racist categories, contrasting race with understandings of identity. By exposing ‘China’ as an intersectional site of otherness in Latin America, and by exposing the multidimensional aspects of ‘China’, these novels make the reader think about how they imagine ‘China’, and how that ‘China’ highlights issues of race in Latin America.
As a fetish, building here specifically on McClintock’s understanding of the fetish here, ‘China’ displays the multiplicity of contradictions that mark a crisis in the social meaning of historical and personal narratives of ‘China’ (1995: 184). The notion of ‘China’ as a place of difference is thus established and simultaneously critiqued. From this perspective, the novels can be seen, on one level, to embrace the irresolution contained in the fetishistic representation of ‘China’ in these novels. Inhabiting the ‘threshold of both personal and historical memory’, fetishes as described by McClintock mark a ‘crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution’ (1995: 184). On another level, the novels themselves make use (even if involuntarily) of China as a ‘fetishised stranger’, engaging with the current publishing market and the growing presence of China in Latin America. However, while ‘China’ is shown to embody ‘otherness’ in Latin America, by focusing on essentialism (stereotypes, racism, post-racism) and the constructedness of hegemonic discourses (stereotypes, narratives, narrators), the novels subvert the ontologising constructedness of China as ‘stranger’. Situated then beyond the ‘West’, and the West/non-West, and West/East binaries, ‘China’ allows Latin Americans in the novels to stand outside themselves and examine themselves.

As Mariano Siskind argues, the differential affirmation of a disruptive cosmopolitan aesthetic identity in Latin America must be read as a ‘strategic literary practice that forces its way into the realm of universality, denouncing both the hegemonic structures of Eurocentric forms of exclusion and nationalistic patterns of self-marginalization’ (2014: 6). Siskind goes on to suggest that this ‘omnipotent fantasy’ of a horizontal universal discursive field, where cosmopolitan subjectivity can be represented on equal terms with the metropolitan cultures whose hegemonic discourse they try to undermine, is ‘nonetheless very effective in opening a
cosmopolitan discursive space’ (2014: 7). Siskind’s words here both defy the notion of cultural difference and situate Latin American literature within a global context. And within this context of cosmopolitanism, analysed through Nancy’s ‘being singular plural’ in relation to Ahmed’s figure of the ‘stranger’, the novels have been shown to converse with currents that critique multiculturalism and question the idea of a post-racial Latin America (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016; Da Costa 2016).

While the absence of the Chinese as part of a Latin American identity has led to their supplemental position within Latin American discourses of race and mestizaje, their inclusion within notions of a Latin American hybridity may also lead to essentialist generalizations. Indeed, terms like hybridity, transculturation or syncretism may sweep distinctions under the rug and lead to generalizations, allowing for the essentializing of Latin American identities as homogeneously hybrid and free of internal conflicts (Cornejo Polar 1998: 7–8; Catelli 2016: 145). However, following Charles Hatfield’s critique from a more universalist position (2015), I see these novels’ emphasis on the figure of ‘China’ as a mechanism to avoid circumventing the power difference which is contained by the idea of difference itself. These novels show that ‘China’ and ‘Latin America’ can be equivalent ‘fictions’, that the Chinese are part of Latin America and that geopolitical distributions on the map are there to be questioned. By regarding the novels’ negotiation of subjectivities beyond fixed global cartographies, the reader is led to reflect upon citizenship and agency in a global context. These novels bring China to Latin America, calling for a Latin America that is more representative of its heterogeneous and composite nature.
A deconstruction of the processes through which China is constructed as ‘fetishised stranger’ reveals the ways in which any ‘stranger’ can be ‘othered’. As Ahmed’s model of ‘strange encounters’ suggests, ‘we need to find ways of re-encountering these encounters so that they no longer hold other others in place’ (2000: 17). In line with Ahmed, I question the assumption that we can have any valid ontology of strangers, and I refuse to take for granted the stranger’s status as predetermined figure. Because of this refusal to essentialise identities, the mutual marginalities of China and Latin America within a global context underline cosmopolitanism by always including the subjects of these regions in relation to each other, threatening any dualist notion. In this sense, the texts question any bounded relation to cartography and nation states, by thinking of subjectivity beyond fixed alterity, and rather from a non-hierarchical standpoint. This thesis acknowledges race and the nation as political realities, but simultaneously explores the politics and subjectivities beyond the subject and nation itself. In this way, it reveals how the novels point towards ways out of essentialist understandings of identity and community in Latin America.

