Transpacific Exoticisms: Performing Asia Across the U.S. Southern Border

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In 1951, Korean American soprano Florence Ahn stood center stage in an elegant gown at the Trocadero nightclub in Havana, Cuba (Figure 1). She gestured graciously toward the audience, soaking up their applause as she prepared to take her bow. Florence took her place among a group of Cuban rumba dancers costumed in polka-dot sleeves and long shiny dresses. An appreciative audience clad in firs and suits clapped from their seats at tables strewn with the remnants of drinks. The Cuban entertainment magazine *Carteles* wrote that Florence Ahn's arrival in Havana had been a triumph: "This Chinese girl came, saw, and conquered. She came to Cuba like a shining star."[1]

In the postwar period, Asian Americans traveled on nightclub circuits that took them across the southern border to perform amid the glitz and glamour of Cuban and Mexican cabaret culture. Many of them had first showcased their artistic talents and "oriental" beauty at famed Asian-themed nightclubs, such as the Forbidden City in San Francisco or the China Doll in New York City.[2] They gained visibility during the early Cold War period when American policymakers, journalists, and cultural producers sought to demonstrate the promises of American racial democracy to audiences at home and abroad by promoting "desirable" images of race.[3] This led to what Christina Klein has termed "Cold War Orientalism," a blossoming of American middlebrow entertainment about Asia, such as the musicals and films *Flower Drum Song, South Pacific*, and *A Many Splendored Thing*.[4] As Klein has argued, this middlebrow

0026-3079/2020/5904-023$2.50/0 American Studies, 61.3 (2022)

culture served the pedagogical function of teaching white Americans "correct" feelings of sympathy toward Asians and Asian Americans, but it also served to conceal war and violence across the Pacific. Along with films and musicals, American GIs brought home a taste for live Asian-themed nightclub shows. This led to the growth of lively audiences in the U.S. South at a time when the region was expanding with the postwar growth of the American military, industry, and tourism. Asian Americans took their shows on the road to entertainment hubs down south.

Their travels show how the U.S. South served as what Tara McPherson has called a "hinge point between the Americas."[5] Asian American entertainers boarded ferries and planes between Miami, Florida, and Havana, Cuba, or took the bus between the small border towns of McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, Tamaulipas, before heading to Monterrey and Mexico City. In turn, they criss-crossed entertainers of Asian descent traveling in the opposite direction. Asian Cuban and Asian Mexican entertainers formed part of the stream of Caribbean and Latin American artists moving across the border to cater to the American craze for tropical rumba and dancing Mexican señoritas. They brought with them Cuban fantasies of the national symbol of the *mulata*, a figure that officially incorporated Blackness and whiteness, but also carried erased histories of racial mixing with the Chinese in Cuba.[6] Others brought with them Mexican fantasies of Asia that had origins in the sixteenth century Manila galleon trade, intimate transpacific ties subsequently denied because of Mexico's orientation toward the transatlantic.[7]

This article draws on archival and oral history research to explore how four entertainers of Asian and mixed-Asian descent, Florence Ahn, Estela, Jadin Wong, and Su Muy Key, navigated the multiple racial and gendered imaginaries of the transpacific that circulated throughout the U.S. South, Mexico, and Cuba in the postwar era. They formed part of a much larger circulation of performers of Asian descent in this interconnected region. I argue that performers of Asian descent occupied culturally and racially ambiguous positions that allowed them to embody multiple transpacific fantasies in nightclub performances that experimented with cultural mixing. This included incorporating new genres global in scope, such as zarzuela, rumba, modern dance, and Mexican revista, developed through cross-cultural encounters during the entertainers' travels. In doing so, they disturbed the Black and white binary in the U.S. South as well as the erasure of the long-standing Asian presence within Latin America and the Caribbean; in some cases, they also facilitated the expurgation of African-European racial mixture from certain constructions of national identity.[8]

Asian American entertainers entered the busy cultural flows that circulated throughout the Gulf Coast of the United States and Mexico, stretching into Cuba. Cold War American images of Asian beauties

assimilating into U.S. culture traveled into Mexico and Cuba through nightclub shows, theatre, and Hollywood films. Meanwhile, Cuban images of tropical Blackness that carried an erased Chinese component swept into Miami and through Veracruz to Mexico City along with the rhythms of son, rumba, mambo, and cha-cha-cha. In Mexico City it met with the "*exóticas*," a group of vedettes who embodied racialized and sexualized fantasies of the Pacific Islands, the Far East, and the Caribbean. The image of the *exótica* traveled through live shows and films such as *Mujeres de Teatro* (1951) and *Han Matado a Tongolele* (1948) to Mexican migrant communities in the Texas-Mexico borderlands. These gendered imaginaries of the transpacific connected the U.S. South with the rich performance cultures flowing between the entertainment centers of Cuba and Mexico.

These complex transpacific cultural mixings provide an unexpected lens into the U.S. South as a bridge into the circum-Caribbean in the postwar era. The popular depiction of the U.S. South as an isolated region has been challenged by scholars who have reoriented new southern studies toward the flow of people, ideas, culture, and capital. This has refigured the U.S. South in terms of border crossings into the transatlantic and hemispheric worlds.[9] More recently, scholars have also begun exploring how the transpacific forms a significant part of these flows through studies of Asian labor migration and capital as well as Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. South.[10] Meanwhile, in the field of performance studies, scholars have explored the circulation of Caribbean, Mexican and Mexican American, African American, and Louisiana Creole entertainers who connected the U.S. South with the circum-Caribbean and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.[11] However, yet to be explored are the transpacific influences that form an important part of the complicated cultural exchanges within this interconnected region, as I show in this article.

