

DEFINING(CHINESE) AMERICANNES: ETHNIC AND RACIAL IDENTITY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *TRIPMASTER MONKEY: HIS FAKE BOOK*

In "Trippers and Askers," the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), the novel's protagonist Wittman Ah Sing and his love interest, Nanci Lee, talk about the limited roles available to Chinese actors in American media. Nanci reflects on her experiences auditioning, complaining that a director criticized her performance of an oriental peasant because she did not "look oriental" enough and refused to speak broken English.¹ "Can't you act more oriental? Act oriental," she was instructed.² To prevent Nanci from "los[ing] the will to audition" or changing herself cosmetically to fit other roles, Wittman promises to write her a play "where the audience learns to fall in love with [her] for [her] ochery skin and round nose and flat profile and slanty eyes, and [her] bit of an accent."³ As a playwright, Wittman's task is to create roles that will provide Chinese-Americans like Nanci a platform to express themselves in new ways, disrupting rigid fictional stereotypes of what it means to be a Chinese-American perpetuated by U.S. popular media during the 1960s.

This passage from Kingston's novel condenses many of the anxieties related to racially over-determined stereotypes and highlights problems endemic to the issue of ethnic identity in contemporary American society. Nanci's auditioning experience reveals that she is being upstaged by preconceived assumptions of an "Orientalist" identity that American society has taken for granted, one where Chinese-Americans are still expected "to speak in a way [they've] worked hard not to speak like."⁴ The inextricable link between the construction of ethnic or racial identity and performance – both literary and theatrical – is a central thematic concern in *Tripmaster Monkey*. This paper considers how the novel articulates not the failure of art and performance in representing ethnic heterogeneity, but its importance as a form and forum for negotiating questions of identity, opening up the stage to a dramatic redefinition of what it means to be a Chinese-American. Through Wittman's (dis)identification with and performance of various cultural stereotypes, culminating in his theatrical attempt at staging a Chinese-American pastiche rendition of multiple classical Chinese novels, Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* complicates the social and cultural constructions of ethnicity and race, fundamentally questioning the basis of a Chinese/American/Chinese-American identity.

Kingston's multifaceted portrayal of a performative Chinese-American identity in *Tripmaster Monkey* is largely contradictory and critical of the notion of cultural authenticity. This tension is made explicit through Wittman's negative relationship with ethnic Chinese stereotyping, where he insistently and vehemently reacts against distinct representations of Chineseness that he comes across throughout the novel. Ironically, however, in the process of rejecting cultural stereotypes and defining himself against them, Wittman actually tacitly

¹ Maxine Hong Kingston. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. (New York: Random House, 1989), 24, emphasis in original.

² Ibid., 24.

³ Ibid., 24; 27.

⁴ Ibid., 24.

reveals how that very same ethnic Chineseness is an inexorable part of his identity. In the very first few pages of the novel, the narrator elaborates on Wittman's disdain towards a Chinese family that he labels F.O.B.s, "Fresh Off the Boats":

The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn't know how to walk together. Spitting seeds. So uncool. You wouldn't mislike them on sight if their pants weren't so highwater, gym socks white and noticeable. F.O.B. fashions – highwaters or puddlecuffs. Can't get that right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs – F.O.B. perfume.⁵

Wittman's strong rejection of this F.O.B. Chinese family reveals his aversion to making a cultural linkage between himself and the image of an F.O.B. "other," despite his implicit acknowledgment that they are of the same ethnicity. This passage also immediately evokes the primary conflict of *Tripmaster Monkey* vis-à-vis an indeterminate, vacillating Chinese-American identity. Wittman's multicultural persona is caught in a double bind: he strives to deconstruct racist "Orientalist" stereotypes, but also actively participates in the socio-cultural matrix that creates and reaffirms that racism against ethnic minorities in contemporary America.

