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Far from "everybody's everything": Literary tricksters in African American and Chinese American fiction

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FAR FROM 'EVERYBODY'S EVERYTHING': LITERARY TRICKSTERS IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CHINESE AMERICAN FICTION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Crystal S. Anderson

2000

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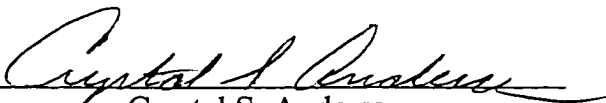
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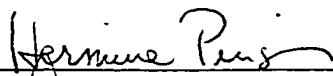
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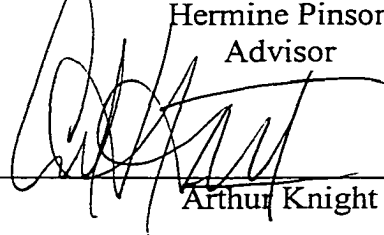
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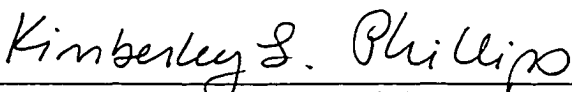
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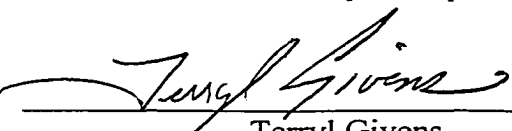

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines trickster sensibilities and behavior as models for racial strategies in contemporary novels by African American and Chinese American authors.

While many trickster studies focus on myth, I assert that realist fiction provides a unique historical and cultural space that shapes trickster behavior. John Edgar Wideman, Gloria Naylor, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston use the trickster in their novels to articulate diverse racial strategies for people of color who must negotiate among a variety of cultural influences.

My critical trickster paradigm investigates the motives and behavior of tricksters. It utilizes close literary readings that are strengthened by my comprehensive knowledge of the history of African Americans and Chinese Americans. Throughout time, images that define individuals in both groups develop in the popular imagination. The authors use the trickster to critique and revise those representations. African American authors also influence the racial discourse of Chinese American writers.

I concluded that the literary trickster's behavior and sensibilities vary from character to character. I found that African American and Chinese American authors share some racial strategies. They also utilize different racial strategies as a result of the different historical and cultural experiences of African Americans and Chinese Americans. Moreover, male and female African American authors differ in the kinds of racial strategies they advocate, just as male and female Chinese American authors.

Such research is significant because of its interdisciplinary exploration of racial strategies of African Americans and Chinese Americans. It provides an alternative approach to the study of the trickster. My work also goes beyond the black/white racial paradigm to explore the cultural dialogue between African American and Chinese American writers.

FAR FROM "EVERYBODY'S EVERYTHING": LITERARY TRICKSTERS IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CHINESE AMERICAN FICTION

INTRODUCTION

The present study of trickster figures in ethnic fiction has been years in the making, literally. As a child, I was fascinated with Brer Rabbit in the tales collected by Joel Chandler Harris. I saw the stories as a primer for explaining oneself out of sticky situations. Now, as a scholar, I see the trickster as a multicultural figure that resides in other oral and narrative traditions ranging from African American to Latino to Chinese and that embodies a variety of critical functions in culture.¹

Because much of the criticism in the field of trickster studies seems aimed primarily at tricksters in myth, I have chosen to focus on tricksters in contemporary novels by African American and Chinese American writers.² I have chosen to focus my inquiry on trickster characters in the following works by African American and Chinese American writers: *Reuben* (1987) by John Edgar Wideman; *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor; *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) by Frank Chin and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1987) by Maxine Hong Kingston. Not only do these novels prominently feature tricksters, but they show clear lines of influence between African American and Chinese

¹ This is not to say that there are not tricksters in other traditions. One need only look at Hermes in Greek mythology, and Loki in Norse mythology. Furthermore, some scholars note that confidence men in American literature bear trickster characteristics. See Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

² Of course, this is not to say that literary tricksters do not exist in other narrative traditions and are not worthy of study. However, this examination focuses on African American and Chinese American fiction because of the unique relationship of influence between the two cultures, a relationship that has not received much critical attention.

American authors regarding ways in which people of color engage issues of race, identity and culture. To be sure, there are other novels that feature trickster-like characters. Such novels include Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976); Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1984), and *Beloved* (1988) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *Japanese by Spring* (1998). However, *Japanese by Spring* was published too late to be included in this study, and the trickster-like characters in the other novels do not provide as clear an opportunity to investigate the influence of African American fiction on Chinese American fiction. As for other Chinese American novels, the works by Chin and Kingston represent the first efforts in the Chinese American narrative tradition to translate the trickster into the novel. Indeed, the Asian American literary tradition has only recently developed a critical language to discuss creative expression.³ These distinctions will become clearer in the following chapter, which deals with the development of the trickster from mythic to literary status.

Rather than simply characterizing tricksters as good or evil in these novels, I interpret trickster sensibilities on a continuum that ranges from reconciling a variety of cultural experiences through an ethnic lens to playing on the multiplicity of cultural values. For convenience and brevity, as well as reasons of historical genealogy, which I

³ Often during this study, I will use the term Asian American to refer to experiences and cultural constructs that Chinese Americans share with other groups of Asian descent in the United States. While a label like 'Asian American' is imprecise because it lumps together the experiences of ethnic groups with different histories, cultures and languages and downplays internal divisions, scholars still use the term frequently when referring to various Asian American groups. The term functions as a political construct with an economic dimension that allows recognition by the state in such activities as the allocation of funds. The label is also a signifier for self-definition, communal consciousness and a unique culture. See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) and William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

take up in my introductory chapter, I characterize literary trickster sensibility as modern, postmodern or indigenous modern.

In order to understand how the modern, the postmodern and the indigenous modern relate to the trickster, a brief explanation is in order. A modern sensibility involves a conceptualization of the world that privileges interpretation and meaning. It assumes that because humans are rational beings, they have the ability to interpret the world around them in a logical manner. I argue that the modern sensibility parallels the preserving aspect of the trickster. With it, tricksters seek to define their world by organizing ideas and concepts in a meaningful yet singular fashion. A postmodern sensibility involves a conceptualization of the world that simultaneously privileges fluidity and the will of the individual. It assumes that all ideas are relative to one another and that the individual is ultimately responsible for creating the reality around him/her. I contend that the postmodern perspective parallels the chaotic aspect of the trickster's persona. With this sensibility, tricksters embrace multiplicity while possessing a worldview that is ultimately centered on the individual. However, an indigenous modern sensibility appreciates both the interpretative impulse of the modern and the play of the postmodern within the context of an ethnic culture, and takes into account the paradoxical nature of the trickster. Tricksters embodying this sensibility acknowledge various cultural spheres and work to reconcile these contending forces within the context of ethnic culture.

I use trickster sensibilities as a foundation to investigate subsequent trickster behavior in the novels. I argue that literary tricksters perform their sensibility through their occupations, vocations and the roles they play within their communities. Depending

on the sensibility of the trickster, these actions may range from those that are motivated by self-interest and wreak havoc to those that serve to preserve and upbuild the community. Through their behavior and sensibilities, literary tricksters promote lessons for the benefit of the reader. They critique grand narratives that make sweeping claims of truth, and promote local narratives that describe the experiences of a group. Depending on the sensibility of the trickster, such descriptions represent viable and non-viable ways of addressing the inequities faced by people of color in the United States.

The benefits of an investigation into the literary trickster are far-reaching. Tricksters within realist novels provide models of interpretation that engage the ever-changing landscape of race and ethnicity in America. The adaptability of literary tricksters provides the vehicle for the exploration of various modes of explaining that landscape. Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach involving the use of psychological models of identity and acculturation, traditional literary strategies of close reading and cultural analysis aids in illuminating the range of literary trickster behavior. This study also highlights the influence of African American culture on Chinese American fiction, a cross-cultural dynamic often overlooked in studies of multiethnic fiction.⁴

Many assume that African-Americans and Chinese Americans have completely different experiences in American culture. African-Americans have typically been viewed as the least favored minority group and have faced obvious and continued discriminatory treatment. Alternatively, as a group under the Asian American ethnic

⁴ To date, Mary Young has provided the only scholarly book-length comparison of the images of African-American and Chinese American women in the popular culture. See *Mules and Dragons: Popular Cultural Images in the Selected Writings of African-American and Chinese-American Women* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993).

umbrella, Chinese Americans have been viewed as the 'model minority,' an example of an ethnic group that successfully assimilated into American culture.⁵ Such assumptions contribute to the failure by many multiethnic literary and cultural studies to explore the historical parallels as well as cultural interaction between these groups. Instead, such investigations focus on defining the ethnic group's experience solely within the context of oppression by a dominant white culture.

In the case of African-Americans and Chinese Americans, there is a substantial record of parallels in historical experience. From their entry into the country, both African-Americans and Chinese Americans were valued by the dominant society for their labor. While blacks were subjected to enforced servitude as early as the 17th century and stifled by the sharecropping system in the South following Reconstruction, Chinese immigrants were recruited primarily to meet labor shortages in railroad construction and agriculture and even replace blacks as laborers in the South after Reconstruction.

Because the presence of both groups at once undergirded and questioned the idea of white supremacy in the United States, both blacks and Chinese Americans were negatively stereotyped. Chinese males were typecast as opium-crazed, sinister threats to pristine white womanhood in popular cultural images such as Fu Manchu, while black males were depicted as predatory brutes in films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Chinese women were seen as exotic sex toys, while black women continued to be defined primarily by their sexuality.

⁵ While the term 'model minority' is often used in reference to Japanese Americans, it also applied to other Asian American groups. The term serves to highlight the success of Asian Americans and downplay any racism or discrimination that may form an obstacle to success in American society. As a result, the term is applied to Korean Americans, who operate successful stores in black neighborhoods without 'handouts' or special treatment, as well as to Chinese Americans, who built economically successful Chinatowns in the late 19th and early 20th century without assistance from the state.

Moreover, African-Americans have influenced Chinese American and other Asian American cultures. High profile actions by black activists against institutionalized racism influenced the awakening self-awareness of Asian American groups during the 1960s. William Wei notes that the cultural nationalism of the Black Power movement inspired Asian Americans to assert themselves as a people of color.⁶ Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American activist, acknowledges that figures such as Malcolm X raised the consciousness of Asian Americans regarding a colonized mentality amid pressures to assimilate into American culture.⁷ The Asian American Political Alliance at Yale and Columbia used black liberation movements rather than collegiate social clubs as models for organization. Asian Americans for Action, a pan-Asian organization, following the example of members of the Black Power movement, expressed concern over the loss of ethnic identity and created community organizations aimed at the retention of cultural values.⁸ In other words, black activism provided a blueprint for reclaiming an ethnic historical past and questioning the desirability of assimilation.

⁶ Wei, 42. Wei notes only in passing the influence of the black civil rights struggle on Asian American activism. Harvard Sitkoff fails to acknowledge how the black civil rights movement provides the blueprint for subsequent civil rights struggles, like the American Indian movement and the Chicano movement (*The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1993]). One of the first acts that united blacks and Asian Americans occurred during the student strikes at the University of Berkeley in 1968. Harvey Dong concludes that the ensuing strikes were in part fueled by ethnic groups united behind the concept of the Third World: "The term identified parallel colonial and racial experiences of minorities throughout US history. Examples of common racial oppression included: genocide of the native Indians, enslavement of Africans, colonization of Chicanos in the Southwest, and the passage of Asian immigration exclusion." ("Third World Student Strikes at SFSU and UCB: A Chronology," in *Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley: History*, June 1998, [website]: 11 August 1999, www.ethnicstudies.com/history.)

