Taming/Untaming the Monkey: Wittman Ah Sing(s) himself and his Community in Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey 1989

Abstract

Much of the recent critical writing revolves around the concept of identity proving the fact that it is fundamental in as much as individuals or communities’ social positions are concerned. These writings bear the evidence that the concept of identity is not tamed into a stable definition; it justifies the idea that identity is actually a flexible construction to which disciplines and critical theory add on more momentum depending on determined contexts.

“Identity remains one of the most urgent—as well as hotly disputed—topics in literary and cultural studies. For nearly two decades, it has been a central focus of debate for [critical] theory” (Moya, 1). Postcolonial approach to identity, for instance, tethers identity politics to the binary opposite notions of colonial/postcolonial subjects with the concept of power that operates as arbiter and decides on the subjects’ location within inter-nation relationships or within the racial strata of society. Yet, the task of locating subjects and selecting the sight of identity is again an ever-shifting ground taking into consideration the intrusion of social or political factors in the process of constructing identity.

Introduction

The idea of location is intrinsically related to identity and is particularly significant in my investigation of Asian Americans’ identity construction. In Goellnicht’s words “Asian-American is a term always already in crisis” (Qtd. in Khoo, 153). Much of the writings by Asian-American writers that spans the thirty previous years evidences the status of crisis Goellnicht mentions in this quotation. The phrase “Asian-American” designates the site within which I investigate the concept of identity. This paper is intended to explore Asian-

In this book Kingston narrates about Wittman Ah Sing’s quest for identity amidst an ebullient atmosphere of the Beatnik generation, the Black Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Viet Nam war Movement and the hippy social vogue. Kingston investigates a fifth generation Chinese-American male artist’s struggle to situate himself and his ethnic diaspora within the context of a culturally hybrid society as that of the United States. The hyphenated aspect of his identity as Chinese and American in relation to The United States of America as a spatial site suggests the idea of Wittman’s dichotomized, bifurcated persona. His identity is split between two locations, China and America. It is worth noting that that these two locations are not to be understood necessarily as geographical, but rather as two psychological spaces that participate in the formation of the protagonist’s split identity. His depicted quest stands as an illustration for Avtar Brah’s idea that “the politics of location, of being situated and positioned, derive from simultaneity of diasporization and rootedness” (Qtd. in Khoo, 6). Wittman Ah Sing struggles to assert his right to American identity by virtue of being sixth generation Chinese-American descendent. He goes through moments of hardship and moments of artistic theatrical glee while debunking stereotypes that the Whites cultivate about Chinese-Americans, and which aim at uprooting and deracinating the Chinese-American group from the history of America and confining them into a diaspora of aliens and outsiders which is why Wittman’s self-chosen mission is defending his rights as American citizen and repairing the ground for the birth of yellow American artists through his artistic revival of Chinese theatre classics.

This paper is divided into two major parts: the first part explores the stereotypic depiction of Chinese-American and Chinese-American artists, in particular, as exotic other. The second point in this first part, deals with the racial confusion that the stereotypic
depiction entails for Kingston’s protagonist in particular and indirectly for all Chinese-American. In the second part, I examine the character of Wittman Ah Sing in his struggle between diasporization and rootedness. The subsequent point I give due mind to is the way Wittman tries to define himself in an environment that has throughout years rejected the likes of him on the ground of “exoticism” and “orientalism” (TMM, 308). This is where I use the two expressions ‘taming/untaming” that appear in the title of the paper to refer to Wittman’s behavior as an American ‘tamed’ rebel as well as his conduct as an ‘untamed’ Chinese Monkey.