This dynamic is manifest throughout the novel whenever Wittman encounters a Chinese immigrant on his peripatetic journeys. Another notable incident occurs when Wittman boards a bus from San Francisco to the Oakland Bay Bridge, and a plain Chinese girl sits next to him. Wittman pretends to be Japanese so as to avoid talking to her, and the narrator reveals his harsh criticism of the girl for being a "fellow ethnick" Chinese, "the kind who works hard and doesn't fix herself up" with "a smell like hot restaurant air that blows into alleys... coming off her."⁶ Such psychological violence against Chinese immigrant stereotypes provokes the reader to rethink the limits of ethnic and cultural solidarity, and the ways in which a Chinese-American identity is internally divided in America's multicultural society.

Here, Wittman's behavior is a classic example of what Sigmund Freud refers to as "the narcissism of minor differences" – the notion that "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them."⁷ Freud first used the term "narcissism of

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 73-74.

⁷ Sigmund Freud. "The Taboo of Virginity." In *On Sexuality*, trans. Angela Richards and James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991 [1917]), 272.

minor differences” in an essay on “The Taboo of Virginity” (1917).⁸ He cites a study by Ernest Crawley to argue that each individual is separated from others by a “taboo of personal isolation” that results in the inclination to aggression between individuals, groups, and communities that differ very little – or between which differences have been diminished.⁹ This “narcissism of minor differences” thus describes the phenomenon where the communities most closely related to each other are the ones that are constantly engaged in conflict driven by “sensitiveness ... to just these details of differentiation.”¹⁰ In terms of ethnic conflict, Freud’s theory illuminates how two groups might be predisposed for conflict if they manifest a high degree of *similarities* and common cultural traits.

In a 1989 interview for *The Boston Globe*, Kingston herself termed Wittman’s behavior as an exemplification “of a *Mayflower* complex” where “many Chinese-Americans ... don’t want to identify with [the immigrants] because then [they] might be taken for one of them.”¹¹ As a self-declared fifth-generation American, Wittman is repulsed by these immigrants precisely because he is aware that to Westerners, all ethnically Chinese individuals look the same, and he aggressively distances himself from these racial rejects in a desperate attempt to integrate into the American mainstream. *Tripmaster Monkey* thus reveals the importance of minor differences – the *narcissism* of minor differences – in the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. In this reading, for groups that are very similar ethnically and culturally (i.e., first-generation Chinese immigrants and Chinese-American citizens), distinct social identities are constructed around difference, where difference is consequently asserted and defended against what is closest – because what is closest represents the greatest threat.

Wittman’s scorn towards racially determined stereotypes of Chineseness also ties into what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in her 1993 book on *Reading Asian American Literature*, has referred to as “the central role of psychological ‘disowning’ in the formation of the double.”¹² Wong identifies how the presence and active rejection of “the double,” or the ethnic doppelgänger, in Chinese-American literature actually generates heightened racial awareness in a doubled, or multicultural, identity. As she explains:

⁸ Freud’s concept originally referred to individual psychological disorder as his writings stemmed from observations of clients during psychotherapy. Later, Freud returned to the “narcissism of minor differences” theory in his cultural analysis of European civilizations and applied it to relations between ethnic and national groups.

⁹ Freud, *On Sexuality*, 272.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud and David McLintock (trans.). *Civilization and its Discontents*. (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2002 [1930]), 305.

¹¹ Somdatta Mandal. “Ethnic Voices of Asian-American Women with Special Reference to Amy Tan.” In *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: The Joy Luck Club*, ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2003), 176.

¹² Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82, emphasis in original.