⁷ Yuri Kochiyama, "The Impact of Malcolm X on Asian-American Politics and Activism," in *Blacks, Latinos and Asians in Urban America: Status and Prospects for Politics and Activism*, ed. James Jennings (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1984), 134.

⁸ Wei, 25.

However, even as these connections between African and Asian American cultures have been forged, new differences have risen into view. Historically, African-Americans and Asian American groups have experienced tension. Just a few years before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, newspapers reported that blacks had come to join the white opinion that the Chinese negatively affected the economic viability of American workers.⁹ During World War II, black organizations like the NAACP failed to publicly criticize the racism in the application of Executive Order 9066 exclusively to the Japanese, an order that resulted in their internment.¹⁰ James Loewen observes that following the black struggle for civil rights, blacks in the Mississippi Delta were “particularly enraged by the irony of the gain in racial status [by Chinese Americans]. . . [the] Chinese were once brothers in oppression. . . however, they [had] been allowed to join white institutions, move into white neighborhoods, and send their children to white schools.”¹¹ Recent Korean immigrants arrive with negative views of African-Americans as a result of the exportation of US media filled with stereotypes to Korea, which creates highly publicized tension between the two groups in urban areas.¹²

The literary trickster, a figure drawn out of the tributary of folk traditions from West Africa, China and pre-20th century Afro and Chinese America, is an almost

⁹ David J. Hellwig, “Black Reactions to Chinese Immigration and the Anti-Chinese Movement: 1850-1910,” *Amerasia* 6, no. 2 (1979): 32.

¹⁰ Cheryl Greenberg, “Black and Jewish Responses to Japanese Internment,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 2 (1995): 22.

¹¹ James Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, 2^d ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 176.

¹² Edward T. Chang, “New Urban Crisis: Korean-African American Relations,” in *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African-Americans*, ed. Kwang Chung Kim (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 43.

necessary figure in the face of such social complexity. The fascination with this figure on the level of myth lies in its paradoxical nature. Tricksters can transform their appearance to suit the occasion. They can cause trouble or help bring stability to a situation. However, these characteristics are modified when the trickster appears in realistic fiction. In Chapter One, “Trickster Transformations: Origins of the Trickster Figure,” I outline the origins of the trickster figure and its transformation from archetype to literary character. Trickster archetypes simultaneously function as promoters of chaos and preservers of order. Many trickster studies attempt to resolve this basic paradox of the trickster archetype in a variety of ways, including reading the trickster as a transcendental figure and interpreting the trickster as a representative of a specific culture. I differentiate between mythic trickster archetype and literary trickster character and contend that fiction governs literary tricksters differently by contextualizing them within a historically defined space. Unlike mythic tricksters, literary tricksters possess comprehensive knowledge that includes personal and communal memories, and they manipulate, navigate and critique cultures and produce alternative cultural narratives. In the transformation of the mythic trickster, animal tricksters are anthropomorphized into human figures, then develop into more complex literary characters as one moves from early to more contemporary African-American and Chinese American ethnic fiction.. Subsequent chapters investigate a range of trickster characters in African American and Chinese American fiction.

In Chapter Two, “‘No Natural Man’: Black Male Tricksters in John Edgar Wideman’s *Reuben*,” I examine Wideman’s exploration of the black male experience through two tricksters. On one hand, there is Reuben, a small, misshapen black lawyer.

He possesses an indigenous modern sensibility that is manifested in his attempts to make sense of the multiple cultural influences that shape his identity and outlook while maintaining a commitment to black cultural values. On the other hand, Wally is a black basketball recruiter who is not beholden to any particular values except those that serve his self-interest. As a result, he exhibits a postmodern sensibility. I argue that through these two tricksters, Wideman advocates a racial strategy based on the notion of community between black men. He seeks to represent the variety of responses by black men to their lives in 20th century America, thereby challenging the homogenization of the images of black men in mainstream society. While Wideman ultimately endorses Reuben's brand of tricksterism, he nevertheless argues for the acknowledgement of Wally's perspective, even though it does not produce effective results.

Wideman uses Toodles, a mythic-like trickster, and her friend Kwansa, one of Reuben's female clients, in part to reveal the limits of the male, but does not depict either of them as the literary tricksters like Wally and Reuben. Consequently, in Chapter Two, " 'More Wise than Wicked': Black Female Tricksterism in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," I explore female tricksters who engage issues of racism and class oppression similar to what Wideman's characters experience but who also must confront gender discrimination. Naylor's text features several conjurers who function as tricksters and who differ in ability and sensibilities. Sapphira, matriarch of the Day family line on the black-dominated island of Willow Springs, represents an ancient feminine manifestation of conjure. Miranda 'Mama' Day, Sapphira's great granddaughter, utilizes her indigenous modern perspective to make meaning of the vastly different experiences of members of the Day family. Although Naylor portrays Mama Day as a stabilizing agent

in the community, Naylor stresses her humanity by making her a trickster who also makes mistakes and causes chaos. Unlike Mama Day, Ruby, a rival conjure woman, enacts a black female tricksterism based on a postmodern sensibility. Like Wally, she is not grounded in cultural values and relies on her self-interest as a guide through life. Naylor uses these three characters to advocate a racial strategy based on reconciliation of traumatic memories as a way to preserve the community. She also challenges the notion of an unproblematic sisterhood among women and reveals the failure in separating the destinies of men and women. I contend that Naylor endorses Mama Day's attempts at reconciliation, which includes Sapphira's female presence but rejects the disruption caused by Ruby's brand of conjure.

I examine Frank Chin's meditation on Chinese American masculinity based in part on black manhood in Chapter Four, " 'Exile on the Road of Life': Heroic Tricksterism in Frank Chin's *Gunga Din Highway*." Within a more multicultural context than we see in Wideman and Naylor's work, Chin uses Ulysses S. Kwan and his childhood friends, Ben Han and Diego Chang to show how departing from one's Chinese cultural heritage results in co-optation by the mainstream society. All begin marginalized from a variety of cultural spheres and adopt trickster mindsets aligned with Chinese culture. Gradually, all distance themselves from that culture. Ulysses retains a sense of Chinese American identity the longest, but eventually resorts to a strong individualism. Ben Han exploits Asian American culture for his own benefit by catering to white tastes and Diego Chang exploits all cultural arenas, including Chinese American culture. Like Wideman's Wally, each of these tricksters sees the world as a series of choices and is guided primarily by a sense of individual agency, thus expressing a postmodern

sensibility. Ulysses is the only one of the three that performs substantial cultural critique, which represents a reactionary response to a variety of cultural issues. I argue that Chin uses these tricksters as a negative example of behavior for Chinese Americans, for he believes that Chinese Americans should enact a racial strategy based on both individualism and a masculinized Chinese American culture.

Chinese American masculinity again figures prominently in Chapter Five, “‘Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West’: The Composite Trickster in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.” Kingston creates two complementary characters, Wittman Ah Sing and Kwan Yin, who together make up a composite trickster. Wittman’s transformative abilities reveal a comprehensive cross-cultural knowledge that represents a postmodern sensibility in the range of cultures that it covers. However, Wittman’s persona is constrained by his reductive masculinity, strong individualism and grounding in a specific cultural moment. Kwan Yin, the narrator of the novel, represents a feminine voice with a long memory. Her commitment to ethical and moral values makes her a modern trickster. I interpret Wittman and Kwan Yin as aspects of one composite character that combines Wittman’s fluidity and Kwan Yin’s stability within a Chinese American context. Kingston uses this figure that captures both the masculine and feminine aspects of the Chinese American experience to advocate a racial strategy based on a gender-equitable Chinese American culture and a multicultural communalism as well as challenge the traditional racial paradigm. Furthermore, this composite allows her to comprehensively explore that experience by including both contemporary and historical perspectives. By doing so, Kingston questions popular

notions about Chinese Americans and seeks to preserve and extend a complex, multiple Chinese American cultural heritage.

These texts reveal significant findings about the trickster in contemporary African American and Chinese American novels. While the tricksters in these novels reveal the influence of black writers on Chinese American writers as they wrestle with issues of race and ethnicity, the reverse does not seem to be the case. While the interaction between these two cultures is becoming increasingly evident in the areas of film and popular culture, the relative youth of the Chinese American literary tradition has delayed its manifestation in fiction until very recently. For example, Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* is one of the first novels to explore the relationship between African Americans and Japanese Americans. As one of the oldest and most substantial ethnic literary traditions in the United States, African American literature functions as the ur-text for Chinese American writers, whose own literary narrative tradition is relatively young. These writers specifically rely on the trickster figure as a vehicle to discuss various ways to address the changing landscape created by race and ethnicity in America from the perspective of African-Americans and Chinese Americans.

CHAPTER I
TRICKSTER TRANSFORMATIONS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LITERARY
TRICKSTER

For you must know that when anyone becomes an Immortal, he can project his soul, change his shape and perform all kinds of miracles. Monkey, since his Illumination, could change every one of the eighty-four hairs of his body into whatever he chose.

--Wu Ch'eng-en, *Monkey*

Co'se Brer Fox wanter hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin, so he cotch 'im by de behime legs en slung 'im right in de middle er de brier-patch. . . Bimeby he hear somebody call 'im, en way up de hill he see Brer Rabbit settin' cross-legged on a chinkapin log koamin' de pitch outen his har wid a chip. Den Brer Fox know dat he bin swop off might bad. Brer Rabbit wuz bleedzed fer ter fling back some er his sass, en he holler out:

"Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred and bawn in a brier-patch!" en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers.

--"How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp For Mr. Fox"

Beginning sometime in the late sixties and early seventies and continuing to the present, there appeared a sudden profusion of African and Asian American, including Chinese American, novels that featured characters that seemed aligned with and to draw from, in varying degrees of explicitness, the trickster figures of myth and folklore. My preliminary questions in this project are, then: 1) what are the histories of the trickster in myth and folklore? 2) What are the key points of development of the trickster in African American and Chinese American fiction? 3) Most crucially, how does the trickster change in the passage from folklore to authored literature, i.e. how do we know the literary trickster when we catch glimpses of his/her shape shifting form? And 4) Why does the trickster come to such pronounced prominence in contemporary African and Chinese American novels? What does the figure mean, both in the specific novels in which we discover it and in broader socio-cultural terms? I pursue all these questions

with some generality in this chapter, but then I pursue the last two through four detailed readings of novels by John Edgar Wideman, Gloria Naylor, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston.

To what end? I believe that the tricksters in these novels illuminate effective and ineffective ways of dealing with discrimination and oppression that people of color still face in the United States. Trickster sensibility and behavior in these novels also reveal the ways in which cultural values can be preserved, adapted and incorporated into survival strategies in contemporary life. Furthermore, this study explores how African American authors provide models for engaging issues of race and culture that Chinese American authors adapt to their historical and cultural situation.