Because they confound logics of racial formation, these transpacific influences have been overlooked. Scholars have described Asian Americans as occupying an "interstitial" space between the Black and white binary in the U.S. South or as sliding between American inclusion and exclusion during an era of heightened Cold War political tensions between the United States and Asia.[12] And yet, entertainers did not necessarily remain fixed within a Black and White binary or a striving toward Americanness. They leveraged their ambiguity to also slide into other national imaginaries, such as toward *mexicanidad* and *cubanidad*, within these nations that had their own long-standing connections to Asia. While the United States remained a dominating imperial force in this hemisphere, this transpacific lens reveals how nightclub entertainers created a world of rich cultural exchanges in which the United States was not the inevitable center.

I focus on two pairs of criss-crossing performers, one pair traveling on the New York City–Miami–Havana–Mexico City circuit and the other on the Texas-Mexico borderlands–Monterrey–Mexico City circuit, to trace how live performers moved inside and outside American categories of racial formation to also become enmeshed within legacies of *mestizaje* and *mulataje*. Tracing performing bodies in motion reveals how performers break down expected categories of race, nation, ethnicity, and genre. Individual performers faced their own unique constraints, such as the exclusion of Afro-Cuban people from high-class Cuban cabarets or the collapsing of Asian diversity into Chineseness. However, they found ways to circumvent these limits to appeal to diverse audiences through skilled performances that called on imaginaries of American cosmopolitanism, Afro-Asian intimacies, or nostalgic Mexican migrant imaginaries of home. While their performances drew on different national imaginaries of the transpacific, they also connected them in ways often unexpected to the performers themselves. Their vision of the transpacific reveals a U.S. South pulled toward the cultural centers of Havana and Mexico City.

The Korean Lark Meets the Cuban Rumbera

When Florence Ahn sang Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine" in her full operatic voice, she won over the audience of *Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts* television and radio show in the late 1940s. "Begin the Beguine" became one of her signature songs. The popular American jazz standard evoked longing for a past love under a starry "night of tropical splendor." Porter claimed to have written the 1935 song while on tour in the South Pacific, where he witnessed a dance that transported him back to the sultry rhythms of the beguine in Martinique.[13] Florence took the song "Begin the Beguine" on travels that also bridged the transpacific and the Caribbean. She toured on a New York City–Miami–Havana entertainment circuit where she performed side by side with Caribbean musicians and entertainers who linked this circuit further afield to Veracruz and Mexico City, where they featured in Mexican film and cabaret. This included mixed Chinese Cubans, such as rumba dancer Estela and the legendary *orquesta femenina,* or all-girls band Anacaona. American news columnist Walter Winchell dubbed Estela and her dance partner Papo "Begin the Beguinexperts" [*sic*], again evoking Porter's popular imagination of the tropical wonder of the Caribbean.[14]

This section explores how Florence Ahn and Estela navigated the transpacific imaginaries that circulated throughout the United States, Cuba, and Mexico, which included tropical imaginaries of Blackness with erased ties to the transpacific. Florence moved from catering to Cold War American fantasies in New York City into Cuban imaginaries of race in Havana's cabaret culture. Working across genres such as musical showtunes and Cuban zarzuela, Florence developed performances

that combined American class and sophistication with Cuban national fantasies of the *china mulata,* which gave her the cachet to become a star. Meanwhile, in Cuba, Estela used her sheer skill and talent as a rumba dancer to move away from the confining image of the foreign "chinita," proving her ability to embody the Cuban figure of the *mulata* that incorporated elements of the transpacific. When Estela performed in Mexico and the United States, however, she now embodied images of tropical Blackness, where these associations with the transpacific appear to have been lost. Although they never met, tracing the criss-crossing movement of these two performers shows how the transpacific is enmeshed with histories of *mulataje* that have often been erased, occluding complex Afro-Asian intimacies.

Florence's childhood was firmly situated within the Pacific. She was born in pre-statehood Hawai'i to a Korean diasporic family who expected her to return to Korea. Instead, in the mid-1930s, Florence left her childhood home of Honolulu to study opera at Los Angeles City College and then at Juilliard Graduate School in New York City. Despite these achievements, Florence saw little possibility of a career in classical opera as a woman of Asian descent in the United States. She married a Korean international student, and they settled down in San Francisco, California. However, after she found herself a single mother with two young boys to support, she made the bold decision to move to New York City. She found an agent and booked singing engagements, not in opera, but in nightclubs. She became a regular fixture at the Hotel St. Moritz, Casa Seville, and the China Doll.

When she arrived in New York City in 1948, Florence became immersed in a cultural scene promoting Cold War American middlebrow entertainment about Asia.[15] Danielle Seid has identified the rise of what she calls the "Asian/American femme" in Cold War television. These figures stood in as stylish and beautiful "symbols of inclusion," but their exotic racial difference marked them as perpetually "citizens-in-the-making."[16] In this context, Asian-themed nightclub revues that featured an Asian female body were all the rage.