[T]he double is formed through repression and projection, in a general defensive process known variously as splitting dissociation, decomposition, or fragmentation. The double is symptomatic of a crisis in self-acceptance and self-knowledge: part of the self, denied recognition by the conscious ego, emerges as an external figure exerting a hold over the protagonist that seems disproportionate to provocation or inexplicable by everyday logic.¹³

In order to become more acceptable in American society, Chinese-Americans internalize white standards of cultural sophistication that devalue an Asian ethnicity by “projecting this undesirable ‘Asianness’ outward onto a double,” then distancing themselves from that double.¹⁴ Along the lines of this analysis, we can read the Chinese immigrant figure in *Tripmaster Monkey* as one that embodies what Wong terms “the racial shadow” reflecting the “residue of racial difference that dooms Chinese-Americans to a position of inferiority in a racist society.”¹⁵

By considering Freud’s concept of “narcissism of minor differences” and Wong’s notion of the “racial shadow” together in relation to Wittman’s pointed denunciation of Chinese immigrant stereotypes, we can also see how Kingston’s protagonist exhibits the psychoanalytical theory of externalization and the problem of the “monstrous double.” Psychoanalysts such as Vamik Volkan have linked Freud’s notion of “narcissism of minor differences” to the unconscious defense mechanism by which individuals project their own internal characteristics, especially the undesirable ones, onto the outside world and onto other people.¹⁶ When these individuals come across a person with these characteristics, they disown them as an “other” – their “racial shadow” and “monstrous double.” According to Volkan, “When kept inside, un-repaired bad units threaten the integrity of the self, but when put ‘out there’ at a safe distance, and when used for comparison with the good units kept inside, they enhance the sense of the self. Such ‘bad’ suitable targets contain the precursors of *the concept of an enemy* shared by the group.”¹⁷ Such externalizations thus help individuals attain a more consistent and positive perspective on their internalized object representation. In this view, Wittman defines himself against stereotypical portrayals of unassimilated Chinese immigrants to shape his own emergent sense of a hybrid Chinese-American self-identity. By projecting his particular undesirable ethnic traits onto Chinese immigrant figures, Wittman regards them as his “racial shadow” and attempts to construct more cohesive Chinese-American self-representation by distancing himself from those ethnic doppelgangers.

Accordingly, Wittman’s self-conscious negotiation between his Chinese heritage and integration into American society is made clear in the constant interrogation of his ethnic roots:

¹³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵ Ibid., 89-92.

¹⁶ Vamik D. Volkan. “The Narcissism of Minor Differences in the Psychological Gap Between Opposing Nations.” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 6 (1986): 175-191.

¹⁷ Ibid., 185, emphasis in original.

What had [Wittman] to do with foreigners? With F.O.B. émigrés? Fifth-generation native Californian that he was. Great-Great-Grandfather came on the *Nootka*, as ancestral as the *Mayflower*. Go-sei. The story boat has got to light out on the Mississippi or among the houseboats on the San Joaquin Delta. It should work the yachts at Lake Tahoe. His province is America. America, his province.¹⁸

This passage reveals the indefinite notion of ethnic origin for a Chinese-American identity, prompting readers to reconsider what it means to have Chinese roots and to be Chinese. Wittman Ah Sing argues that he should not have to refer to his Chinese heritage as a point of departure in defining his racial identity because he had never been to any provinces in China before. For that reason, Wittman adamantly denies and disowns his Chinese ethnicity by refusing to associate himself with Chinese immigrant figures and what they represent, ironically rendering alien an inherently inalienable part of his racial identity. Nonetheless, this paradoxical situation raises important questions about how one *should* define a Chinese identity. Just because Wittman has not visited mainland China before does not mean that being Chinese is any less fundamental to his cultural identity or sense of self. As such, *Tripmaster Monkey* unsettles preconceived assumptions about ethnic identity, problematizing the common assumption that having physically been living in China before should impart a greater degree of Chinese authenticity on an individual who goes abroad.