The Archetypal Trickster

Many people are familiar with tricksters like Brer Rabbit in American folklore and the Monkey King in the Chinese oral tradition. These are archetypes that exist in the realm of myth. Wilfred Guerin et al describe archetypes as “images that recur in the myths of peoples widely separated in time and place . . . [and] serve similar cultural functions.”¹ In nearly all the cultures in which the trickster appears, s/he exhibits several recurring characteristics. Often a comical figure, the mythic trickster causes confusion in any given situation. Such confusion often results from the trickster’s ability to transform appearance and change identity. At the same time, tricksters function as preservers of cultural values and embody a sense of order, passing on cultural values to the next generation and creating continuity within society.

¹ Wilfred Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 149.

Consider two examples from African and Chinese myth. Esu is a West African trickster in Yoruban mythology who is well known for playing tricks on others for his own sport. Such tricks emanate from a sensibility that is not grounded in any particular conviction and represents his freedom. In the commonly known myth called “The Two Friends,” Esu decides to test the friendship of two farmers. He puts on a hat with the right side painted black and the left side painted white, and rides between the two men as they till their fields. Of course, the farmer on the right sees black, and the farmer on the right sees white. When they later discuss it over lunch, they fight over the color of the man’s cap. Esu causes dissention between the farmers by playing on their belief in what they see. The result is chaos, for Esu’s trick disrupts the friendship of the farmers. This story illustrates Erik Davis’ assertion that “moving along the seam between two different worldviews, [Esu] confuses communication, reveals the ambiguity of knowledge, and plays with perspective.”²

However, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., also identifies an aspect of Esu that enables order. He describes Esu as “the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding” and “a classic figure of . . . the unity of opposed forces.”³ Esu manifests this aspect of his personality by creating order through the lessons embodied in his tricks. These lessons ensure the survival of the community by embodying cultural values that are to be passed down from generation to generation. In this way, Esu functions as what Jeanne Rosier

² Erik Davis, “Trickster at the Crossroads: West Africa’s God of Messages, Sex and Deceit,” *Gnosis* (1991): 26 October 1999, <http://www.levity.com/figment/trickster.html>.

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

Smith refers to as a “culture-builder.”⁴ In the case of the farmers, Esu teaches them to view a person or thing from all angles before rendering a judgement. Robert Farris Thompson explains that learning this lesson brings one closer to having what Yorubans call *àshe*, the power-to-make-things-happen: “One must cultivate the art of recognizing significant communications, knowing what is truth and what is falsehood, else the lessons of the crossroads. . . will be lost.”⁵ By promoting the Yoruban ideal of learning all that is possible about a situation, Esu preserves cultural values. One could also describe Esu’s function as interpretative, because he gives meaning to certain cultural values. He defines values such as *àshe* as worthy of emulation.

In the Chinese tradition, the Monkey King demonstrates the same paradoxical trickster qualities. *Monkey* (1948) by Wu Ch’eng-en’s is a novel based on Chinese folktales that relate the adventures of the Monkey King: his birth from a divine egg, ascension among the monkeys, disruption of the royal banquet, imprisonment under the hand of Buddha, release and redemption through accompanying a monk to retrieve scripture from India. Like the tricksters in African folklore, the Monkey King’s fluid sensibility translates into his ability to take different forms, thus multiplying his identity. Throughout the novel, the Monkey King insists on changing his title, and by extension, his identity. He starts as the Stone Monkey, then becomes the Handsome Monkey King, then the Great Monkey Sage, equal of Heaven. His ability to transform further underscores his fluid identity. Famous for his seventy-two transformations, he can

⁴ Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 9.

⁵ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 19.

change from the size of a flea to the size of a monster in seconds. Such transformations often wreak havoc on heaven by disrupting royal events such as the banquet of the peaches.

At the same time, the Monkey King serves to retain cultural values. Monkey's journey with Tripitaka, the monk, embodies the quest for enlightenment, the final step of the acquisition of knowledge. Literary critic Jing Wang suggests that Monkey's quest reflects stabilizing tendencies in his personality: "By the end of the narrative, with Monkey's initiation into Buddhahood, we witness the completion of his psychic development, which began with the unconscious and ends in deified consciousness."⁶ The journey transforms his unruly personality to a more contained persona. Monkey achieves enlightenment, which implies access to 'Truth,' leaving no room for Monkey's own unruly desires. This commitment to enlightenment is linked with the notion of preservation and definition; alternative ways of looking at things are rejected because they may challenge the singularity of 'Truth.' Whalen Lai notes that "we scholars may think of Monkey as nothing more than a literary creation, but the common folk of China know better. To us, a text is just a text, but to them *Journey* is more than a fable: it tells of reality. The Sage Equal to Heaven is living reality. . . . Monkey still answers prayers. Monkey has his own temple; he was worshipped and prayed to as a god by the history-making rebels of the Boxer Rebellion."⁷ Rural Chinese still appeal to Monkey's wisdom, establishing him as an agent of stable knowledge even in the present day.

⁶ Jing Wang, *The Story of the Stone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 241.

⁷Whalen Lai, "From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King," *Asian Folklore Studies* 53, no. 1(1994): 43.

Trickster Criticism

The resolution of the apparently contradictory nature of the mythic and folkloric trickster is a central issue in criticism devoted to the trickster figure. In *The Trickster* (1955), the first book-length study of the trickster, Paul Radin resolves the conflict between chaos and preservation in the trickster's function by dropping the preservative aspect of the trickster from his consideration. While Radin acknowledges the trickster as both "creator and destroyer," he asserts that the trickster functions only as a force of disorder in all societies. For Radin, the trickster "wills nothing consciously. At times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control."⁸ As a result of this spontaneity, Radin also interprets the trickster as a symbol for the impulsive aspect of the human psyche. Rather than representing a means by which humans rationally solve their problems, the trickster exemplifies an instinctive response guided only by the achievement of instant gratification. Radin ultimately consigns to the role of symbolizing the primordial psyche that motivates people to act on the spur of the moment.

Radin also promotes the trickster as a universal archetype. While he focuses on North American Native American trickster, he asserts that the trickster can be found in nearly every culture on the planet and that "few other myths have persisted with their fundamental content unchanged."⁹ For Radin, the trickster causes confusion in every culture in which s/he appears. Radin makes no attempt to account for the specific

⁸ Paul Radin, prefatory note to *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), xxii.

⁹ Radin, xxiii.

contexts of those varying cultures that may alter the trickster's function as the symbol of disorder. Even within his own study, he does not make distinctions among the various Native American tribes that depict a trickster in their oral traditions.

Present day trickster studies address the paradox of the function of the trickster in a variety of ways. In *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms* (1993), William Hynes creates a matrix of trickster characteristics by expanding the definition to include functions that go beyond the preservation of culture and creation of chaos.¹⁰ The result is a framework that goes beyond the binary that forms the foundation of traditional conceptions of the trickster: "At the heart of this cluster of manifest trickster traits is (1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Flowing from this are such other features as (2) deceiver/trick-player, (3) shape-shifter, (4) situation-inventor, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur."¹¹

By making the transformational ability of the trickster primary in his definition, Hynes tries to encompass the complexity of the function of the trickster: "[The trickster's] cosmic interplay engages unceasing sets of counterpoint sectors. . . [still s/he] is not fully delimited by one side or the other of a binary distinction, nor by both sides at once, nor by a series of oppositions. Anomalous, a-nomos, without normativity, the

¹⁰ Certainly there are other important studies in tricksters that follow Radin, including Robert Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa* (1980), Ellen Basso's *In Favor of Deceit: A Study of Tricksters in an Amazonian Society* (1987) and William Hynes and William Doty's *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms* (1993), which will be discussed later in the study. They, like Radin, focus on the mythic trickster, whereas the bulk of this study is devoted to trickster characters in contemporary fiction.

¹¹ William Hynes, "Mapping Mythic Tricksters," in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. William Hynes and William Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 34.

trickster appears on the edge or just beyond existing borders.”¹² By defining the trickster primarily through his/her amorphous personality, Hynes makes it possible to consider not only the chaotic and preserving aspects of trickster personality, but other functions as well, such as deceiver and messenger of the gods. Hynes’ matrix argues for a relativism of trickster characteristics in an effort to be all-inclusive. In fact, this expansion of the definition allows such figures as confidence men, conjurers, fools and shamans to fall under the rubric of tricksterism.

In *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective* (1994), Elizabeth Ammons maintains the paradox of the trickster’s function while centralizing the context of ethnic culture. Ammons argues that the trickster operates as a figure of mediation, “a principle of human rebellion and resistance that exists both within a protagonist/antagonist framework *and* within a totally different context, one in which the disruly—the transgressive—is accepted as part of the community’s life. Individual desire and group authority cohabit within a network or web of relations.”¹³ In Ammon’s definition, the chaotic function of the trickster can be seen in his/her unruliness, while the preservative aspect is retained by an acceptance of community authority. Ammons attempts to account for the trickster’s nature by interpreting the chaotic function as a complement to the preserving function of the trickster against the backdrop of ethnic culture.

¹² Hynes, 34.

¹³ Elizabeth Ammons, introduction to *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks (Hanover: University Press of New England), ix.

Moreover, Ammons sees the trickster as a literary paradigm that promotes an alternative vision of the world. Ammons argues that traditional literary paradigms actively exclude works by writers of color from critical consideration: “The master codes at work within the literary-critical terms realism, naturalism, and modernism really comprise one code. . . [committed to] the preservation and maintenance of elite white male power in the United States, which at the turn of the century (as is still true at this turn of the century) had everything to do with empire, dominance of others.”¹⁴ Ammons asserts that writers of color may alter the basic individual-against-society plot by showing that individuals of color may have an interest in having a favorable relationship with the ethnic community while at the same time enacting resistance strategies against a hostile dominant society. Under these conditions, tricksters not only rebel against white society while preserving communal values but represent “a whole other, independent, cultural reality and positive way of negotiating multiple cultural systems.”¹⁵

Under Ammon’s consideration, as both a figure of mediation and a literary paradigm, the trickster incorporates ethnic culture into his/her nature. She argues that tricksterism “is always attached to specific, identified group realities and traditions, no matter how flexibly deployed or surprisingly redefined. [A failure to consider the cultural context] is to dilute beyond usefulness or recognition a paradigm that . . . must be rooted in culturally specific analysis.”¹⁶ Ammon’s position challenges Radin’s assertion

¹⁴ Ammons, viii.

¹⁵ Ammons, xi.

¹⁶ Ammons, xii.

about the universal nature of the trickster and increases the role of ethnic culture in the makeup of the trickster, which is de-emphasized by Hynes' relativism.

Like Ammons, Jeanne Rosier Smith looks at the impact of ethnic culture on considerations of the function of the trickster. In *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction* (1997), Smith addresses the contradictory nature of the trickster by emphasizing both gender and ethnicity in her interpretation of the figure. She emphasizes a cross-cultural feminist approach as a means of categorizing the trickster in the novels by contemporary women of color: "Feminists critics have suggested that a trickster-like receptiveness to other voices, the skill of speaking in and negotiating among several languages, is characteristic of women in general."¹⁷ For Smith, women's ways of knowing are ideal in dealing with the trickster's paradoxical function. In their engagement with issues that face people of color, ethnic women writers use the trickster to validate culture as one of the spheres that the trickster must negotiate in moving between borders. By bringing in ethnicity, Smith also argues that tricksters have a stake in maintaining cultural values in the face of possible erasure by the dominant society.