1- Chinese-American Diaspora: Alterity Debased

A- An Exotic Other

In the American context ethnicities’ location is based on the dialectics of “mainstream” and “marginalized” which frame the White mainstream as hegemonic and other ethnicities as othered groups who are subdued to the whites’ hegemony. “Attempts to define [oneself] in terms of contradistinction from alterity have generated a broad and varied range of stereotypes, including those of Africa as the Dark Continent, Asia as the exotic Orient” (Thieme, 4). Taking one side of the polarity self / other helps to perceive identity from two distinct perspectives which actually depend on one another; one necessitates the other in order to exist. This finds echo in Shen-mei-Ma’s “inherent in any subjectivity formation, the image of the other is required even for the founding of the United States” (p2). However, it becomes known that identity is perceived and constructed from a wealth of perspectives which adds to its representational flexibility.

Kingston’s novel, Tripmaster Monkey, is all about the representation of mainstream / marginalized, self and other, race and racism that W.E.B. Du Bois associates to the problem of the twentieth century which is according to him “the problem of the color line” (Cited in
Mackin, 512). It is due to the yellow color that the Chinese-American are viewed as “Orientals” wherein degrading undertones of being despicable, inhuman, exotic etc are embedded. The Whites’ racial stereotypes make the sheer fact of belonging to the Chinese-American community too painful a stigma to bear. Mad with anger, psychologically in pain and yet, struggling to survive, Wittman Ah Sing faces his audience in the chapter entitled “One Man Show” blaming the Whites for degrading the Chinese-American community. He bursts out ironically: “They think they know us – the wide range of us from sweet to sour because they eat in Chinese restaurants” (TMM, 307). He channels his wrath to the White Americans because “they willfully don’t learn [the Chinese] and blame that on [them]. That [they] have an essential unknowableness.” (TMM, 310) The idea seems to be that Chinese-Americans are not known because they are unknowable. In other words, it is their fault to be so.

Their ‘knowableness’ is measured with their readiness to abandon their own culture and language and assimilate in the mainstream American society. Some of them do assimilate and speak English, though ungrammatical, which Wittman emulates from time to time in the course of the novel. A good illustration is “Fu-li-sah-kah-soo” which is the Chinese way of saying ‘Fleishacker zoo’, or the words he uses to voice out the objective of his play to-be. He intends to “Show the bok gwai that Chinese-Ah-me-li-cans are human jess like anybody elsoo” (TMM, 15). This objective is Wittman’s answer to the stereotypes that stigmatize the Chinese-Americans such as considering them as asexual or over sexual. Chinese-American men are relegated to the status of women and the Chinese-American women are seen most often as prostitutes. This explains the reason why Nanci Lee, a Chinese-American actress, refuses to act the role of an oriental prostitute, or speak broken English no matter what. (TMM, 23)
Wittman stands for the Chinese-American artists who are wandering at the margin of the film industry in Hollywood. Racial stereotypes are manifest through the liminal roles given to Chinese-American actors. “All we do in the movies is die. I watch for you Charley, your face appears, but before I can barely admire you, they’ve shot you dead. Our actors have careers of getting killed and playing dead bodies. You’re targets for James Bond to blow to pieces” (TMM, 323). Chinese-American actors are present in American films only to be shot, in other words, they function as death targets. This frame is meant to accentuate the idea of Chinese-American actors’ liminality. Mackin shares the same idea which is formulated as: “Asian-American, particularly those in the acting profession, are themselves manipulated by Hollywood to conform to the movie industry’s perceptions about what they ought to look like or how they are supposed to behave,” (Mackin, 344) and this leads to the idea of an imposed identity on Chinese-American or rather a manipulation of Chinese-American actors so as to make them fit in the dehumanizing frame made for them. It is significant that identity could function as politics of liberation as well as those of oppression (Moya, 8). When identity is constructed by one person, it is often in the aim of freeing him from certain injustices; however, when it is imposed on other people it becomes a means of oppression.