While Ahmed’s theoretical approach is especially interesting because of her emphasis on the dynamic process of the encounter, Nancy’s idea of the subject as being-in-common is also central to my analysis. Indeed, I argue that we need to explore the ways through which the (re)production of strangerness continues to produce ‘otherness’. From this perspective, Nancy’s understanding of the subject as being-in-common allows us to focus on the relationships between people and their understandings of community, a relationship that emerges as crucial in the novels studied here. Ultimately, the choice of ‘China’ exposes the availability in Latin America of new ideas on identity and new forms of inoperative community, which
allows for community but does not endorse any essentialist understanding of it.

These novels can thus be considered to form part of a corpus that denounces histories of racism against the Chinese who continue to be relatively ‘invisible’ or ‘unknown’ in Latin America (Herbert 2015; Solano Rivera 2016: 38; La Jornada Morelos 2016), while offering new understandings of identity and community as non-essentialist and in constant development.

While the theories expose the mechanisms at work in encounters between subjects, the novels themselves out-do the theory by simultaneously hinting at the impossibility of fully expressing complex articulations of difference and essentialism, as well as the consequent discrimination and exclusion of subjects along different axes — such as race, class or gender — and their intersections. Thus, I view the novels as using ‘China’ as a fetishised multidimensional term (exponentially diverse), to disclose the complexities inherent in the mechanisms of strangerness and (essentialist) otherness. The novels’ interruption of mestizaje is thus strategic, precisely because of the contradictory and multivariate meanings of ‘China’ in Latin America, informed, among other, by histories of imperialism, racism, economic exchanges, and exotic imaginaries. Published at a time when people of Asian descent in the region have also begun to explore race and identity through literature, poetry, art and politics (López 2016: 128), with a growing academic body of work that deals with the role of Asian communities in Latin America, these novels stimulate thinking about Latin America in non-essentialist ways. A non-essentialist understanding allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the role of people whose presence has been silenced within the political constructs of Latin America.

Future projects could explore the uses of a fetishised ‘China’ in relation to other Asian communities, as well as the meanings that a fetishised ‘China’ acquires
when presented in other cultural manifestations and in other parts of the Americas, underlined by the transnational experience of Chinese migration to the region. For the specific case of Latin America, an analysis from the perspective of texts being written by self-identified Asian diasporas or communities perceived as minorities may reveal other ways in which otherness is being deployed, and how it can be challenged and/or used strategically. Also, the scope of this project does not permit an analysis of how ‘China’ engages with the understanding of a fetishised ‘Latin America’. Furthermore, the novels, taken together, show that Argentina and Mexico are the two Latin American countries publishing the most novels on China, an aspect that is worth studying further. An analysis of the latter may contribute to the exposure of contradictory discourses at play nationally in relation to a Latin American identity as a whole.

While the novels studied here embrace non-binarial definitions, which are more open to diversity, other ‘texts’ may disclose alternative perspectives. In this sense, the novels studied here allow us to change the frames through which identity, identities and subjectivities have been defined, thus leading the reader to reflect on the identities which have been denied to the subject. At a time when borders and differences are becoming increasingly entrenched and we see a return to the concept of the ‘nation’, further research can contribute to the exploration of strategies for non-essentialist transnational constructions of identity, the defiance of hegemonic understandings of self and other, the positioning of national cultures in relation to global discourses, and new forms of transnational and local alliances and community.
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