In contrast to the static, anachronistic Chinese stereotypes that recur throughout the novel, Wittman's character exhibits an Other that is always changing with present necessity; the male protagonist in *Tripmaster Monkey* is a Chinese-American actor/writer who incessantly fluctuates from one role to another. Although Wittman appropriates numerous different personas, from Black poets to Russian novelists and British actors, his preferred modus operandi is the Monkey King, or Sun Wukong. In *Journey to the West*, one of the best-known Chinese epic novels from the sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty, Sun Wukong is the irascible protagonist endowed with powers such as the ability to travel superbly far and to transform into various animals and objects, also known as his 72 transformations. It is therefore fitting that Wittman, as an individual with a fluctuating sense of identity, should repeatedly impersonate the Monkey character and even proclaim, "I am really: the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys."¹⁹

As scholars such as Carlos Rojas (2008) and Derek Parker Royal (2004) have pointed out in their discussions of *Tripmaster Monkey*, it is possible to read the Monkey figure as a protean character that refuses to be fixed in any one form of representation, and thus a useful metaphor for the possibility of transformation and transnational movement pertaining to cultural stereotyping.²⁰ In this regard, Wittman's mimetic performances of the protagonist in

¹⁸ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁰ Carlos Rojas. "Western Journeys of *Journey to the West*." In *Sinographies: Writing China*, ed. Eric Hayot, HaunSaussy, and Steven G. Yao (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 339-341; Derek Parker Royal. "Literary Genre as Ethnic Resistance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*." *MELUS* 29, no. 2 (2004): 141-156.

Journey to the West underscores *Tripmaster Monkey*'s thematic motif of hybrid identities, symbolically illustrating the fluid process of assimilation as Chinese-Americans become different from native Chinese in Asia when they engage their sociocultural environment in the U.S. Nonetheless, the notion that Wittman attempts to shake free from the shackles of his Chinese heritage by adopting a fictional character, albeit one that has transformative powers, which is fundamentally bound to Chinese culture, is deeply ironic.

It is important to note, however, that the Monkey King cannot fully transform into exact replicas of other people or objects, because he is unable to complete the transformation of his tail. Insofar as the Monkey King is able to successfully assimilate to his environment by fluidly adapting multiple forms, he is nonetheless always marked by an Otherness that gives away his true primate likeness. Hence, the paradoxical status of Monkey as both a paradigm of transnational mutability and icon of Chinese cultural immovability provides an evocative parallel to the ambiguous position of ethnic and racial identity that Chinese-Americans have to navigate in a predominantly white environment that excludes and prejudices against them. Regardless of the fact that Wittman has been immersed in American culture from a young age, as a Chinese-American, he is still marked by a Chinese appearance that inevitably recalls entrenched ahistorical Orientalist stereotypes. Akin to how the Monkey King figure that Wittman impersonates is haunted by an unchangeable tail, Chinese-Americans in Western eyes are forever marked by some un-transformable foreign element that relegates them to the margins of society.

How does *Tripmaster Monkey* critique the inconsistencies of this process of Chinese-American cultural assimilation? As Kingston explained about the novel in an interview when she was writing it, "It's set in 1962 and it's about a young, hip, Chinese-American man who has the spirit of the trickster monkey. He has to solve all kinds of problems about who he is, and how he will be a Chinese-American."²¹ In this sense, one can see how Wittman attempts to "solve" the relationship between "Chinese" and "American" in a culturally heterogeneous social environment but nationally homogenous model of citizenship in present-day America. Much like the Monkey King character he performs, Wittman Ah Sing is conscious of how he appears as a liminal soul, one that is able to blend in everywhere yet fits in nowhere. He comments that "wherever [he] goes, [he] does the integrating," and describes himself as a "blushing chameleon, ripping through the gears of camouflage trying to match the whizzing environment."²² Yet, he feels very much "alone. Alienated, tribeless, individual."²³

Even Wittman Ah Sing's name suggests his identity crisis, divided across divergent national and cultural traditions. Wittman's first name connects him to Walt Whitman, an American poet widely known for his influence on the American canon and claimed as the "poet of democracy."²⁴ Thus, Wittman's first name suggests a romantic conception of a democratic

²¹ Marilyn Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston. "A MELUS Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston." *MELUS* 16, no. 4 (1989): 66.

²² Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 57; 109

²³ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁴ David S. Reynolds. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. (New York: Knopf, 1995), 4.

and equal America. However, when Wittman's Chinese relatives talk to him, they mispronounce his name as "Wit Man." This mispronunciation appropriately makes a metatextual reference to Wittman's identification with the paradigmatic Monkey figure as a symbol of Chineseness. In Chinese culture and literary tradition, the Monkey King is adored as the "Wit Man" – the ingenious character that is able to beguile and outwit all the evil spirits he encounters. A "trickster" or the "Tripmaster Monkey" in the novel's title is but an inadequate English-language interpretation. Wittman's name thus represents a hybrid model of cultural assimilation: both the American poet "Whitman" and the Chinese Monkey "Wit Man" are integrated as fundamental components of Wittman's Chinese-American identity.

While Wittman's first name identifies him with an English-speaking environment, his last name, Ah Sing, anchors him to Chinese ethnic origins. At first glance, Ah Sing appears to be a classic Chinese surname. However, as those familiar with Chinese names will know, "Sing" is actually not a common name at all. The lack of Chinese characters in the novel leaves the reader room to speculate on what his name might actually be, and it is plausible that Kingston decided to give Wittman the surname "姓" (*xing*). This Chinese character sounds phonetically similar to "Sing," but ironically simply means "surname." In this interpretation, Kingston's eccentric naming exposes how cultural identity formation and performance are influenced by the process of naming. By giving Wittman Ah Sing the most generic surname of "A Surname," but one that still evokes a clear ethnic Chinese identity, Kingston forces the reader to rethink the significance of a Chinese appearance for Chinese-American individuals. When an individual looks Chinese simply because he/she has Chinese parentage, but has limited connection to China outside of the preservation of a Chinese surname, to what extent should he/she still be considered Chinese? Can such an individual still make claim to a Chinese identity? How should one define the boundaries of "China" and its relation to a sense of authentic Chineseness?

Wittman proposes an answer to this ambiguous process of identity formation when he suggests "[a] new rule for the imagination: The common man has Chinese looks. From now on, whenever you read about those people with no surnames, color them with black skin or yellow skin."²⁵ By assimilating racial and ethnic markers and projecting them onto the "common man," Wittman's final play is a performance that reveals the very instability of cultural identity itself. He carefully points out that he is "casting blind. That means the actors can be any race... [He's] including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place."²⁶ The appearance of Chinese and non-Chinese actors playing Chinese roles boldly opens up the Chinese-American identity and history for a much broader community to empathize with.

As multicultural playwright, Wittman strives to disrupt cultural and racial stereotyping to create a new sense of self-identity for the Chinese-American community through performance:

Wittman wanted to spoil all those stories coming out of and set in New England
Back East – to blacken and to yellow Bill, Brooke, and Annie... By writing a play,

²⁵ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

he didn't need descriptions that racinated anybody. The actors will walk out on stage and their looks will be self-evident. They will speak dialects and accents, which the audience will get upon hearing. No need for an unreadable orthography such as Mark twain's insultingly dumb dis and dat misspellings and apostrophying.²⁷

Here, Wittman attempts to deconstruct notions of what it means to be American, while disseminating what it means to be a multicultural Chinese. Through his play, Wittman aims to challenge the national boundaries of American identity, eroding Orientalist perceptions of "East meets West," "exotic," and "Sino-American theatre."²⁸ Instead, he instructs his audience to adopt the idea that "There is no east here. West is meeting West" and that there is "nobody here but us Americans."²⁹ Wittman wants to erode the mark of an Asian identity that is exoticized, fetishized, and commodified in mainstream American media and society; instead, he emphasizes that Chinese-Americans are "as human as the next American man."³⁰

By speaking through Wittman in *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston grapples with the possibility of reconciling "Chinese" and "American" as a singular identity. The novel continually poses questions to readers, challenging them to take up the task of how to transcend the mark of a racialized Chinese body. How can Chinese-Americans overcome a sense of internal division and doubled identity when their experiences straddle divergent cultural contexts? How can Chinese-Americans simply be considered American, without always being reverted to some essential Chineseness? After staging one of his performances, Wittman directly addresses the need to overcome the notion that Chinese-Americans are still somehow essentially more Chinese than other Americans:

And "Chinese-American" is inaccurate – as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out – "Chinese American." "American," the noun, and "Chinese," the adjective. From now on: "Chinese Americans." However. Not okay yet. "Chinese hyphen American" sounds exactly the same as "Chinese no hyphen American." No revolution takes place in the mouth or in the ear.³¹

Thus, Chinese individuals, as Americans, are not "Chinese-hyphenated-schizoid-dichotomous-American," but simply "Chinese American," without the hyphen.³² They are not Chinese *and* American, but rather Chinese as a subset of American.