Wittman points out the emasculation of the Chinese in general which is the frame they are put in by means of racial stereotypes: “Every few days, they show us a movie or a TV episode about us owing them, therefore thankfully doing their laundry and waiting for them, cooking and serving and washing and sewing for John Wayne and the Cartwright boys at the Ponderosa.” (Ibid, 320) The emasculation of Chinese males is actually a theme that Kingston started with her second book China Men (1980) and she carries it on in Tripmaster Monkey. The Chinese-American males are emasculated within the American social context. In movies they are treated as women and given women roles and in reality they are accepted in jobs that are designed for women like servants, laundrymen, cooks etc. Taking into account that these
Chinese-American are descendents of a Chinese patriarchal society that glorifies men and privileges them at the expense of women who are seen as slaves, the Chinese-American males’ effeminization remains the most pain-triggering racist stereotype.

Wittman, just like the Chinese Monkey King, often goes to parties wherein he is not introduced by name, but rather considered “an irrelevant nobody” (TMM, 90) and the narrator bitterly ironicizes the pain caused by his irrelevance stating: “Wittman Ah Sing had been there in the room, but nobody knew it. It was okay that nobody knew; he was just a nobody kid.” (TMM, 113) Being nobody and nobody kid is synonymous to having no roots and no lineage which are viewed as the pillars of identity. Denying him American roots deracinates him from American soil and history and casts him and his ethnicity within the limits of diaspora. Denying the Chinese group American roots is a deliberate act meant to erase their history from the mainstream American history. Therefore, Wittman feels confused about his race, history and identity.

**B- A Confused Racial Identity**

Racial identity is a sort of enigma for Wittman; he fantasizes about his land only to face the harsh reality that his land is but one of imaginary homelands. Though he keeps confirming his Americanness on the ground of his being fifth-generation descendent of Chinese ancestors, he is betrayed by his physical features - small eyes, yellow skin and his pig tail- which inscribe him within the Chinese-American already classified as “exotic” and “inscrutable” (TMM, 310). Five generations away from the first Chinese immigrants, he is asked about his green card and passport in which he deems enough racism and alienation. (TMM, 227) However far away from his ancestors, he is served his own portion of diasporization and this is what Arjun Appadurai possibly means by “Diaspora remains, above all, a human phenomenon lived and experienced” (Qtd. in Khoo, 9). Spivack writes about
“Diasporas old and new” (Qtd. in Khoo, 143) which if applied to the case of Wittman would show that he is a member of the new diaspora, while his grandfathers are members of the old diaspora of hard laborers in mines, railroads and sugar plantations. Wittman believes that he is American thanks to his birth on American land, which accounts for his appropriating the White gaze in perceiving the new Chinese immigrants in America.

When he meets a Chinese family in the park, he describes them as F.O.Bs (Fresh-Off-the Boat) which is an indication that they are outsiders, aliens. His mocking comments “F.O.B fashions- highwaters or puddlecuffs. Can’t get it right. Uncool. Uncool, the tunnel smelled of moth balls-FOB perfume” (TMM, 5) are telling of his racial confusion. He adopts the same view the Whites have about Chinese; while to the Whites’ eyes he himself is a F.O.B. To their minds, there is absolutely no difference between newly-arrived Chinese and Chinese-American born on American soil as far as they share the same physical features- small eyes, flat nose and yellow skin. Wittman lives with a constant reminder of the racial similarity between himself and other Chinese-Americans. He perceives them as aliens while he is viewed the same by the Whites. This is what Saw-ling Cynthia Wong refers to as “racial shadow” (Cited in Mackin, 519) or what Jonna Mackin calls the “racial double” (519). The reason why Wittman diminishes the Chinese family he meets in the park is that they remind him of his own alienation. His ironic comments are actually self-oriented.

The racial confusion is summarized in the hyphen splitting the very adjective ‘Chinese-American’, an identity that is bifurcated between two histories, two cultures, two languages and Wittman feels confused about which one to use in his play an inaccurate Chinese or a mutilated English? This is because White people’s reaction to Chinese accent shows its ‘strange’ aspect as far as the American audience is concerned and strange, here, is to be equated with ‘exotic’. Wrathfully Wittman speaks his mind up:
Don’t you hate it when they ask you “How about saying something in Chinese? If you refuse, you feel stupid, and whasamatter, you’re ashamed? But if you think of something Chinese to say, and you say it, noises come out of you that are not part of this civilization. Your face contorts out of context. They say “What?” like “Do it again”. They want to watch you turn strange and foreign” (TMM, 318).