Interrogations about the nature of the trickster invariably involve some discussion of the impact of gender on the trickster. Several scholars define the trickster as predominately masculine. Hynes does not discuss the implications of a female trickster. Lewis Hyde argues that "it is not hard to think of women who have pulled a trick or two; lying, stealing and shameless behavior are not masculine essences. But one or two

¹⁷Jeanne Rosier Smith, 27.

episodes do not make a trickster.”¹⁸ He questions the female trickster’s function as a destabilizing agent in patriarchal societies, because tricksters, most of whom are male, cause chaos in cultures that are predominately patriarchal.¹⁹ Even androgyny does not introduce a unique brand of female tricksterism, for Hyde argues that cases of “true androgyny,” where males transform into females, are relatively few and in such cases, “a *male figure* becomes briefly female and then reverts to being male. The male is the ground, the point of departure.”²⁰

Defining tricksters using activities often engaged in by males may indeed result in mostly masculine tricksters. However, some scholars suggest that female tricksters embody key trickster characteristics by disrupting the gender expectations and power relations of a culture. Deldon McNeely notes that “woman threatens the masculine need for predictability and order, as does the Trickster.”²¹ Jeanne Rosier Smith parallels the trickster’s challenge to the status quo with women’s challenge to patriarchal societies.²² Tiffany Ana Lòpez argues that the function of the trickster tales that feature female characters is to pass on “new kinds of tales of cultural survival that take into account the importance of women’s roles in the survival of culture and community.”²³

¹⁸ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 338.

¹⁹ Hyde, 340-341.

²⁰ Hyde, 335-336.

²¹ Deldon McNeely, *Mercury Rising: Women, Evil and Trickster Gods* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1996), 112.

²² Jeanne Smith, 2-3.

²³ Tiffany Ana Lòpez, “Maria Cristina Mena: Turn-of-the-Century La Malinche, and Other Tales of Cultural (Re)Construction,” in *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural*

These previous trickster studies illuminate my own attempts to address the paradoxical nature of the trickster. Like Hynes, I seek to elucidate the trickster's various responses to the world around him/her. Like Ammons, I contend that the function of the tricksters is profoundly influenced by ethnic cultural context. Like Smith, I consider the impact of gender as spheres of influence on trickster perspective and behavior.

My trickster paradigm takes as its subject the trickster within the context of the realist novel. I argue that this setting imposes a certain unique environment on the trickster that influences its characterization and behavior. Realist novels seek to depict a world familiar to the reader. While many American writers, ranging from John Steinbeck to Ernest Hemmingway to Ralph Ellison fall into this category, Leo Braudy argues that a certain strand flows through their work that can be described as realist: "However their standards and assumptions might differ, they are therefore similarly involved in the problem of *knowing*: what the character (and perhaps the reader) must know in order to survive and prosper; what the novelist must know in order to convince the reader that the novel's world is 'real.'"²⁴ If part of the realist novel's aim is to present a model of interpreting life in order for the reader to survive it successfully, then it must present situations that the reader is likely to encounter. As characters within this setting, tricksters must follow the conventions of a world that resembles that of the reader. In many cases, their thoughts and behavior often correspond to what is possible in the "real" world.

Perspective, ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 22-23.

²⁴ Leo Braudy, "Realists, Naturalists, and Novelists of Manners," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1979), 132.

Because literary tricksters exist in this realist setting, they mirror human beings. Unlike mythic tricksters who often rely on supernatural powers and feats, I explore the tricksterism of these characters in realist fiction through their sensibility and behavior. I ascertain the motives of these characters by first describing a range of trickster sensibilities, using the concepts of the modern, the postmodern and the indigenous modern.²⁵ Trickster sensibility forms the foundation for behavior and also allows consideration of the impact of culture, gender and historical circumstances on the trickster's personality. Differentiating among trickster attitudes aids in explaining differences in trickster behavior, for all tricksters are not alike. Moreover, in considering trickster sensibilities and behavior, I am able to shed light on the kinds of lessons promoted by tricksters. While terms like the modern, the postmodern and the indigenous modern contain a myriad of gradations of meaning, there are several general characteristics that most critics agree relate to these terms.

The modern refers to a set of philosophical ideas and attitudes based on the notion of interpretation as a means of creating order and meaning in the world. Brian McHale argues that the primary philosophical idea of the modern is to “engage and foreground questions such as ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?’”²⁶ Pauline Rosenau adds that the modern centers on the search for truth, which inherently “makes

²⁵ I use the terms modern, postmodern and indigenous modern refer to sensibilities, and envision the terms modernism, postmodernism and presumably indigenous modernism as aesthetic movements. See Mary Klages, “Postmodernism,” lecture notes on Voice of the Shuttle [webpage] (University of Colorado, Boulder, 1997, 14 April 2000, <http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>).

²⁶ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 9.

reference to order, rules and values [and] depends on logic, rationality and reason.”²⁷

While Madan Sarup acknowledges an aspect of the modern that addresses multiple perspectives, he also maintains that the modern ultimately remains committed to the notion of truth as a unified, though complex, reality.²⁸ I see this interpretative impulse as a parallel to the preserving aspect of the trickster, as both are aimed at creating order and meaning. Thus, a trickster operating with a modern sensibility seeks to define his or her world by organizing ideas and concepts in a fashion that culminates in a single meaning.

If the modern privileges order and interpretation, then the postmodern represents a set of attitudes that privileges multiplicity and critiques the idea of unity and meaning. McHale maintains that the primary philosophical thrust of the postmodern is to “engage and foreground questions like. . . What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constructed, and how do they differ?”²⁹ Jacques Derrida, a prominent figure in the theory behind postmodern thought, asserts that concepts and the worlds they are a part of are not unitary, but consist of different aspects that may even be incongruent. To deal with this paradox, Derrida puts forward deconstruction, a method of analysis designed to reveal underlying contradictions and assumptions associated with concepts: “It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are

²⁷ Pauline Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 77.

²⁸ Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 95.

²⁹ McHale, 10.

themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction.”³⁰ In other words, all concepts are subject to being broken down further because they are composed of various parts that are themselves composed of various parts. As a result, the postmodern engages the multiplicity that makes up concepts and ideas.

The postmodern also emphasizes a sense of freedom associated with such multiplicity. This can be seen in a consideration of the postmodern individual. Conceived as a response to the modern unified subject, the postmodern individual is “the disintegrating patchwork of a *persona*, with a disparate personality and a potentially confused identity. S/he submits to a multitude of incompatible juxtaposed logics, all in perpetual movement.”³¹ Lacking a center, the postmodern individual embodies the fluidity of the postmodern, reveling in the play of indeterminacy and instability. If one accepts the contention that such individuals create their own reality because they reject the notion of objective reality, then their reality, while appearing to be free-flowing, actually conforms to the personal whims of the postmodern individual. I see the privileging of the unstable and subsequent illusion of freedom as analogous to the chaotic aspect of the trickster’s persona, as all serve to disrupt order. A trickster operating with a postmodern sensibility embraces multiplicity but also possesses a worldview that is ultimately centered on the individual. Sh/e would acknowledge the fluidity that underlies concepts but interpret them according to his/her own desires.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 273.

³¹ Rosenau, 55.

When the interpretative impulse of the modern meets the fluid impulse of the postmodern within the context of ethnic culture, I describe the resulting attitudes as the indigenous modern. An indigenous modern sensibility blends the trickster's chaotic and preservative aspects while addressing issues that uniquely impact the ethnic group, such as discrimination and oppression. A trickster exhibiting this sensibility acknowledges the different spheres of the dominant culture and ethnic culture, yet actively works to reconcile those contending forces while maintaining a commitment to ethnic cultural values.

African and Asian American scholars each describe phenomena that may be defined as the indigenous modern. Within the context of African American culture, Craig Werner refers to an "Afro-modern" sensibility that centralizes the African American experience while recognizing other cultural realities.³² Werner asserts that Afro-modernism, the aesthetic informed by the experiences of African Americans in the United States, validates the multiple modes of sense-making within the context of the black experience:

Understood from a Du Boisean perspective, then, the central problem confronted by Afro-American culture closely resembles that confronted by mainstream modernism: the alienated individual experiences a profound sense of psychological and cultural disorientation in a world characterized by an accelerating rate of change; he or she subsequently attempts to regain some sense of coherence. . . . Afro-American modernists generally perceive a communal dilemma deriving from historical and political forces.³³

³² This term is not synonymous with Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism is the study of Africa and its history from a non-European perspective and includes rediscovering African and African American achievement, restoring Africa's rightful place in history and establishing its importance on a par with European history, culture and accomplishment. See *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, s.v. "Afrocentrism."

³³ Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994), 186-187.

The underlying Afro-modern worldview simultaneously values fluidity through its attention to fragmentation produced by oppression and stability through its attempt to define and preserve African American cultural connections. The seeming paradox results in a complex style of sense-making that addresses a multifaceted world through recognizing the different ways of being in the mainstream society. In addition, the Afro-modern contains a grounded mode of definition that recognizes the need to preserve communal, African American values conditioned by a historically defined context.

Similarly, Asian American theorists describe sensibilities that reflect indigenous modern tendencies. Donald C. Goellnicht notion of indigenous theory includes what I have identified as modern and postmodern impulses:

[Asian American texts] enact the threatening potential of theory to expose the workings of ideology, to uncover the matrices of established power relations, and to challenge traditional canons and official histories. . . for 'minorities' written out of 'official' history, recorded memory is not a luxury, an academic exercise, but the very proof of existence. . . the act of remembering, of putting fragments back together, of reclaiming the body (of flesh, history and memory) is presented as essential for survival.³⁴

The disruption by indigenous theory reflects the tendencies of the postmodern while the recovery of history and experience parallels the definitive tendencies of the modern. Moreover, Keith Osajima asserts that oppositional postmodernism in Asian American studies "involves utilizing the critical impulses of postmodernism to reveal oppressive constraints. . . while avoiding the extreme positions of total repudiation, where it is

³⁴ Donald C. Goellnicht, "Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 351-352.

impossible to fashion alternative visions of the future.”³⁵ The underlying outlook, again, highlights the blending of a multiplicity of critical impulses and commitment to defining Asian American culture, the very dual impulses that compose the indigenous modern.

As examples of the indigenous modern, Afro-modernism, indigenous theory and oppositional postmodernism blend the definitive impulse of the modern with the fluidity of the postmodern with a special attention to race and ethnic experience. I argue that the dual impulses of the indigenous modern parallel the paradoxical nature of the trickster. More than just describing a trickster sensibility, the indigenous modern specifically engages the role of ethnic culture in a way the modern and the postmodern do not. The postmodern de-emphasizes unique cultural values by failing to acknowledge differences between ethnic and dominant cultural spheres. It assigns all cultural spheres the same value and ignores historical inequities and conflicts. In describing the postmodern, Todd Gitlin provides a series of styles he believes emulates the thrust of postmodern. This list is emphatically white, and demonstrates why ethnic writers would want to lodge their practice somewhere between the modern and postmodern.³⁶ The emphasis on order and meaning by the modern often results in narrowly construed interpretations that exclude the voices and experiences of ethnic groups and reinforces the status quo. The indigenous modern brings race and ethnic difference back into the forefront.

³⁵ Keith Osajima, “Postmodernism and Asian American Studies: A Critical Appropriation,” in *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro et al (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1995), 33.

³⁶ Todd Gitlin, “Postmodernism: What are They Talking About,” in *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*, ed. Arthur Asa Berger (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998), 59-60.