Florence navigated these racial and gendered fantasies of Asian American women in New York City. Her classically trained voice represented the promises of American democracy to critics who often commented on her Juilliard School training. However, they also continually remarked on the exoticism of her racialized and gendered body, which reduced her to at best a copy or a mimic, the "finest singer of her race."[17] When Florence appeared on Arthur Godfrey's show in December 1948, Godfrey framed her performance not in terms of the quality of her voice but in terms of her "Korean" ethnicity, making a joke about her Korean dress to promote his Lipton Tea sponsorship.[18]

As Florence performed in New York City, she met Caribbean

musicians traveling on entertainment circuits that connected her to Miami, Florida, and Havana, Cuba. In 1949, Florence booked a six-month engagement at the China Doll nightclub in Midtown Manhattan. The China Doll marketed the fantasy of the Asian female body with its all-Asian floor show, but the music was all Latin. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote: "Rumba rumblings, slant-eyed honeys and enticing Chinese food tidbits—no new formula for this W. 51st St. club."[19] The China Doll had previously been the Latin music hotspot La Conga, which had brought in famed Afro-Cuban bandleader Machito and singer Miguelito Valdés.[20] Inside the nightclub, Asian American and Caribbean entertainers mixed and mingled, forming friendships and at least one marriage.[21]

It was during this time that Florence was recruited by Miami businessmen scouting for talent.[22] She entered the connected entertainment worlds of Miami and Havana. The military and tourist boom in postwar Miami had opened up the rapidly developing city as the "Gateway to the Americas." An opulent nightlife catered to these adventure seekers. Nightclubs marketed their shows through the exoticism of tropical Blackness, but they also played with a range of tropes from Harlem jazz to Arabian nights, Mexican mariachi, Haitian vodou—and the mysticism of the Orient.

Florence booked a show called the Bataclán Chino at the Teatro Martí in Havana, Cuba, produced by Cuban impresario César Alonso and American baseball player Mickey Grasso. Asian American and Asian Cuban entertainers filled the acts of what Florence termed an "oriental strip show." Cuban reviews panned the show. They noted that dancer Mai Ling's strip act showed off a beautiful body but was overall too fleeting, the music was just "noise," and the rest of the acts "excel at nothing."[23] The reviews lumped together the acts as vulgar burlesque.

However, critics made a clear exception for Florence Ahn. *Carteles* placed Florence in a class of her own: "The artistry in the show was provided in the most outstanding manner by Florence Ahn, who is a good singer."[24] Critics recognized not only her artistry, but also her technical brilliance with "good vocal flow, good interpretative taste, good training."[25] Florence's voice reflected her classical music training at Juilliard, linking her to the prestige of the premier performing arts school in the United States. The press was fascinated by her ability to sing in multiple languages, including "English, French and Spanish with absolute authority."[26] Her son Vincent recalled that she played up this linguistic virtuosity by singing songs like "Sin Ti" and "Besame Mucho" in both English and Spanish, sometimes rotating languages between verses. Critics took special pleasure in the spectacle of a "Chinese" singer demonstrating her mastery of Western languages: "This chinita soprano who sings in all languages, except… Chinese!"[27]

In Cuba, Florence was finally granted artistry and the status of a star by a Cuban press that associated her with Euro-American modernity. At the same time, her "Chinese" body was part of her appeal, lending her a tinge of the exotic. The press hailed Florence as "la dama china de la canción" (the Chinese lady of song), "muñequita china" (little Chinese doll), and "pollo chino" (Chinese chick). As a "chinita," Florence's Korean background was typically erased in Cuban newspapers. According to Vincent, however, Florence experienced these as "words of endearment and appreciation" that differed from the limiting stereotypes she had faced in the United States.[28] The outpouring of fascination led to a nightly radio show contract and regular appearances at the lavish Tropicana and Sans Souci cabarets in Havana. Commenting on her appearances on Radio Cadena Habana, *Carteles* wrote: "Florence Ahn can proudly say that, both at the Martí theater and on the radio, the public gave in to her without reservation."[29]

Florence took her place on the cabaret stage next to the Cuban vedette. The vedette was known for her stunning beauty, statuesque body, and artistry as a dancer, singer, and actor. She had mastered the most Cuban genres of rumba and mambo, but she was equally at home in American musical showtunes or French ballads. Cuba inserted itself into the internationalism of the early Cold War period through this figure of the vedette, a world traveler to the cosmopolitan centers of New York, Paris, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires.[30] However, in film and high-class cabaret, vedettes such as Ninón Sevilla and Rosita Fornés embodied a light-skinned or whitened figure of the *mulata*, the national symbol of Cuba.[31] This exoticized figure of the *mulata* came out of the historical mixing of African and European in Cuba, provoking fascination for the thrill of illicit Blackness, but also representing a threat that needed to be tamed. Elite Cuban cabarets such as the Tropicana "promoted whiteness" by privileging light-skinned and white vedettes who embodied the figure of the *mulata* for upper class Cuban and international tourist audiences, although some Afro-Cubans did appear on the cabaret stage.[32]

Significantly, the figure of the *mulata* included traces of transpacific influences that came from long histories of Chinese migration to Cuba. The Chinese had formed part of the colonial experiment of replacing slavery with indentured labor. They arrived to Cuba in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where they faced harsh conditions.[33] After the abolition of slavery, some of the Chinese formed relationships with formerly enslaved African women, leading to a second generation of mixed Afro-Asian descendants.[34] As scholars such as Kathleen López have argued, the Chinese have often been erased from official *cubanidad*.[35] Nonetheless, the figure of the *china mulata* has played an important role in religious practices, literature,

and the performing arts in Cuba.[36] This includes an eroticized character of the *china mulata* in Cuban literature, which Ignacio López-Calvo characterizes as "libidinized and objectivized for [her] 'exotic' physical appeal."[37] In this context of racial mixing, "china" as a term of endearment has also been used to gesture toward racial ambiguity in Cuban culture.[38] When Cubans celebrated Florence as a "chinita," they pulled her into this history of racial mixing in Cuba, despite her Korean ancestry.