Many Asian-American are frustrated by this tendency of being exoticized and discarded as aliens. “They believed, as generations of American schoolchildren have been taught, that they enjoyed an inalienable right to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ only to discover that the US Constitution applied to White Americans” (Wei, 45). This quote makes it obvious that the adjective ‘Chinese-American’ causes split and fragmentation, or in Goellnicht’s words “crisis,” to the Chinese-American community more than recognition and justice, which is why a central dilemma for the protagonist of Kingston’ novel is “how [to] reconcile unity and identity?” (TMM, 105) This echoes Wei’s contention that “Asian-American activists rejected the concept of a dual heritage that artificially divided their identity into abstract Asian and American halves.” (47) This rejection of a double or divided identity proves that “social and cultural identities […] are similarly fictitious because the selves they claim to designate cannot be pinned down, fixed, or definitively identified” (Moya, 6). In the case of the Chinese-American, constructing a homogenous identity is impossible; that is why a third space is negotiated to achieve a sort of compatibility between the incompatible Chinese and American halves.

The sense of schism causes Wittman to feel schizophrenic, split between two incompatible cultures and repulsive perceptions of life that do not meet but in the scope of his hyphenated self which is viewed as the third space I mentioned above. “Furth suggests the hyphen is a mark of bondage and separation [a mark] of the wound of a difference that must be exercised if the discourse of inclusion is to be accepted” (Cited in Mackin, 530). The
hyphen that makes the encounter between two repulsive components possible in the self of Wittman, as Chinese-American, is subverted by Kingston into a mark of unity and bondage that aims at harmonizing the Chinese part and the American one and set them as bases of the Chinese-American identity. Mackin states that Wittman’s goal is to prove that he “is not Chinese-hyphenated schizoid- dichotomous- American but Chinese no hyphen American” (328). To achieve this aim Kingston varies her techniques from parodying the Chinese myth of the Monkey King to forming a composite character of different traits such as that of the trickster, or that of the Beatnik putative poet, Jack Kerouac to that of Walt Whitman free-spirited poetry. How Kingston employs her diverse literary and cultural array and how Wittman makes use of his bifurcated cultural heritage to build a unified identity which defies the monologic White discourse is what I discuss in the following part.

2- Wittman Ah Sing (s) His Identity and his Community

A- Wittman’s Characterization

Wittman Ah Sing is a fifth-generation Chinese-American descendent of twenty three years, a Berkeley graduate fascinated with poetry and theatre, an actor and a playwright. Fashioned in the Beatnik style, endowed with the Chinese mythic Monkey characteristics and armed with Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Kingston’s Witt Man does not stop tripping around to construct his identity. He is Kingston’s version of the Chinese legendary Monkey King and he asserts that he is “really the present day USA incarnation of the King of the Monkeys” (TMM, 33). Enjoying the monkey’s gift of seventy-two transformations, Wittman keeps trying on many selves so as to find his (Huntley, 157) which is his mission throughout the novel. He goes about subverting the dominant society’s stereotyping of Chinese-American while performing a fluid identity. Gao states: “As the present USA incarnation, Wittman/Monkey is self-created anew in a number of respects in the
commingling of the Chinese Monkey tradition, the Whitmanian tradition representing the American past and the Beatnik mode representing the American present,” (101) of course taking into consideration the period of writing the novel which is the late 80’s.