Some scholars question the melding of the modern and the postmodern against the backdrop of ethnic culture. David Mikics points out that parallels drawn between ethnic cultural traditions and conceptions of the modern and the postmodern fail to address the “colonial gesture” that underlies European and Euro-American ideologies. For Mikics, the appropriation of ethnic cultural practices by artists often identified as key purveyors of the modern or the postmodern “is motivated by nostalgia for the (supposed) immediacy or palpable, experiential knowledge that the alienated artist perceives in either colonized nations or the underclass of his or her own nation.”³⁷ Mikics argues that both the modern and postmodern could be construed as antithetical to the project of ethnic culture because they reduce the ethnic experience to merely an aesthetic with no connection to a socio-historical context.

However, Mikics assumes there is no structure in ethnic culture that, like the modern, engages issues of interpretation, or like the postmodern, engages different spheres of influence. I argue that ethnic cultures have long engaged these ways of looking at reality and incorporated them into the very heart of ethnic culture. What critics label as the modern or the postmodern have significant parallels in the philosophy and culture of ethnic groups, a phenomenon that Werner, Goellnicht and Osajima illustrate.

The trickster sensibilities described by the modern, the postmodern and the indigenous modern shed light on subsequent trickster behavior. In their behavior, tricksters perform the paradox that defines their nature, much like the Signifying

³⁷ David Mikics, “Postmodernism, Ethnicity and Underground Revisionism in Ishmael Reed,” *Postmodern Culture* 1, no. 3 (1991) [cited 10 September 2000], http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v001/1.3mikics.html.

Monkey, an African-American trickster. In one of the most well known folktales, Monkey tricks the Lion into fighting the Elephant over the title of king of the jungle. Monkey tells Lion that Elephant has insulted his family (most notably, his mama). Lion takes the insults literally, while Monkey means them figuratively. As a result, Lion confronts Elephant, who soundly whips him. Lion goes back to confront Monkey, only to be made aware of his misreading of their previous conversation.

Monkey performs on the playground of language. By creating alleged insults to the Lion's family, Monkey causes Lion to retaliate. Gates argues that Monkey's behavior is a performance of the paradoxical sensibility as a trickster: "The Monkey is a term of (anti) mediation, as are all trickster figures, between two forces he seeks to oppose for his own contentious purposes, and then to reconcile."³⁸ Monkey creates chaos by insulting Lion. He also creates order by facilitating the fight that establishes Elephant as the true head of the jungle order. He does both by means of a trick, in his case, a play on language.

I contend that tricksters in this study perform their sensibility as well, through their occupations, vocations and roles they play within their communities. I believe that tricksters operating with a modern sensibility consistently act to achieve one clearly defined goal. Tricksters operating with a postmodern sensibility act with a commitment to their own way of being. Their actions serve their self-interest. Such tricksters may also act with no commitment to any idea and have no focused intent for their actions. Because of the fluidity of the trickster with a postmodern perspective, these figures float

³⁸ Gates, *Monkey*, 56.

from situation to situation wreaking havoc. Tricksters with an indigenous modern sensibility often act as mediators in communities and utilize choices around them to reconcile contending forces.

Through their behavior and sensibilities, tricksters promote lessons for the benefit of the reader that represent various alternative narratives. What are narratives? Francois Lyotard says that narratives “allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it.”³⁹ They are the means by which society categorizes knowledge. They are cultural codes that tell us what is important or valid, and what is not. Some narratives, like master narratives or grand narratives, make truth claims that exclude other kinds of knowledge: “It is therefore not at all surprising that the representatives of the new process of legitimation. . . should be at the same time actively involved in destroying the traditional knowledge of peoples, perceived from that point forward as minorities or potential separatist movements destined only to spread obscurantism.”⁴⁰ Other narratives such as little or local narratives describe the experiences of a group without making claims to an ultimate truth. Rosenau argues that little narratives “assert neither truth nor totalizing theory, and propose no broad theoretical generalizations or ultimate truths. . . . They present a common story that unifies people and promotes a social bond among individuals in their everyday life.”⁴¹

³⁹ Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; reprint, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 20.

⁴⁰ Lyotard, 30.

⁴¹ Rosenau, 84.

I argue that tricksters critique grand narratives and, depending on their sensibilities and behavior, promote various local narratives. Tricksters with a modern sensibility tend to advocate lessons that are rigid and are difficult to adapt to various situations. Their lessons may only be applicable within the context of ethnic culture. Tricksters with a postmodern sensibility tend to promote lessons that consistently benefit the individual, often at the expense of others or the community. Tricksters with an indigenous modern sensibility tend to promote lessons that can be adapted to changing situations while remaining complementary to the ethnic community.

Authors use the trickster to articulate racial strategies that reflect their understanding of the ways in which ethnic groups grapple with the race-conscious world that surrounds them. The sensibilities and behaviors of the tricksters are therefore paramount because, as Gitlin observes, the modern, postmodern and the indigenous modern are more than just styles; they are ways of apprehending and experiencing the world the determining our place in it.⁴² In this way, tricksters can be read as models of ways of being in the world.

I believe my approach addresses some of the issues omitted by other trickster studies. By characterizing a range of trickster sensibilities within a continuum to provide context, I avoid the relativism Hynes encounters in his emphasis on the amorphous nature of the mythic trickster. In Hynes' model, tricksters can be 'everybody's everything,' and lose an identity that differentiates them from other kinds of archetypes. Ralph Ellison notes that "from a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters. . . because

⁴² Gitlin, 60.

he-she-it is protean with changes of pace, location and identity.”⁴³ Ellison implies a warning in constructing a definition that is so broad that it defeats the purpose of definition by making no real distinctions at all. My continuum of trickster sensibilities seeks to keep in view the trickster’s paradox while maintaining a structure for interpreting how the trickster sees and acts in the world.

My paradigm also focuses on close readings of trickster sensibility and behavior, aspects overlooked by models more focused on the aesthetic and literary implications of the trickster. Smith focuses on the trickster as representative of feminist cross-cultural strategies in novels by women of color: “My trickster aesthetic envisions the trickster not only as an actual figure in the novel but also as a linguistic and stylistic principle.”⁴⁴ By doing so, she emphasizes the trickster more as a device rather than a character. Ammons envisions the trickster primarily as a literary strategy and leaves unanswered questions about the actual explication of the character’s behavior as opposed to the character as tool of the author. My study contemplates how tricksters present models for people of color in dealing with oppression as well as ethnic cultural preservation.

My model also seeks to address the relationship between gender and the trickster in a way that includes a consideration of masculinity and femininity. While critics like Hyde maintain that the trickster is primarily male, and scholars like McNeely argue that female tricksters are unique, my continuum of various trickster sensibilities elucidates what drives these characters, including motives that may be related to gender. My

⁴³ Ralph Ellison, “Slip the Joke and Change the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1953; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 46.

⁴⁴ Jeanne Smith, 14.

paradigm defines tricksters by the ways in which they think and behave, not solely based on the characteristics assigned to mythic or folkloric tricksters. By doing so, my model can explore male tricksters whose behavior may represent a response to societal gender expectations, or female tricksters whose psyche may reflect the influence of women's culture.

While all of these scholars explore the nature of the paradoxical nature of the trickster, the aesthetic and literary implications of its behavior, and the relationship between gender and its nature, none of these scholars of the trickster address the development of the trickster from mythic archetype to literary character. Central to this work is the role the novel, for it creates a different context for the trickster than myth and folklore and affects the trickster's behavior and sensibility. The increased cultural and historical specificity of the novel conflicts with the lack of specificity of myth and folklore. Moreover, authors construct a particular context for their characters, whereas myth lacks such artifice. These differences cause the trickster to change in his/her move from archetype to fictional character. By looking at this development, I intend to present relevant examples of significant shifts in trickster identity rather than an exhaustive genealogy. But first what are the differences between mythic and literary tricksters?

Trickster Transformation from Archetype to Literary Character

The primary difference between literary tricksters and mythic tricksters is the narrative world created by fiction. Mythic tricksters are not constrained by historical place, while literary tricksters reflect a definite place in time. Furthermore, the literary trickster possesses several aspects that define his/her character, including a comprehensive kind of knowledge as well as the ability to manipulate situations,

negotiate among various cultural spheres and promote viable and non-viable ways of being in the world. A consideration of the lack of historicity in the mythic trickster, both animal and human, will elucidate the transformation of the trickster from archetype to character.

Mythic, Folkloric and Literary Tricksters

The difference between mythic and folkloric tricksters and fictional ones hinges on the ahistorical nature of archetypes. Ralph Ellison articulates this difference in his essay, “Slip the Joke and Change the Yoke:” “The identity of fictional characters is determined by the implicit realism of the form, not by their relation to tradition. . . . Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted. . . . If symbols appearing in a novel link up with those of universal myth they do so by virtue of their emergence from the specific texture of a specific form of social reality.”⁴⁵ Ellison’s words suggest that because literary tricksters are authored, they have direct ties to specific times and spaces than archetypes, which exist on a large scale with no temporal specificity.

Folkloric and mythic trickster archetypes serve similar functions. They both function as character types rather than characters. As such, they are not represented as self-conscious, or aware of themselves in relation to others. Their existence also is not dependent upon a historical context. As types, they are deliberate exaggerations of certain human qualities and can exist in any place at any time.

However, folklore involves the beliefs of a subculture or people, whereas myth functions as something more. Susan Meisenhelder notes that myths “have a serious purpose and often embody ritual and theological ingredients . . . within myth is found

the ideological content that determines a sacred form of behavior.”⁴⁶ Characters in folklore centralize the role of the ethnic culture in which they exist. Folklore sometimes adapts myth to specific cultural contexts, making it less universal and more specific to a particular people. In the end, the folkloric trickster retains the freedom of an archetypal figure within a specific cultural context.

Well-known animal tricksters in the African American tradition like Brer Rabbit represent such culturally conditioned folklore archetypes. For example, the “Tar Baby” episode to which my second epigraph refers features Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, who are perennial rivals. Like most folktales, this one is morally instructive in the sense that the listener is expected to learn a particular lesson. Brer Fox envies Brer Rabbit and constantly tries to make him suffer. In this episode of their feud, Brer Fox constructs a figure out of tar, taking advantage of Brer Rabbit’s naturally inquisitive nature and pride to trap him. Brer Fox then ties Brer Rabbit to a roasting spit, only to have him escape. Brer Rabbit tricks Brer Fox into throwing him into the briar patch.

Craig Werner offers several interpretations of the lesson of this folktale in black culture: “The tar baby could evoke materialism or the white stereotypes of blacks (it is black, stupid, lazy, and smells bad). Similarly, the briar patch can be read as a figure for Africa, the African aspect of Du Bois’s double consciousness, the black community, the woods of the black belt, the ‘hood, etc.”⁴⁷ The story can provide multiple interpretations

⁴⁵ Ellison, “Yoke,” 57.

⁴⁶ Susan Meisenhelder, “‘The Whole Picture’ in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 155.

⁴⁷ Werner, *Playing the Changes*, 71-72.

within a cultural context, but those interpretations are not necessarily attendant upon a historical context. John Roberts asserts that “shortly after the appearance in print of the first animal trickster tales found among African Americans, scholars began publishing parallel tales from African traditions demonstrating that, in some instances, trickster tales of African Americans were developed around the same plots and situations as those found in African tales.”⁴⁸ The applicability of the lessons of the tales to the experience of free Africans and enslaved blacks in America shows that the folktales are not dependent on historical context for meaning.