But if "no revolution takes place in the mouth or in the ear," can one occur in the eyes or in the mind? Is it possible to remove the hyphen when it is inscribed in flesh on the Chinese-American body? In his final monologue, Wittman reveals his nightmare of

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁸ Ibid., 307.

²⁹ Ibid., 307-308.

³⁰ Ibid., 293.

³¹ Ibid., 327.

³² Ibid., 327-328.

irreconcilable ethnic conflict in America. Despite his efforts, Wittman feels that people will still only “think that Americans are either white or Black” and that “after duking it out, someday Blacks and whites will shake hands over [his] head.”³³ Consequently, Wittman will be “the little yellow man” stuck “beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked,” trapped under the hyphen of a Chinese-American identity that excludes him from an overwhelmingly binary rhetoric of American national unity.³⁴ Although he mediates between both white and Black communities, as an ethnic Chinese, Wittman finds himself in a position where he “can’t wear that civil-rights button with the Black hand and the white hand shaking each other.”³⁵ Wittman’s racialized Chinese body is thus anchored to the discourse conceptualizing American citizenship, yet is fundamentally excluded from it. Accordingly, the Chinese-American community must find a way to establish self-identity and disrupt ethnic assumptions that are inscribed – and prescribed – by U.S. media, problematizing mainstream conceptions of what it means to be an American.

Near the end of Kingston’s novel, *Chang and Eng*, a pair of acrobatic Siamese twins, take center stage in Wittman’s play. The twins are played by two Americans, one of European ancestry and the other Japanese – “verbal twins in green velveteen connected suits. Yale Younger and Lance Kamiyama as Chang and Eng, the Double Boys, pattering away in Carolina-Siamese. Chinkus and Pinkus.”³⁶ The extravagant performance of these conjoined twins in Wittman’s play provides an evocative metonym for the process of de-hyphenating the Chinese-American identity. Chang-Eng’s attitudes towards each other (or towards himself?), their interactions with other characters in Wittman’s play, and their impact on the broader audience reveals how the process to merge a divided Chinese-American identity might be received in contemporary American society.

The ambiguity in linked twins, one body sharing two subjectivities, manifests many of the apprehensions associated with a multicultural identity in a tangible form. Chang-Eng vividly embodies the tension that Kingston has been grappling with in trying to define a unitary Chinese-American identity that is inexorably and inherently doubled. In the middle of Wittman’s play, Eng asks how he can get out of being drafted, and Miss Watanna advises a Japanese identity. Chang-Eng replies, “Identity? (He are baffled),” reminding readers that there is hardly an “I” in identity for Siamese twins.³⁷ Because they are always attached, they will always represent a doubled persona. In this sense, Chang-Eng’s presence speaks to the internalized tensions of a split Chinese-American identity: as conjoined twins, t(he)y are (is?) a two-in-one, a neither-and-both, lying somewhere along the continuum between singular and plural status. Hence, Chang-Eng

³³ Ibid., 307-308.

³⁴ Ibid., 308.

³⁵ Ibid., 307.

³⁶ Ibid., 290.

³⁷ Ibid., 292.

provides an interesting counterpoint to Wong's concept of the racial shadow and the problem of an ethnic double. Rather than revealing a process of externalization whereby an individual projects undesirable internal characteristics onto an estranged doppelganger target, the figure of conjoined twins symbolizes a situation where these alienating attributes are actually *internalized* within the self. In this way, Chang-Eng represents how Chinese-American individuals are wedged between two competing racial identity claims, one of which insists that certain cultural differences in a certain population are minor (i.e., American culture is unable to distinguish between native Chinese and Chinese-American individuals), while the other maintains that they are major (i.e., native Chinese and Chinese-Americans perceive significant differences amongst themselves).