Mixed Chinese Cubans, however, also made significant cultural contributions to Cuban genres in the performing arts. Dancer Estela was celebrated by contemporaries as "the best rumbera from Cuba."[39] Rumba was an art form indelibly linked to the legacies of slavery, originating in Cuba's poor Afro-Cuban working-class neighborhoods. By the 1930s, *Afrocubanismo,* or a celebration of Afro-Cuban culture, was playing an important role in defining Cuban national identity. This cultural movement coincided with the global export of Cuban music and dance.[40] Estela and her dance partner, René, were among the first to bring rumba abroad. The Cuban press raved about the "originality" of her style, her "complete mastery" of the dances, and her "tempting body."[41]

And yet, Estela had not always been allowed to stand in for Cuba. Estela, whose birth name was Ramona Ajón, claimed Chinese and Mayan ancestry. It is important to note that Chinese and Indigenous ancestry were sometimes highlighted or claimed strategically to avert the discrimination experienced by African-descended people in Cuba.[42] However, Chineseness still carried social stigma. In her early career, Estela recalled how Cuban director Roberto Rodriguez had looked askance at her Chinese-like eyes, long straight hair, and skinny body. Relegated to dancing foreign numbers in his company shows, Estela asked to dance rumba instead. At first doubtful, Rodriguez was astonished when she started to move, which *Bohemia* journalist Don Galaor reimagined: "Undulating the hips, hardly in the form of hips. She shook the shoulders and all of her was rumba. Cuban rumba learned in that universal and magnificent school which is the street. As she advanced, new figures, new steps showed that she, Ramona, knew about this."[43] Through performance, Estela asserted her presence in *cubanidad*, insisting on her ability to perform rumba authentically by using performance to overcome her Chinese features. She now embodied the figure of the *china mulata*.

Estela danced her way through the vibrant nightlife scenes of New York and Mexico City in the 1930s and 1940s. She was booked nightly at the Havana-Madrid and Club Yumuri in New York City. She also followed the stream of Caribbean entertainers, including Anacaona, who traveled to Mexico City through Veracruz, Mexico's port city on the Gulf Coast. In 1938, Estela and René appeared in the Mexican films *Tierra Brava,*

México Lindo, and *María* before stopping in Hollywood to film *Another Thin Man* (1939).

In 1939, they booked the Mexican government–sponsored production of *Mexicana* at Forty-Sixth Street Theatre on Broadway. Estela starred in "La Mulata de Cordoba," the famous Mexican myth of a *mulata* from Veracruz who cures the poor and renders men spellbound. Denounced to the Inquisition, she instead enthralls the Inquisitor who falls in love with her. She then draws a ship on her prison wall and sails away. Casting Estela to dance in the "Mulata de Cordoba" contributed to what scholars have argued was a project of displacing Blackness onto Cuba in the post-revolutionary era. As B. Christine Arce argues, Mexican national discourses disappeared people of African descent from Mexico through the trope of an exotic *mulata* rendered foreign.[44] Through these exoticized images of Blackness, Mexicans could transgress gender, sexual, and racial conventions and incorporate themselves into modernity.[45] In the context of Mexico, Estela's transpacific influences appear to have in turn been disappeared into Afro-Cubanness.

By the 1950s, Estela had also become a frequent presence in Miami's growing nightlife scene. She entered a Jim Crow South contending with the complications of race as the city developed into a Pan-American center. Estela booked Place Pigalle, El Mambo, and Hotel di Lido in Miami Beach. Miami Beach venues were infamous for booking Black artists as entertainment but banning them from staying at their hotels. However, as Chanelle N. Rose has argued, Afro-Caribbeans often occupied intermediate positions in Miami due to their ethnicity demonstrated through their Spanish-language fluency, giving them entry into otherwise segregated spaces.[46]

In Miami, Estela catered to the American craze for rumba, contributing to the growth of an exoticized imaginary of tropical Blackness. The American popularization of Cuban rumba, which had begun at the 1932 Chicago World's Fair, soon spread across the nation. Musicians such as Don Aspiazu, Xavier Cugat, Machito, and Mario Bauzá discovered enthusiastic audiences. As Robin Moore has argued, now North American composers and musicians such as Cole Porter, Bing Crosby, and Marion Sunshine also began to bring rumba to Broadway and Tin Pan Alley.[47] The fascination with rumba was a highly racialized and often sexualized encounter that allowed white Americans to adventure beyond middle-class boundaries of propriety, similar to the reception of exoticized Blackness by Mexican audiences. The obsession with the sensual movement of Estela's hips erased the rich Afro-Cuban histories conveyed through rumba, including its transpacific connections.[48]

In contrast to Estela's reception during her travels, Florence discovered that in Havana she now brought to mind a bewildering number

of associations that tied her to the cosmopolitanism of the vedette and the Cubanness of the *china mulata*. The Cuban newspaper *Pueblo* wrote: "This is something serious, to be in Havana and interviewing a lovely Chinese woman, who was born in Honolulu, who likes the Spanish language and who loves Argentinian mate drink, is like being at the center of the United Nations."[49] Off stage in interviews, Florence played up the romance of her background in Honolulu as she drew a connection with Cuba, presenting her origins in an island of tourism and pleasure not in the Caribbean, but in the Pacific.