Similarly, Asian American folktales containing mythic tricksters do not depend upon historical context for interpretation. The Monkey King’s antics have no corollary in history. In fact, several critics seek to prove the Monkey King story is actually an amalgam of trickster tales of the Asian region, which includes Japan and India. For example, in *Ramayana*, the Indian epic by the poet Valmiki, Hanuman, a monkey warrior, accompanies Rama, dethroned royal prince, on his journey to find his wife, Sita, whom rival forces have abducted. When his army reaches an ocean, Hanuman uses his transformative abilities to traverse it.⁴⁹ Both Hanuman and the Monkey share the ability to perform astounding transformations. Not only is such cross-pollination possible, given the contact between India and China through trade, but also Glen Dudbridge concedes that “it is Hanuman’s role as companion to a questing human hero, his resourcefulness, boldness and versatility that have suggested the parallel with [the Chinese Monkey

⁴⁸ John Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 17.

⁴⁹ *The Ramayana: A ‘Telling’ of the Ancient Epic*, ed. Larry Tominberg, 26 October 1999, www.globaled.org/curriculum/story2a.html.

King].”⁵⁰ If the essential actions of the protagonists of the story can be transplanted from one culture to another without losing significant meaning, then historical specificity is not essential to its interpretation.

Anthropomorphizing the Animal Tricksters

A key step in the transformation from archetype to literary character is anthropomorphizing the animal trickster. Ascribing human characteristics to the trickster brings a greater sense of historicity to the figure, setting it up for the final transformation to a literary trickster.

In the African American tradition, John, of the Old John-Massa stories, is a popular human folkloric trickster who possesses a greater historical context than previous mythic and folkloric tricksters I’ve considered. For example, in the folktale “Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money,” found in Zora Neale Hurston’s collection, *Mules and Men* (1935), John tricks Massa in a series of bets that play on Massa’s greed and eventually lead to his own demise.

Ole John bets Massa that he can beat him making money if Massa kills his horse. Massa kills Ole John’s horse. Ole John takes the hide, turns it into a fortune teller, and makes a fortune in town. Ole Massa kills his own horse, hoping for the same kind of material gain. He becomes the laughing stock of the town because in the course of trying to reproduce Ole John’s feat, he destroys his only mode of transportation. As punishment for John riding his grandmother in Massa’s buggy, Massa kills Ole John’s grandmother. In response, John once again bets Massa that he can beat him making money. Using his

⁵⁰ Glen Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 160.

fortune teller, John again amasses riches. Massa kills his own grandmother, but the town shuns him for this brutal act. Finally, Massa threatens to throw Ole John in the river. Ole John once again comes back to town to make a fortune. Massa meets his end when he bets he can make money if Ole John throws him in the river.

John represents an incarnation of the black slave driver from antebellum plantation life in America. Roberts explains that slavemasters made black foremen out of trusted slaves: “Drivers were given responsibility not only for regulating the pace of work, but also for enforcing the master’s rules in the slave quarters, punishing under the supervision of the master, doling out rations and supplies, and keeping the master informed on issues relating to his property, both human and nonhuman.”⁵¹ The fact that John is given a measure of responsibility shows he occupies the same intermediary role in the story as foremen did on the plantations. Moreover, John’s attempts at justice “served constantly to remind enslaved Africans of their identity as the exploited human victims of a system. . . . the tales revealed the master-slave relationship as one which justified trickster-like behavior.”⁵² Thus, John also represents a character defined in part by a specific historical and cultural moment.

There does not seem to be a human trickster analogous to John in the Chinese American oral tradition. In *The Golden Mountain: Chinese Tales Told in California* (1940), Jon Lee compiles a variety of tales that feature humans, but no transitional figure

⁵¹ Roberts, 49.

⁵² Ibid, 61.

such as John appears.⁵³ Many tales like “The Cunning Murderer ” have no specific setting that reveals an American context and do not reflect the circumstances in which many Chinese immigrants found themselves in America. This particular story depicts fighters who become bondbrothers, kill a king’s son and escape an execution. This has little relation to the life of many Chinese immigrants who spent most of their time laboring in mines or working the fields in the western United States.

Other tales feature ghosts who take the form of humans, but these tales do not invoke the lives of the Chinese immigrants in America either. For example, “The Shadow on the Wall” opens with the following words: “It may perhaps seem strange for one born in America, but in China it is a fact that everyone has heard about ghosts. Not only are ghosts a vital part of Chinese lives but they have influenced many people just as they have destroyed many people.”⁵⁴ Lee’s introduction implies that ghosts are not important to those who live in America. America is mentioned to form a contrast with China, where the rest of the story takes place. While Chinese immigrants most likely adapted their Chinese folktales to reflect their lives in America, it is very difficult to ascertain from materials available whether these tales contain a transitional trickster figure like the one found in African American folktales.

However, transitional figures like John suggest that historicity becomes more prominent the closer the trickster figures comes to being rendered in fiction. Moreover, such figures demonstrate the importance of ethnic culture in interpreting these figures.

⁵³ Jon Lee, comp., *The Golden Mountain: Chinese Tales Told in California* (San Francisco: California State Library, 1940). These tales were collected from informants who related stories they heard directly from older people.

⁵⁴)Lee, 1.

Both historicity and ethnic cultural contextualization will play a significant role in the manifestation of the trickster in early fiction.

The Literary Trickster

In addition to historical specificity, there are several characteristics that define the literary trickster in ethnic fiction. Literary tricksters possess a comprehensive kind of knowledge. They retain their own personal histories, the memories of the larger ethnic community as well and knowledge of the dominant culture's past. They are the repositories for what Manning Marable describes as "collective experiences, survival tales and grievances [that] form the basis of an historical consciousness," a consciousness that is different from members of the mainstream society and may form partial commonality among ethnic groups.⁵⁵ These memories include recollections of oppression, resistance by people of color and the use of cultural traditions to survive. In addition, these literary tricksters preserve ethnic cultural values in the face of efforts of assimilation on the part of the dominant culture. They may even be aware of the plight of other ethnic groups. Bonnie TuSmith argues that people of color share "a historical past forged out of 'colonization' and invisibility, in America."⁵⁶ As a result, literary tricksters may understand the circumstances of other communities of color.

Literary tricksters use their comprehensive knowledge to manipulate and navigate among cultures and critique them in the process. Unlike other kinds of characters,

⁵⁵ Manning Marable, "Beyond Racial Identity Politics: Towards a Liberation Theory for Multicultural Democracy," *Race and Class* 35, no. 1(1993): 115.

⁵⁶ Bonnie TuSmith, *All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 24.

literary tricksters are keenly aware of the societies that surround them. They often find themselves on the borders while simultaneously linked to communities. Often risking exposure, they nevertheless use their knowledge and unique position to exploit the assumptions that underlie cultural values in order to achieve their goals.

These characteristics are particularly important for tricksters in fiction due to the artificially constructed nature of this literary form. James Phelan maintains that characters in fiction function according to the wishes of authors: “Because literary characters are synthetic, their creators are likely to be doing something more than increasing the population, more than trying to bring another possible person into the world. They are likely to be increasing the population in order to show us something about the segment of the population to which the created member belongs.”⁵⁷ Literary tricksters are products of an identifiable author who deliberately places them in a particular historical and cultural moment to reveal ways in which the individual of color may deal with a world that has not significantly altered its treatment of members of ethnic groups.

However, the trickster does not appear fully formed onto the literary scene. The character develops from his/her emergence in early fiction to his/her appearance in later novels.

The Trickster in Early Twentieth Century Fiction

Before discussing the trickster in early African American fiction, a brief note on the trickster in slave narratives is in order. The slave narrative as a genre blended

⁵⁷ James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 14.

recollection and literary devices. Their authors often sought to expose the plight of enslaved persons to the reading public in the hopes of moving others to work for slavery's end and to advocate the humanity of Africans in America. Such authors depicted survival strategies of Africans in America. Because of the multifaceted nature of the slave narrative, the trickster, embodying its paradoxical nature, foreshadows some of the characteristics of the trickster in early African American fiction. In *Narrative of the Life of J.D. Green* (1864), Jacob D. Green relates an incident that demonstrates both the chaotic and preservative aspects of the trickster. When tearing his pants at a slave dance embarrasses Green, he takes revenge on those who delight in his misfortune by loosing the horses they brought to the dance. Since the horses belong to the planter, Green knows the slaves will be held responsible for their loss, and most likely, severely punished. Later that evening, upon hearing about his lost horses, the planter makes the whole group of slaves look for the horses and clean them up.

Clearly, Green's actions cause disorder on the plantation and among the slaves themselves. They also work to preserve the community. Green's actions provide the opportunity for some to take advantage of the chore of looking for the horses to escape. Living a free life elsewhere, they survive and make it possible for the community of blacks to continue to exist. William Andrews interprets Green's actions as those of true trickster, who "represents both the creative *and* destructive potential of freedom in the context of both the black *and* white community."⁵⁸ Thus, the trickster in the slave

⁵⁸ William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 210.

narrative represents an important precursor to the literary trickster in the African American tradition.

The trickster in early African American fiction is most clearly represented by Julius in Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), a collection of stories. A brief look at one of the Chesnut's stories will illustrate how Julius functions as a trickster within the context of a fictional work. "The Goophered Grapevine," first published in (1887), describes the first meeting of a trio of characters that become central in the collection. John and Anne, two northerners who relocate in the South during Reconstruction, meet Julius on the road in front of a plot of land John contemplates purchasing. Julius humbly suggests John may want to reconsider because the vineyard is "goophered," or bewitched. He proceeds to relate its history.

During slavery, Mars Dugal enlisted the aid of Aunt Peggy, a local conjure woman, to help protect his grape crop from pilferers. He failed to warn Henry, his new slave, about the hexed vines. As a result of eating the conjured grapes, Henry becomes young and spry as a chicken, but with the onset of winter, he returns to his elderly state. Mars Dugal decided to take advantage of this marvel, selling him to unsuspecting slavemasters in the spring, and buying him for substantially less in the winter. One day, a Yankee stranger convinces Mars Dugal to follow his advice to increase his grape crops by digging close to the vines and covering them with lime. Eventually, the vines die, and so does Henry.

At the conclusion of the story, Julius advises John not to buy the vineyard to avoid Henry's fate, as he would not be able to distinguish between the "goophered" vines and safe vines. Ignoring Julius' warnings, John buys the vineyard and enjoys much

financial success exporting wine to the North. Since the ostensible reason behind Julius' attempt to dissuade John is to protect his own small wine business and his home in the vineyard, John compensates Julius for his lost income by hiring him as a coachman.

Julius manifests all of the key characteristics of a literary trickster. He demonstrates his self-awareness by understanding the historical circumstances that place individuals like himself at the mercy of migrants from the North like John. He recognizes the cultural worlds represented by his antebellum slave experience and Reconstruction reality. Eric Sundquist notes that Julius engages in a "rational form of conjure," which Chesnutt locates "within the ambiguous borderland between slavery and freedom, and more specifically the assimilating cultural borderland between the world of slaves (and their ancestors) and the world of masters."⁵⁹ Julius knows that John and Anne perceive him as just a flunky, so he uses that knowledge to manipulate his hosts and procure things like food and employment for his family. From behind this mask, Julius also highlights the greed and avarice of the slave masters and migrant Northerners. Julius exposes these connections, connections that John does not make because he lacks a trickster's awareness.