In "Bee-e-eeen! Nation, Transformation and the Hyphen of Ethnicity in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*" (1994), Isabella Furth posits that the hyphen is a "mark of bondage and separation, of being tethered yet kept at a distance ... [and also the] mark of the wound of a difference that must be excised" in negotiating between "the pull of essentialism" and an attempt to assimilate into the mainstream.³⁸ The intertextual doubling evoked by Chang-Eng's presence emphasizes the grotesquerie of mainstream American discourse that precludes Chinese-Americans from merging their split identity into a singular one. When the twins are jailed for starting a riot, they rebuke the audience from behind bars:

We know damned well what you came for to see – the angle we're joined at, how we can have two sisters for wives and twenty-one Chinese-Carolinian children between us. You want to see if there's room for two, three bundling board. You want to know if we feel jointly. You want to look at the hyphen. You want to look at it bare.³⁹

This scene demonstrates how Chang-Eng – as a metaphorical representation of divided Chinese-American individuals – is/are trapped in a world that relentlessly demands justification for removing the hyphen in their polymorphous sense of identity. As previously noted by multicultural theorists, the hyphen is a mark that simultaneously conjoins and separates.⁴⁰ It paradoxically signifies an attempt to integrate "Chinese" and "American" cultural backgrounds, yet at the same time underscores the very fact that the two phrases being connected are presumed to be fundamentally distinct. In other words, the hyphen is incorporated to forcefully suture two words – and, by extension, two cultural identities – that are otherwise considered too different to be one coherent

³⁸ Furth, Isabella. "Bee-e-eeen! Nation, Transformation and the Hyphen of Ethnicity in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (1994): 35.

³⁹ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 293.

⁴⁰ Furth, Isabella. "Bee-e-eeen! Nation, Transformation and the Hyphen of Ethnicity in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (1994): 33-49.

bounded concept. Chinese-Americans are thus subject to an internal conflict where they feel forced to have to choose between being either “Chinese” or “American,” rather than adopting a more fluid conception of how experiences from both cultures influence their overall sense of identity.

As such, *Tripmaster Monkey* reveals Kingston’s insistent rejection of the exoticizing assumption that, for all Americans of Chinese ancestry, both sides of the hybrid Chinese-American ethnic/national equation should have equal weight. Therefore, the novel calls upon multicultural individuals to redefine themselves as unitary unhyphenated “Chinese American” racial identities. Yet, in spite of Kingston’s efforts to circumvent the hyphen and relegate “Chinese” to the status of an adjective, the case of Chang-Eng illustrates how the marks of separation are not easily overcome. Before the hyphen can be dropped, Chinese-Americans have to somehow prove that they are more “American” than “Chinese” before being regarded as American. Whereas for most European and African immigrants, the hyphen drops out after a generation or two, it remains etched upon citizens of Asian ancestry like Wittman Ah Sing even unto the fifth generation. The hyphen remains as a blemish of Otherness, a haunting mark of the “racial shadow,” and is indicative of the persistent failure to inscribe the Asian American identity within the parameters of American national discourse.

But can the hyphen be deleted? If so, what destabilizations might be provoked by the removal of naturalized linkages? Once again, Chang-Eng provides an evocative metaphor exemplifying the disruptions that the Chinese-American identity may experience if “Chinese” is turned into an adjective. Taking the hyphen out – removing the place where Siamese twins are adjoined – is a life-changing process, often resulting in one twin dying or feeling like they have lost their other half. In Wittman’s play, Chang dies, and the performance reveals how Eng is unable to continue living after his twin passes away:

But they cannot evade age and death. Chang dies. He does death throes, then hangs there dead with his pigtail fanning like a fishtail sweeping the floor. The world has been contemplating the horror of being attached to a corpse... The remaining brother pushes at the dead one, runs without getting anywhere, and says: *Now it was there. Now it grew out of me like a tumor, like a second head, and was so big. It was like a huge, dead beast, that had once, when it was still alive, been my hand or my arm.* Eng dies too after several days and nights of sympathy and fright.⁴¹

Thus, the clash between “Chinese” and “American” identity claims that Chinese-Americans experience is not a process of externalization, but one of internalization. Both racial perspectives concomitantly contribute to a hybrid conception of Chinese-

⁴¹ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 294, emphasis in original.