In her shows, Florence learned new repertoire to appeal to her Cuban audiences. Another of her signature songs now became the famous *romanza* from Ernesto Lecuona's zarzuela *Maria La O* (1930), based on Cirilo Villaverde's iconic novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the quintessential song of the tragic "*mulata infeliz*" [unhappy *mulata*]. And so, Florence ascended to the cabaret stage by singing the role of a *mulata* who stood in as a national symbol for Cuba. Cuban magazine *Carteles* stated that Florence interpreted Lecuona with authority and originality, displaying "great prestige."[50] Her ability to craft performances that displayed cosmopolitanism, Americanness, and Cubanness all at once promoted her to stardom in Cuba.

After spending two years in Havana, Florence left Cuba, but Cuba did not leave her. Florence now saw possibility in future Latinx audiences. In 1953, Florence sang at the Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles for a variety show headlined by Mexican actress Miroslava. She was held over for the following month, headlined by Ecuadorian Paco Miller as "La encantadora Princesa Coreana" [The lovely Korean Princess]. Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión* wrote: "She who shone with her beautiful soprano voice was the Korean Princess, Florence Ahn, who returned to the Million Dollar stage at the request of her many admirers."[51] Her travels to Cuba had brought her in front of Spanish-speaking Mexican and Mexican American audiences, but now she was in Los Angeles.

The Moon Goddess Meets la Exótica

In 1948, Chinese American dancer Jadin Wong's unique style of American modern dance was advertised in Mexico City to Tívoli nightclub audiences as a "marvelous Chinese spectacle" that would be "first of its class in the history of the arts in Mexico."[52] Sitting in the audience was mixed Chinese Mexican dancer Su Muy Key, a member of the *exóticas* who appeared frequently at the Tívoli. The *exóticas* were vedettes who attracted scandal, not praise, for embodying exoticized fantasies of Asia, the South Pacific, and the Caribbean on the Mexican nightclub stage. After Jadin Wong's resounding success, the Mexican newspaper *El Nacional* wrote that Su Muy Key had much to learn from the "gringita," or her American counterpart.[53]

In this section I explore how dancers Jadin Wong and Su Muy Key navigated multiple transpacific imaginaries on a route that stretched from the Texas-Mexico borderlands to Monterrey and then to Mexico City, although both traveled more extensively within the Gulf Coast of the United States and Mexico. Trained in American modern dance, Jadin's exclusion from the concert stage led her to the nightclub world where she catered to American fantasies of the transpacific on a circuit that included the Texas-Mexico borderlands. However, she moved into Mexican imaginaries of the transpacific when she booked nightclubs in Mexico City and Monterrey. Jadin developed a modern dance show that, similar to that of Florence Ahn, brought both her American training and exotic Chineseness to Mexico, which combined to raise her to the status of an artist, a status she had been denied in the United States. Meanwhile, Su Muy Key catered to desires for exoticism and eroticism as an *exótica* in Mexico City and Monterrey. However, when she traveled to the Texas-Mexico borderlands, she now found herself catering to new audiences. This included Cold War American fantasies of the transpacific in front of American tourist audiences and Mexican migrant nostalgia in the Rio Grande Valley and San Antonio. The criss-crossing movement of Jadin and Su Muy Key reveals a transpacific entangled with histories of *mestizaje* in Mexico as well as histories of Mexican migration.

Thinking back over her years working as a dancer in the late 1930s to the 1950s, Jadin Wong reflected that she had "a nightclub career as a concert dancer."[54] This was a profound statement of resistance against the racial exclusions of American concert dance. Jadin had never been short on daring. At the age of sixteen she ran away from home in Stockton, California, to pursue her dreams in Hollywood. She ended up in San Francisco, studying with renowned Japanese modern dancer Michio Ito, a choreographer and dancer who had developed a career in Europe before moving to California. Ito was working within an American modern dance world in which white dancers and teachers, many of them women, queer men, and immigrants, pushed for the formation of a concert dance tradition. To create this American tradition, they borrowed heavily from diverse dance aesthetics, including African diasporic, Indigenous, Latinx, and crucially, Asian and Pacific Island dance forms. White American dancers such as Martha Graham, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn claimed legitimacy on the stage through the figure of the "artist-genius," promoting dance as a universal expression of the inner self.[55] They equated white American bodies with universalism, meaning that racially marked bodies could not stand in for the universal. Despite working within this modern dance tradition, Ito was classified as an "international" dancer marked as foreign.[56]

In contrast, white American dancer and choreographer La Meri, also Jadin's teacher, pioneered the genre of "ethnic" dance. Growing up in San

Antonio, Texas, La Meri had become fascinated with Mexican culture.[57] This motivated her travels as an amateur ethnographer throughout Latin America and Asia, where she studied with local dance teachers. La Meri's aim was to perform and teach these dances with authenticity, claiming to be a translator of "alien" dance forms to white American audiences. In doing so, however, she positioned herself as modern, aligning herself with the white American "artist-genius" and freezing Asian and Latin American dancers into the past.[58] At her Ethnologic Dance Center, La Meri taught dances she identified as originating from the Orient, Spain, Hawai'i, Polynesia, and Latin America.[59] Jadin credited La Meri for developing her unique hand technique. Unlike La Meri, however, Jadin was denied the position of "artist-genius" as critics attributed her hands to traditional "Oriental temple dances."[60]

Recognizing the challenges Jadin would face in the American concert dance scene, Michio Ito instead recommended the nightclub world. Together, they developed Jadin's signature Moon Goddess dance, with its blend of Javanese, Balinese, and ballet technique. She brought the Moon Goddess dance to San Francisco's Forbidden City, New York City's Leon & Eddie's nightclub, and far beyond to small nightclubs and USO shows across the United States, Canada, and Europe. This included shows Jadin booked in the U.S. South at nightclubs such as the Blue Room in New Orleans, a club that often featured Asian-themed shows, including a 1947 appearance by film star Anna May Wong, and performances at Winnie's Riptide in Miami.