Julius also demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge. As a person on the margins, Julius keenly comprehends the world of John and Anne. bell hooks asserts that "black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations 'special' knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. . . its purpose was

⁵⁹ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1993), 374.

to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society.”⁶⁰ Craig Werner ascertains the comprehensive nature of Julius’ knowledge of white world: “Double voicing intimates Julius’ awareness that his white audience is in fact less unified than it appears. Employing many of the standard images associated with the 19th century sentimental fiction addressed primarily to a female audience, . . . Julius addresses not only John but also Annie.”⁶¹ The same cannot be said of John and Anne, who lack knowledge outside their cultural circle. They do not act on Julius’ cultural critique of their part in perpetuating the economic disparity between ex-slaves and former slave-masters. So Julius’ knowledge addresses the gradations of difference in the cultural sphere of John and Anne.

Finally, Julius’ storytelling promotes an alternative cultural narrative within the context of African American culture. John Roberts asserts that after slavery, “the trickster’s actions revealed black feelings of rebelliousness against the values of the system which denied opportunities for self-definition.”⁶² Through his stories, Julius rebels against the oppression in Reconstruction that is carried over from slavery.⁶³ Sundquist argues that Julius’ storytelling represents a coping mechanism, “a denial that the destruction of African American culture was complete or that the master’s

⁶⁰ bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 165.

⁶¹ Craig Werner, “The Framing of Charles W. Chesnut: Practical Deconstruction in the Afro-American Tradition,” *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 9 (1991): 14.

⁶² Roberts, 21.

⁶³ For more information on the similar structures of oppression in slavery and Reconstruction aimed at limiting blacks’ labor and movement, see William Cohen, *At Freedom’s Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1991.

proscriptions were not recognized and resisted. Part of that resistance lies in the very telling of the tale, the ongoing act of cultural cognition, remembrance and creation that the orally transmitted stories have become."⁶⁴ Thus, Julius' tricksterism is defined by a sense of responsibility in articulating the African American experience of slavery and Reconstruction. His narrative articulates the African American voice in response to the stereotypes of the 19th century. By doing so, he introduces a new aspect into the narrative of Reconstruction. His narrative, then, is one based on preserving the African American memory of the experience of bondage.

Slavery and Reconstruction focused Chesnutt's efforts to produce a character that simultaneously preserves and extends the African American experience, but different historical and cultural circumstances prevent the emergence of a similar figure in the Chinese American literary tradition. At the turn of the century, writers like Sui Sin Far created characters that acknowledged the dual heritage of Chinese Americans, but such figures did not develop into tricksters. Possibly, the priority of refuting stereotypes of Chinese Americans by creating positive characters was paramount.

For example, Sui Sin Far's "The Americanizing of Pau Tsu" (1912), focuses on Wan Lin Fo, an eighteen year old Chinese immigrant whose successful business activities suggest a knowledge of American and Chinese culture, as the narrator describes:

He learned to speak and write the American language with such fluency that he was never at a loss for an answer, when the white man, as was sometimes the case, sought to pose him. . . . New Year's Day, or rather, Week, would also see him, business forgotten, arrayed in national costume of finest silk and color 'the blue of the sky after rain,' visiting with his friends, both Chinese and American,

⁶⁴ Sundquist, 383.

and scattering silver and gold coin amongst the youngsters of the families visited.⁶⁵

Wan Lin Fo demonstrates cross cultural knowledge in his conscious effort at learning English to conduct business. He knows he needs this ability to succeed according to American standards. Furthermore, he keeps bonds with both Chinese and American friends, demonstrating a cross-cultural knowledge.

Despite his cross-cultural knowledge, Wan Lin Fo does not develop into a literary trickster because he has no self-awareness. When Wan Lin Fo brings his Chinese wife over and tries to get her to assimilate, Aday Raymond, his American friend, scolds him for his error: "You're a Chinaman, but you're almost as stupid as an American. . . . You wanted your wife to be an American woman while you remained a Chinaman. For all your clever adaptation of our American ways you are thorough Chinaman."⁶⁶ Despite his knowledge of American culture, Wan Lin Fo remains grounded in Chinese culture. The narrator admits that "Wan Lin Fo was a true son of the Middle Kingdom and secretly pitied all those who were born far away from its influences."⁶⁷ Without the ability to critically negotiate his relationship to both American and Chinese culture, Wan Lin Fo cannot be a literary trickster.

Why did Sui Sin Far stop short of making Wan Lin Fo fully capable of promoting an alternative narrative that challenged the imposition of American culture? Part of the answer may lie in the cultural circumstances of the time. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong

⁶⁵ Sui Sin Far, "The Americanizing of Pau Tsu," in *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, ed. Shawn Wong (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996), 66.

⁶⁶ Far, 73.

⁶⁷ Far, 68.

suggests that during the early 1900s Asian American writers were obsessed with positive characterizations of Chinese Americans: “Defending and explaining the Chinese to white readers became a preoccupation of ‘ambassadors of goodwill’: highly educated, often aristocratic, Asians who used their knowledge of the English language and American culture to dispel negative images about their ethnic group.”⁶⁸ Sui Sin Far portrayed Wan Lin Fo primarily as an upstanding member of society to combat the negative impact of Chinese exclusion acts and anti-Chinese movements on the society’s perceptions of the Chinese.

The priority for such writers to produce a positive Chinese characterization may have taken precedence over creating trickster characters who would critique American society. Such writers were engaged in paving the way for assimilation, which many thought would lead to greater tolerance and acceptance by white society. Assimilation was touted as a goal for Asian immigrants, and probably laid the foundation of the later “model minority” thesis, whereby Asians are used as exemplars of an ethnic group who successfully blends into mainstream culture without calling attention to injustices. Literature at this time was in the service of making it possible for Asians to live in peace. As a result, Sui Sin Far did not impede this mission by creating a character that would criticize American society and jeopardize the process of assimilation by the Chinese.

However, tricksters take another turn in development in novels by African Americans and Chinese Americans in the later 20th century. Notable historical and cultural shifts may help explain the proliferation of the trickster in this moment in ethnic

⁶⁸ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “Chinese American Literature,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45.

literary history. Jeanne Rosier Smith cites moments of cultural crisis as one reason for the trickster's increased presence.⁶⁹ The eruption of wars created an opportunity for African-Americans to alter their treatment by the dominant society. C. Vann Woodward contends that World War I sparked large-scale resistance in black veterans who felt they had earned equal treatment on the battlefields of Europe: "The war-bred hopes of the Negro for first-class citizenship were quickly smashed in a reaction of violence that was probably unprecedented. . . . When the Negroes showed a new disposition to fight and defend themselves, violence increased."⁷⁰ Woodward also points to pressure generated by World War II, where the United States' fight against Hitler's genocide based on racism prompted critical examination of America's domestic racial policies.

The world wars had an equally jarring effect on the experiences of Chinese Americans. World War II in particular sparked a crisis about identity. Executive Order 9066 allowed the United States government to inter the Japanese on the West Coast, and Chinese immigrants feared being mistaken for the Japanese. Ronald Takaki argues that the Chinese "remembered how they had previously been called 'Japs' and how many whites had lumped all Asians together. Fearful they would be targets of anti-Japanese hate and violence, many Chinese shopkeepers displayed signs announcing, 'This is a Chinese shop.'"⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jeanne Smith, 9.

⁷⁰ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 114.

⁷¹ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 370-371.

Therefore, from the time of the 1950s onward, both African American and Chinese American writers may have been more inclined to meditate on the ways in which society treated them. These historical events may have prompted closer looks at identity for people who face discrimination. Such events may have also led to consideration of ways of surviving such treatment. Thus, later 20th century writers often look at attempting to render more complex portrayals of characters to reflect the multiple spheres of influence people of color encounter.

Later Twentieth Century Manifestations of the Literary Trickster

The large-scale historical events of the early 20th century cause significant cultural shifts for the rest of the century. Twentieth century writers use the trickster character to grapple with the ramifications of the cultural upheaval that follows. While several twentieth century African American writers, such as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed continue a tradition of creating significant trickster characters in the realist novel, Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin represent both the literary ancestors and current purveyors of the trickster tradition in Chinese American literature.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) expands Chesnut's literary trickster by depicting two poles of trickster sensibilities and their subsequent cultural narratives. At one end of the spectrum are characters that reflect an indigenous modern sensibility. At the other end of the spectrum are characters that embody a more postmodern perspective. Such differences become clearer when we compare the grandfather and Rinehart in Ellison's novel.

The grandfather demonstrates literary trickster qualities that reflect an indigenous modern sensibility. He promotes an outlook of the world that acknowledges different

experiences, while retaining a commitment to the preservation of black culture. The grandfather's self-awareness encompasses the limits placed on him as an African American in the segregated South. Furthermore, his cross-cultural knowledge of both white and black Southern culture and his alternative narrative become clear just before his death. In his final confession, he passes on a model for dealing with the bicultural experience of blacks in America to his grandson: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. . . . Learn it to the younguns."⁷² What exactly is the grandfather advocating? He promotes a mask of assimilation while maintaining a commitment to resistance in the black community. Such an outlook is only viable if one has intimate knowledge of white society. So, the grandfather urges the protagonist to use comprehensive knowledge to manipulate the system to the advantage of the black community.

One could argue that the grandfather advocates a split consciousness that prevents achieving an integrated self. However, later in the novel, the protagonist suggests that the grandfather's advice originates from a complex sense of self. After the riot in Harlem, the protagonist finds himself in the underground haven remembering his grandfather's advice: "Did he mean we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible

world. . . . And here's the cream of the joke: Weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?"⁷³ The protagonist touches on the possibility that the grandfather advocates a negotiation of identity whereby blacks could reconcile their bicultural existence without denying black cultural ties. Ella Pearson Mitchell writes that "one need not necessarily lament being born and having to live among two cultures, of which one's own is considered lesser. . . . the 'two souls' of which Du Bois spoke are a reality only if one has engaged in the suicidal enterprise of equal identification with two or more groups and their worlds. It is one thing to understand and be competent and fluent in two or more worlds. It is quite another thing to attempt to be effectively linked with all of them at the core of one's very being."⁷⁴ The grandfather succeeds in "live in the lion's mouth" most of his life because he is competent. The protagonist fails repeatedly because he does not follow his grandfather's advice. He does not understand how to balance his interests in the black and white world. The grandfather's narrative does not attempt to equally link black and white culture. Rather, it advocates a mode of sense-making that simultaneously recognizes the different cultures and has an interest in preserving black culture. Thus, the grandfather's narrative reflects a mode of reconciliation against the backdrop of African American culture.

At the other end of the spectrum, Rinehart's comprehensive knowledge and the lesson he teaches the protagonist points to a postmodern sensibility. After the police gun

⁷² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, Random House, 1952), 16.

⁷³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 575.