American identity. Chang-Eng's performance gestures at how the "racial shadow" and *Mayflower* complex becomes a fundamental marker of Chinese-American identity formation, where it is integrated in an organic sense as a limb or body part. A parting of ways, a cleavage separating "Chinese" and "American" to prioritize one over the other, would be tantamount to a painful amputation and pose a threat to self-identity for the Chinese-American community. Chang-Eng's character therefore suggests that attempting to remove the hyphen may put Chinese-American individuals at risk of dissolving into a fragmentary sense of self.

Wittman's play materializes and performs Kingston's view of Chinese Americanness in a way that implies bringing together representations of racial others might somehow create a more cohesive "American" community. In this politics of inclusion, an American identity can mean a hodgepodge of almost anything, where one can "learn what a Chinese-American is made up of" by looking at "chicken scraps and dog scraps."⁴² Nonetheless, when hyphens are both axes of transformation and a wound inscribed on the Asian body excluding it from American national discourse, can we avoid the confusion experienced by Chang-Eng, baffled by the very idea of a singular identity? On this point, behind the question of "what causes hostility and broken relationships between groups?" looms the larger question of "what causes seemingly divergent groups to coalesce and unite?" The disproportionate splittings and doublings of a multiply determined Chinese-American community portrayed in *Tripmaster Monkey* echoes the LSD-inspired question at Lance's party early in the novel: "How do you reconcile unity and identity?"⁴³ Is there a way for an individual to become more like a conjoined twin – one who is able to act as a member of a collective community yet not lose a sense of unique identity as a singular person?

Kingston attempts to resolve this problem by emphasizing a discourse of "inclusion," symbolically represented by Wittman's pastiche version of Chinese classical novels in his play. At the end of the play, however, Wittman's scathing diatribe reveals the failure of this project, where he castigates the propagators of racist jokes and angrily yells at the audience: "I am so fucking offended."⁴⁴ Hence, it appears that "inclusion" and unity vis-à-vis a (Chinese) American identity can only be performed if the twin representing Chineseness is relegated to the dark and remains unacknowledged. This conflicted situation brings us to the paradox where perhaps the only way to accurately perform Chinese American identity would be to perform a refusal to perform it, thereby leaving the stage open to important negotiations of new ethnic subjectivities.

With *Tripmaster Monkey*, Maxine Hong Kingston has endeavored to create a text that can speak for and about a Chinese American, providing a template for "performative" Chinese Americanness as a multicultural identity. Although Kingston emphasizes the ideals of inclusiveness and its importance for American national

⁴² Ibid., 277.

⁴³ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 308.

discourse, *Tripmaster Monkey* presents a somewhat confused mosaic of ethnic and racial identity. By symbolically removing the hyphen through Wittman's satirical performance of Chinese American identity, Kingston aims to offer prospects of new cultural sites where social relations determining new subjectivities might be located. *Tripmaster Monkey* is a tricky text which strives to inscribe a space where the conflicted process involved during an effort to describe Chinese American culture can be dramatized. In this way, Kingston's novel attempts to open the stage to invite variegated possibilities for a performative Chinese American identity. Nonetheless, the fact that her text remains inherently conflicted and contradicted by her own need for consistency as a writer clearly demonstrates how slippery and intangible the goal of defining a cohesive racial and national identity truly is. As such, the answer to how one *should* reconcile unity and identity across Chinese and American cultures remains to be seen.

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