The American press was especially drawn to Jadin's dancing body. *Life* magazine's feature on the Forbidden City in 1940 featured Jadin's dancing body for a full-page spread, showing her in a deep back bend, wearing a Southeast Asian inspired headpiece and a dress with a long train that revealed her legs and midriff. *Life* magazine commented: "Chinese girls have an extraordinary aptitude for Western dance forms…. Slim of body, trim of leg, they dance to any tempo with a fragile charm distinctive to their race."[61] The press was fascinated with an "Asian" female body moving toward American modernity, but always lagging one step behind.

During this time, Jadin formed a traveling revue, choreographing the entire show, and took it on tour to Hawai'i and Mexico. In Mexico, she discovered a very different reception. In October 1948, the "Chinese Ming Toys" debuted at the Tívoli nightclub in Mexico City. The advertisement stated: "For the first time a Chinese show in Mexico." The Mexican press described Jadin as an "exotic Chinese star" and a "little Chinese doll." On the one hand, she evoked histories of constructing *mexicanidad* defined against the Chinese alien, although here through romanticized tropes.[62] On the other hand, the Mexican press pointed to Jadin's Americanness,

"coming from Chinatown in San Francisco, California." The press reprinted Jadin's *Life* magazine cover and depicted her reading *Esquire* magazine.

Meanwhile, vedette Su Muy Key was in the unusual position of sitting in the audience at the Tívoli where she so often stood under the spotlight. The Tívoli was located near the Plaza Garibaldi in a working-class neighborhood known for its nightclubs, bars, and sex-trade work. Su Muy Key, the stage name for Rosa Su López, was one of the so-called "*mujeres exóticas*" who scandalized Mexican audiences in the Tívoli's shows. The most famous of the *exóticas* was Tongolele, an American born in Spokane, Washington, who took on Afro-Cuban and Tahitian exoticism in her onstage personas. The sight of exotic Blackness performed by a whitened body served to bring Mexico into a cosmopolitan modernity even as Blackness remained condemned as a national threat.[63] Su Muy Key, meanwhile, was able to access the stage by claiming mixed Chinese, Aztec, and French descent, strategically associating herself with the origins of cabaret in France. During her lifetime, however, she attracted fascination and censure for her vulgar "*desnudismo*" or nudity.[64]

The *exóticas* became the focus of censorship campaigns in Mexico. As Laura Pérez Rosales and Claire Fox have pointed out, the "spirit of antiexoticism" of the late 1940s and 1950s tied together attacks on "foreign" ideas with sex and pornography.[65] The Catholic church–affiliated Liga Mexicana de la Decencia and the Acción Católica denounced foreign influences within the realm of culture.[66] At a time of rapid urbanization in Mexico, the *exóticas* symbolized a threat to *mexicanidad* through their associations with a foreign racial other, urban decay and poverty, and transgressive gender and sexual norms.

Su Muy Key's shows linked nudity with the foreign exotic. She brought to life the persona of "Su Muy Key, the beautiful daughter of the imperial celestial."[67] Su Muy Key appeared in films like *Carta Brava* (1949) and *Mujeres de Teatro* (1951), where she was relegated to a racialized and eroticized other counterpoised to a whitened Mexican female figure, played in both films by the Spanish actress Emilia Guiu. In *Carta Brava,* Su Muy Key's character was the villain who lured Guiu's character to an opium den, threatened to kill her with a knife, and then stabbed the hero in the back before she succumbed to death. The film rendered Su Muy Key utterly alien to *mexicanidad*. This portrayal is reminiscent of American Anna May Wong's villainous Hollywood film personas in the 1930s and fits within the broader representation of the Chinese in Mexico during the early years of the Korean War.[68] In Su Muy Key's publicity for the film *Carta Brava*, she claimed to have been a spy for the United Nations during World War II, perhaps as an attempt to offset Mexican Cold War images of a Chinese foreign threat.

While Mexican journalists frequently debated whether her shows

had artistic merit or were mere vulgar pornography, Su Muy Key had something of her own to say on this matter. In October 1948, *El Nacional* reported, tongue in cheek, on an exchange between the great Mexican artist Diego Rivera and Su Muy Key:

> As a decorative performer, above all, [Su Muy Key] has great vision and an extraordinary ability. So much so, that when Diego [Rivera] became aware of [her as] a dangerous competitor, he became furious…. For her part, Su Muy Key has not given importance to the incident because Diego is an absolutely inoffensive man. On the other hand, if it were a policeman or a theater or cabaret inspector, the situation would change.[69]

Diego Rivera's murals formed part of a movement to shape a mestizo vision of *mexicanidad* for the popular classes.[70] However, as Ed McCaughan points out, Rivera and other muralists also contributed to "a heterosexist, patriarchal machismo that constrained the private and public life of women and men alike."[71] While men such as Emiliano Zapata or Francisco Villa were celebrated as heroes, *mestiza* and Indigenous women were often depicted as passive and noble or through the figure of the *Malinche*, the traitor who betrayed the Aztecs to the Spaniards. Su Muy Key's dismissal of Diego Rivera refused these depictions. In contrast, she claimed agency as a Chinese-Mexican artist pushing boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race in the face of regulation. She, too, spoke to the popular classes, providing the racial and sexual fantasies that served the needs of a working-class population experiencing urban displacement in the late 1940s.