Wittman appears a composite character who inherits from the Beatnik poets a concern for identity and from Walt Whitman a celebration of his body and his community. “Ah Sing” is Kingston’s version of “I sing” which is a phrase from Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” (Huntley, 175). Like the Chinese Monkey King, Wittman is a liminal character who is left out from history and discourse and so he dwells in the margin. Consequently, he is forced to resort to trickery to create new selves that allow him to sing the ‘body electric’ (Huntley, 176). The Monkey’s seventy-two transformations offer him a wide range of articulating his identity within his social environment.

B-Wittman’s Song of himself and his Community

Wittman’s song of himself is located mainly in the “One-Man Show” chapter wherein he declares “his looks – teeth, eyes, nose, profile – perfect. Take a good look at these eyes. Check them out in profile too. And the other profile […] Notice as I profile you can see both my eyes at once. I see more than most people- no bridges that block the view between the eyes” (TMM, 318). He subverts the denigrating racist description of Chinese physical features into signs of perfection, even signs of being super human. For instance, the Chinese eyes which are viewed as so “little” that the whites cannot see into them are praised by Wittman as being “enormous eyes, not enormous for a Chinese but for anyone” (TMM, 312). The physical features that the Whites find inscrutable and use to reduce the Chinese-Americans are celebrated as perfect. In parallel to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is Wittman Ah Sing’s inclusive play in which he is “including everything that is being left out; and everybody who has no place” (TMM, 52), a song composed to honor unity and community.
Moreover, Wittman’s hippy look suggests defiance of White racists and a revolt against reductionist stereotypes. “His appearance was an affront to anybody who looked at him” (TMM, 44). He persists on wearing green-colored clothes even though it makes his race more salient. ‘His suited body and hairy head didn’t go together. Nor did the green shirt and green tie (with orange-and-silver covered wagons and rows of Daniel Bones with rifles) match each other or the suit” (TMM, 44) (emphasis mine). Wittman’s protest against racial stereotypes is first expressed through his looks then through the play he puts. Chinese-Americans look yellower in green-colored clothes and Wittman “knew it had to do with racial skin, and from that time on, he knew what color to wear, to war” (Ibid). He puts on costumes to perform a new self with each new outfitting, imitating the Chinese Monkey trying on his seventy-two transformations. Wittman tries to create himself anew through costumes which act like tricks that give him freedom to perform his identities and it is pluralized because it is really a matter of multiplicity in self or others’ perceptions.

Using costumes as tricks to try on diverse selves, Wittman is seen by some critics as a ‘trickster’ who is the American counterpart of the Chinese legendary ‘Monkey figure’. Tricksters are perceived as liminal characters, who in spite of their liminality, strive to revive their cultural lore from wading away. In this respect, they are seen as “culture builders [who] appear in moments of identity crisis in American literature” (Smith, 7). The appearance of the monkey character or the trickster figure in Kingston’s novel is an evidence that the Chinese-American community by large and artists in particular do suffer a crisis of identity. Being in ‘contact zone’ (Mary Louise Pratt cited in Huntley, 163) he struggles to construct his identity and the cultural identity of his community. Straddling two cultures, Tricksters “serve to combat racial and sexual oppression and to affirm and create personal and cultural identity” (Smith, 2). Wittman Ah Sing is no exception to this. His frustration about the positioning of his race below the Whites’ and the Blacks’ and his insistence to revive his community’s
culture engage him in a mission of placing himself and his community within the multi-racial USA society and relocate them in the American history.

His “Where’s our jazz? Where’s our blues? Where’s our ain’t-taking-no-shit-from nobody street-strutting language? I want so bad to be the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America” (TMM, 27) translates his commitment to his quest and shows his untamed rebellious self. While scrutinizing the races’ location in the American racial Kaleidoscope, he envies the Blacks for beautifully naming themselves and blames himself and the Chinese-American audience of his play for not naming themselves. He urges them: “You say our name enough, make them stop asking ‘Are you Chinese or Japanese? ‘Who are we? Where’s our name that shows that we aren’t from anywhere but America? We’re so out of it. It’s our fault they call us gook and chinky chinamen. We’ve been here all the time, before Columbus and haven’t named ourselves” (TMM, 326). Understandably, what he does in the play is naming himself and his community as well as placing them vis-à-vis other races; therefore he constructs their ethnic identity as ‘Chinese-no hyphen-American’. He is bitterly offended to be considered an outsider:

They want us to go back to China where we belong; they think that Americans are either white or black. I can’t wear that civil rights button with the Black hand and the White hand shaking each other. *I have a nightmare* after ducking it out; someday blacks and whites will shake hands over my head. I’m the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked (TMM, 307-8) (emphasis mine)

The phrase “I have a nightmare” is a pun on Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream.” While the dream augurs hope and ambition, the nightmare is revealing of psychological quandary that can be caused by the deep suffering of racism, alienation and dehumanization. In his show, untamed Wittman exorcises his malaise and strives to find a way to claim
America just like his ancestors and locates himself and his people in equal terms with the whites because he, too, is American and his ancestors contributed to the building of America which is his land. He questions the reason of his ancestors’ coming to The United States and instead of offering the alternative of the Gold Rush and the Chinese desire to build a fortune Wittman insists “The difference between us and other pioneers, we didn’t come here for the gold streets. We came to play” (TMM, 162). “To play” is to be understood as to make theatre that is to make art. His mission is to revive the Chinese classic theatre and invites everyone he knows to take part in the performance. Having no script, he insists that “the play is the thing” (TMM, 34) therefore, he gives space for everyone to improvise and take part in the acting.

Not forgetting the point about emasculation, he enacts the role of Gwan Goong, the god of War and Literature in Chinese culture. He raises himself up from the little yellow Chinese to the status of a god. This resort to Chinese classics and the endeavor to incorporate Chinese theatrical heritage within the American history of art is Wittman’s, and by implication, Kingston’s technique of claiming American and asserting herself and her community as American. Wittman finally concludes “As Confucius said ‘you are you and I am I.’ I’m not going to tear up any railroads, and I’m not freeing any slaves. I don’t want to go to war” (TMM, 293). He adds “We bad chinamen freaks. Illegal aliens. Outlaws. Outcasts of America. But we make theatre, we make community” (TMM, 261) and “more than California, the entire USA is ours” (TMM, 332). Apart from the scattered-through-the-text arguments of being American, Wittman devotes a whole show to voice out his alienating pain which is cured only through claiming America as an ancestral land, where they are supposed to enjoy equal rights with the Whites. His play is his artistic chant for identity.

Conclusion
Wittman Ah Sing faces racial reductionist stereotypes in the white American-dominated social context of The USA. Racist slurs pervade Hollywood film industry and because he is an artist, his mission is to construct his identity from the very fragments of stereotypes abound about the Chinese-American community of China Town which is cast as a dark ghetto of stowaways, social outcasts and inscrutable, exotic Orientals. His depiction as straddling a contact cultural zone creates a sort of confusion about who he is and who his people are. On one part of the hyphen he is Chinese; on the other, he is American, yet he is denied the rights other White Americans enjoy. Henceforth, he starts his quest for identity empowered by the Chinese Monkey King’s gift of transformation.

Throughout the novel he is untamed to trip around and meet other colored people namely Japanese and Blacks. And with each racial encounter, he is made aware of his liminality and the inscrutability of his community members and culture. An heir of Walt Whitman, the Beatnik poets and the hippy style by the law of his American birth and a descendent of a long Chinese history immersed in myths, he rises up a trickster monkey king who claims America as his province and China as his inspiration. He goes back to the classic theatre and revives it in his land–America- and to his American audience. He is a self-born character who sings his birth and his community through the art of acting always asserting “Once and for all. I am not an oriental. An oriental is antipodal. I am a human being standing right here on a land which I belong to and which belongs to me” (TMM, 327). This feeling of belonging which is allocated both materially and imaginatively is aimed to attain significant results as far as identity construction for individuals and community alike is concerned.
Works Cited


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