The Mexican newspaper *El Nacional* reported that Su Muy Key had come to "observe her countrywomen [at the Tívoli], with the aim of taking some lessons."[72] The Mexican press distinguished the Chinese Ming Toys from the *exóticas* as "a high-quality group and the first of its genre to be seen in Mexico."[73] The distinction was their artistry. One newspaper called Jadin "a formidable and accomplished dancer who cultivates the varieties of modern dance, absolutely dominating all the rhythms and cadences of the dances of her distant land and also of our own."[74] In this statement, the press afforded Jadin legitimacy within the world of American modern dance, presenting her as a figure who bridged the Orient and the West, and in doing so wrapped Mexico into her cosmopolitan modernity. Even Princesa Tsiu-Tsiu's exotic fan dance, choreographed by Jadin in the style of American burlesque dancer Sally Rand, showcased musical and dance training according to the Mexican press. *Jueves de Excelsior* wrote that Princesa Tsiu-Tsiu was "a figure who has come to save us from sinking [to] the [level of the] frivolous, owing to the seismic movements of shameless exotic excess, and has

demonstrated that nudity in theatre is as clean and pleasant as a Baccarat crystal vase."[75] The Chinese Ming Toys approached respectability due to their cosmopolitan associations with both the United States and China.

From Mexico City, Jadin Wong booked the Chinese Ming Toys in Monterrey before heading to Reynosa, the twin city to McAllen, Texas, in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. For one weekend in December 1948, the show took over the Monte Carlo Casino. This was no small feat in a casino that advertised itself as the "largest dance floor on the border" with tiered seating for 3,000 people.[76] During World War II, the audience for the Monte Carlo had expanded with the influx of servicemen searching for liquor, gambling, and sex in their days off from nearby Moore Air Base in Mission, Texas. In clubs like the Monte Carlo, racial and sexual fantasies flourished in their lavish productions.

Within this context, the Chinese Ming Toys now found themselves catering to largely white American military and tourist audiences. Advertisements in the McAllen *Monitor* played up Cold War American fantasies of "desirable" Asian women. One promoted Jadin's "movie star" image, reprinting an image of her appearance in RKO's *Around the World*, where she showed off her bare leg in a high kick while her dance partner raised two index fingers.[77] Another advertised the Ming Toys as a "Chinese review from the 'Forbidden City,' San Francisco," direct from Mexico City. It played up the absurdity of Jadin performing dances from around the world as "the originator of the Chinese conga."[78] The gloss and glamour of Hollywood featured in the advertisements, erasing Jadin's unique style of modern dancing in a nation striving to assert American cultural preeminence on the global scene. Two years later, when Su Muy Key traveled to the Monte Carlo Casino, she too would be presented as a cosmopolitan entertainer: "Su Muy Key Chinese exotic dancer of international fame… direct from Mexico City… has charmed thousands with her exotic dancing… in China, in the USA, abroad with the USO, in old Mexico."[79] The *Monitor* placed Su Muy Key alongside Asian American entertainers.

At the same time, Su Muy Key brought *mexicanidad* into the Rio Grande Valley and up to San Antonio, traveling on larger American entertainment circuits that would also bring her up to New York City. She performed to Mexican migrant and Mexican American audiences during a 1950 American tour to promote *Carta Brava*. Su Muy Key was joining a circuit of Mexican stars who traveled to the borderlands to perform at movie theatres, *carpas* (tent shows), and variety shows. These Mexican stars performed to eager Mexican and Mexican Americans audiences who continued to look across the southern border during an era when they faced what Jennifer R. Nájera has called "accommodated segregation." In her study of small town La Feria in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Nájera argues that the Mexican American community gained partial inclusion

Photo Credit: USC Digital Library. Korean American Digital Archive Collection.

in the 1940s, but this left intact a "logic and culture of segregation."[80] Due in part to ongoing segregation, *mexicanidad* remained critical to the cultural identities of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans.

Su Muy Key contributed to local constructions of *mexicanidad* in the borderlands. She gave a "special show" at Cine El Rey, a historic movie theatre in downtown McAllen, Texas, on the segregated "Mexican" south side. According to Velia Rangel, who worked in the box office as a teenager, the theater was the "centre of the Valley," home to community events and the latest Mexican films, with attendees of sometimes up to 1,200.[81] From McAllen, Su Muy Key traveled up to San Antonio to headline a variety show at the lavish Cine Alameda, a theater that had become "synonymous with the best entertainment for *Mexicanos* and Mexican-Americans."[82] In a photo in *La Prensa*, Su Muy Key sat cross-legged, eyes closed, hands in a meditation mudra wearing an orientalized headdress with a bikini top and a flowing skirt that showed off her legs.[83] A caption read: "Su-Mey-Key the oriental dancer full of grace and splendor."[84] Alien cosmopolitanism now spoke to Mexican migrants experiencing their own sense of displacement in the borderlands. Film scholar Laura Isabel Serna has argued that Mexican nation-building among early twentieth-century migrants was "as conditioned by their exposure to discourse on progress, modernity, and nationhood in Mexico as they were by the experience of migration and cultural shock."[85] Defining themselves

against the foreignness of the Chinese Mexican vedette brought Mexican migrants experiencing exclusion in the United States into *mexicanidad*, even as Su Muy Key also brought them the cosmopolitan modernity of Mexico City.

Su Muy Key's career was stopped short soon thereafter in 1951 when she was tragically killed by her lover, journalist Roberto Serna. This sensationalized story traveled far and wide across both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, shocking Mexican and Mexican American readers, as well as readers across Latin America. Now, the Mexican press began to recognize Su Muy Key's artistry and contributions to *mexicanidad* denied during her lifetime. Mexico City's *Jueves de Excelsior* wrote that the "china de México" (Chinese woman from Mexico) had never been an "audacious 'exótica,'" but rather had danced with thoughtfulness and emotion "rhythms with tradition and history."[86] The article refused the orientalist stereotypes that had plagued her career: "A doll Su-Muy-Key? A woman, with a heart that leaps. All a woman." Only after death could Su Muy Key's artistry be recognized in Mexico and abroad.

Conclusion

The travels of Florence Ahn, Estela, Jadin Wong, and Su Muy Key reveal the diversity of transpacific imaginaries that circulated throughout a U.S. South connected with the circum-Caribbean of Cuba and Mexico. To access the stage, performers of Asian descent embodied gendered figures of the transpacific that fulfilled different functions within these national imaginaries. During a time of U.S. expansionism, Cold War American visions of exotic Asian beauties put forth a view of the United States as a benevolent power seeking to integrate the Free World, relegating Asian Americans to approaching but never belonging to Americanness. Meanwhile, the figure of the vedette served to promote a vision of modern Cuba abroad for elite Cubans in the early Cold War. This included the visibility of a whitened or light-skinned figure of the *china mulata* who evoked an exoticism derived from the historical mixings between Afro-Asian communities in Cuba. Finally, in Mexico, the *exóticas* promoted a vision of an exotic foreign other during a period of tightened social control, a vision that included the exoticism of the Orient that gestured toward Mexico's intimate, if denied, ties to the transpacific.

Performers of Asian descent took advantage of the ambiguous positions they occupied to slide between national imaginaries as they traveled and connected with new audiences. They show how the U.S. South served as an entryway for Asian Americans into the vibrant cabaret cultures of Mexico City and Havana and, in turn, for Asian Mexicans and Asian Cubans into the nightclub circuits of the Texas-Mexico borderlands and Miami. It was through their performances that they bridged "multiple souths," moving between performing Americanness, Cuban

cosmopolitanism, Afro-Cubanness, Mexicanness, or migrant nostalgia to gain mobility to access audiences across borders. They reveal the importance of the transpacific to the rich cultural exchanges within the interconnected region of the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean.

Nightclub performers, however, needed to make a living by entertaining their audiences. Within the constraints of the Cold War entertainment scene, their nightclub shows led to incomplete and contradictory results. They had to participate in crafting racial and gendered fantasies that supported national imaginaries, but at the same time opened up possibilities for them to build more expansive ties and connections with their audiences. Their performing careers open up larger questions about these transpacific connections to historical Afro-Asian intimacies and Mexican migration. Furthermore, their artistry points to the need for more research into the transpacific cultural contributions to genres such as modern dance, zarzuela, and rumba, genres in which Asian subjects have not typically been recognized. It was through their skill as singers and dancers that these four performers insisted on being taken seriously in front of past and now present audiences, challenging the occlusion and erasure of transpacific influences within the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean.

Rosanne A. Sia thanks Joo Ok Kim and Giselle Anatol, the anonymous *American Studies* reviewers, Shannon Zhao, and Nic John Ramos for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. The Goizueta Foundation Graduate Fellowship at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided generous funding that supported this research.

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4. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism,* 11-17.

5. Tara McPherson, "On Wal-Mart and Southern Studies," *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (2006): 698.

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15. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

16. Seid, *Cold War Asian/American Chic on TV*, 1259.

17. Florence Ahn in Postwar New York City, Korean American Digital Archive (KADA) Collection, USC Digital Library.

18. Florence Ahn Collection, Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

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20. Cándido Camero, NEA Jazz Master Interview, Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program, March 12, 1999.

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22. Vincent Takeuchi, interview with author, 2015.

23. Florence Ahn in Cuba, KADA. Unfortunately, the critic and newspaper are not included in the clipping.

24. *Carteles,* August 20, 1950.

25. *Carteles,* October 29, 1950.

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35. López, *Chinese Cubans,* 209–210.

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42. For example, in her memoir about the Anacaona all-girls dance band,

Alicia Castro describes her mixed background through her father's Chinese ancestry and her mother's Basque grandfather. She believes her mother's side had likely mixed with African-descended people, but this was erased in her family's memory: "In some of our old family photographs, the faces of certain individuals have been carefully clipped out; I assume someone was embarrassed that we might have had African ancestors. A few of us turned out somewhat dark-skinned, like our sister Yolanda, but Mother would always insist it was because we had Indian ancestors in the family too." Alicia Castro, *Queens of Havana: The Amazing Adventures of Anacaona, Cuba's Legendary All-Girl Band,* in collaboration with Ingrid Kummels and Manfred Schäfer (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 23.

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