⁷⁴ Ella Pearson Mitchell, "Du Bois' Dilemma and African American Adaptiveness," in *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 270-271.

down Tod Clifton in the street, the protagonist dons a pair of dark sunglasses and assumes Rinehart's identity. As he moves through Harlem, the protagonist realizes the different identities of Rinehart: "Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both mind and heart? What is real anyway? . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast, seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it."⁷⁵

The protagonist's assumption of Rinehart's identity reveals the manipulative quality of Rinehart's masking. For Rinehart, there are no moral sanctions. While Rinehart takes on various identities like the reverend, which helps preserve the community, his actions serve only to benefit himself. Motivated by his own self-interest, Rinehart inevitably profits from the masking, whether through money or the adoration of others. He does not extend a narrative of community, but a narrative of chaos, as the protagonist contemplates after he has been mistaken for Rinehart on several occasions: "Sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to contemplate."⁷⁶ In fact, the protagonist ultimately abandons Rinehart's way of being precisely because it is not helpful to community preservation and causes chaos. Because Rinehart is dispassionate about his masking, I can only conclude that the way Rinehart chooses to see and be in the world is guided solely by the principle of self-interest. Therefore, while

⁷⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 498.

⁷⁶ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 499.

his freewheeling approach to identity may seem liberating and unrestricted, it actually boils down to a single, reductive worldview.

Despite his range of tricksters, Ellison overlooks the role gender plays in trickster characterization. All of his trickster characters and sensibilities originate from a male perspective. In contrast, Toni Morrison addresses the category of gender in her depiction of the trickster character in the novel.

On one hand, Morrison elaborates on an indigenous modern sensibility in Pilate by inscribing a feminist perspective in *Song of Solomon* (1977). Pilate's outlook on the world is greatly influenced by her experience as a woman with links to the black community. When the narrator reveals Pilate's decision to change her life after being ridiculed, her brand of feminine self-awareness becomes evident: "When she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore."⁷⁷ Pilate realizes that she is driven out from the communities she tries to settle in because she does not fit society's expectation of a woman. Women's hair, often called their crowning glory, is used by society to characterize women as objects of beauty. The act of cutting off her hair is a symbolic rejection of society's conventions that limit women. It is also an assertion of Pilate's conscious decision to manipulate the society that sanctions those conventions of gender.

However, this sensibility does not result in complete severance from the black community. It lays the foundation for Pilate's own brand of gendered interaction with

the community. After cutting off her hair, the narrator describes Pilate's further change in attitude: "She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships. . . . She was a natural healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediate a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them."⁷⁸ Pilate's sensibility is adaptable enough to allow her to 'hold her own' with both men and women. It also reflects her commitment to the welfare of the community by motivating her to help mediate conflicts.

Such a combination can be characterized as women's ways of knowing. According to Mary Belenky et al, some women cultivate a constructivist mode of knowing, where women integrate knowledge they feel intuitively with knowledge gained from others: "Constructivist women want to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men—the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. . . . [They] aspire to work that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others. . . . They speak of integrating feeling and care into their work."⁷⁹ In working for the preservation of the community from a center that is consciously feminine, Pilate embodies a worldview that acknowledges ambiguities and difference yet seeks reconciliation.

⁷⁷ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1977), 149.

⁷⁸ Morrison, 149-150.

⁷⁹ Mary Field Belenky et al, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 137, 143, 152.

On the other hand, Morrison also depicts a feminine postmodern sensibility in *Beloved* (1987). *Beloved*'s sense of self appears more fluid than Pilate's. *Beloved* acts as a multifaceted symbol in the novel. This comes through when she first appears on Sethe's doorstep:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. . . Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. . . . Women who drink champagne when there is nothing to celebrate can look like that: their straw hats with broken brims are often askew; they nod in public places; their shoes are undone. But their skin is not like that of the woman breathing near the steps of 124. She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands.⁸⁰

Beloved has murky origins, which helps to obscure any definitive identity. She looks like a woman down on her luck, but her skin suggests she may be otherworldly. She lacks ties to any place, let alone a commitment to cultural values. At the same time, as the spirit of the child Sethe kills to prevent her return to slavery, she operates as the symbol of the horror of slavery and its impact on black enslaved women. The multiplicity of her identity implies that in representing so many different things, she actually represents nothing. Phillip Novak asserts that "Beloved is in fact almost wholly without attribute as a character; she is more a mode of functionality than a personality, a kind of cipher in the text."⁸¹ That lack of character allows her to assume identities based on the expectations of others. Sethe thinks *Beloved* is the benevolent spirit of the child she killed, and Paul D thinks she is some evil spirit sent to torment Sethe. One could also argue that *Beloved*, like Rinehart, represents a kind of self-interest, for she situates herself to gain access to

⁸⁰ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1987), 50.

⁸¹ Phillip Novak, "Signifying Silences: Morrison's Soundings in the Faulknerian Void," in *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-envisioned*, ed. Carol Kolmarten, Stephen Ross and Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 211.

Sethe and exact revenge on Sethe for killing her. In both instances, *Beloved* utilizes a fluid sense of self.

While Ellison and Morrison show the continuum of trickster sensibilities, Ishmael Reed provides an example of trickster cultural critique. In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Pa Pa La Bas, a neo-hoodoo detective, represents a trickster with an indigenous modern sensibility who promotes a cultural narrative of reconciliation. Intimate knowledge of African American and white culture gives Pa Pa La Bas the needed foundation to critique both spheres of influence while remaining grounded in black culture.

On one hand, Pa Pa La Bas critiques essentialism in purveyors of a brand of the black aesthetic. In a conversation at a party, Pa Pa La Bas chastises Black Herman, an occultist, for mimicking the superiority found in the dominant cultural narratives. “You are no different from the Christians you imitate. Atonist Christians and Muslims don’t tolerate those who refuse to accept their modes.”⁸² Pa Pa La Bas implies that such organizations seek to validate only one form of black cultural expression by rejecting challenges. Such a critique challenges what David Mikics describes as “the notion of blackness as a ‘transcendental signified,’ an authoritative, static and univocal symbolic presence.”⁸³ When Pa Pa La Bas further questions Black Herman about his total embrace of all things black, he asserts that a sense of multiplicity is missing from his narrative on black aesthetics: “Where does that leave the ancient Vodun aesthetic: pantheistic, becoming, 1 which bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can

⁸² Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner and Shuster, 1972), 34-35.

⁸³ Mikics, 20.

hold?”⁸⁴ Thus, Pa Pa La Bas’ critique brings attention to one of the little narratives excluded by the master narrative of Black Herman’s aesthetic.

On the other hand, Pa Pa La Bas critiques Western cultural superiority through his unmasking of the Wallflower Order, a pun on the Ivy League, which some characterize as a prime purveyor of dominant cultural standards. The Wallflower Order seeks to repress cultural difference, and Pa Pa La Bas unmasks this strategy in a long explanation that spans several pages. Gates refers to this recitation as an allegorical representation of the dominance of Western cultural values and the repression of African ones. It is through this extended explanation that goes back thousands of years that Pa Pa La Bas weaves a story that depicts the way in which Western cultural values and African cultural values have engaged each other. He relates how members of the Wallflower Order sought to keep Jes Grew from finding its text. Jes Grew, the so-called plague that causes its victims to dance and sing represents black cultural expression. Pa Pa La Bas’s story represents a challenge to the propaganda spread by the Wallflower Order about Jes Grew, promotes an alternative narrative that acknowledges the history of Jes Grew and puts both histories in context. He puts this story together, acting, as Gates argues, as “the figure of the critic, in search of the text, decoding its telltale signs in the process.”⁸⁵ The search signifies his desire to reconcile two narratives that are closely linked. Pa Pa La Bas decodes the mysteries of Jes Grew and the Wallflower Order, within a matrix of African American cultural values.

⁸⁴ Reed, 35.

⁸⁵ Gates, *Signifying*, 223.

Unlike the African American trickster, the Chinese American trickster figure has only recently translated into contemporary literature. There are several factors that may explain his/her late appearance in fiction. As already noted, during the turn of the century, Asian American writing generally consisted primarily of works aimed at refuting racist claims in the popular culture. During World War I and World War II, Shawn Wong notes that the literary production of Asian Americans were severely hampered by immigration exclusion laws and a culture that restricted inhabitants of Asian descent: "Camp journals, literary magazines, newspapers, and even private letters were controlled and censored by camp authorities. . . . Filipino immigrants in the twenties and thirties also lived under the same restrictive laws as the Japanese."⁸⁶ Thus, historical circumstance halted the development of Asian American writing during the early 20th century.

Other Asian American works reject a complex identity that characterizes a literary trickster figure during the mid-1950s. For example, in John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Ichiro, the Japanese American main character, does not attempt to negotiate between American and Japanese culture. He rejects American culture by refusing to join the armed forces during World War II. He renounces his Japanese heritage by distancing himself from his father. Jeffery Paul Chan et al assert that Ichiro "cannot be defined by the concept of the dual personality that would make a whole from two incompatible parts."⁸⁷ In other words, Ichiro does have the kind of sensibility that critically addresses

⁸⁶ Shawn Wong, introduction to *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996), 11-12.

⁸⁷ Jeffery Paul Chan et al., "An Introduction to Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literatures," in *Three American Literatures*, ed. Houston Baker (New York: MLA, 1982), 215.

major cultural influences on his psyche. He just rejects both cultures without interrogating the circumstances under which he may be defined by them. Okada's depiction is praised by some Asian American critics because it supports the impossibility of negotiating between two distinct cultures of which an individual may have no first-hand knowledge or which consistently confines him/her to a negative stereotype. However, this observation also prevents the development of a trickster figure, who is defined by his/her ability to recognize, manipulate and negotiate cultural spheres.

Moreover, according to Elaine Kim, when more diverse narrative forms did appear, like Louis Chu's novel *Eat A Bowl of Tea* (1961), such works primarily addressed "intensified identification with their own ethnic communities, where they could find sympathy, understanding, and psychic sustenance."⁸⁸ Jinqi Ling argues that Chu depicts interference in an arranged marriage where the woman allegedly has an affair in order to highlight "the family association's practical considerations: they serve to strengthen the primordial ties in an ethnic enclave that must be cohesive enough to resist racial hostility from the outside."⁸⁹ Because novels such as Chu's were focused on rendering Chinese experience from a Chinese point of view, they do not seem to depict characters that engage or challenge the assumptions of the dominant society.

Contemporary Asian American and African American fiction published during the 1980s and 1990s begins to address the complexities in identity, a move which lends

⁸⁸ Elaine Kim, "Asian American Writers: A Bibliographical Review," *American Studies International* 22, no. 2 (1984): 52.

⁸⁹ Jinqi Ling, "Reading for Historical Specificities: Gender Negotiations in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*," *MELUS* 29, no.1 (1995), 42.

itself to the incorporation of tricksters. While Ellison, Morrison and Reed all utilize different aspects of the trickster's qualities, Wideman and Naylor provide insight into the motivations behind their trickster figures as they encounter an increasingly complex world. In *Reuben* (1987), Wideman depicts two tricksters and their thought processes in great detail, and reveals the motivations behind their behavior. Naylor explores the decision making process in her trickster figure, faults and all in *Mama Day* (1988). Kingston and Chin are not only the most engaging examples of novelists who depict Chinese American tricksters, but they also are two of the few Chinese American writers who engage issues of race and cultural negotiation by adapting African American strategies of racial discourse. They go one step beyond Wideman and Naylor, for their tricksters negotiate a more multicultural setting. Chin uses three tricksters as examples of the exploitation that can occur from the margins in *Gunga Din Highway* (1994). In *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1987), Kingston creates a modern trickster with direct links to a mythic trickster. Both the African American and Chinese American writers create novels that provide an engaging environment for the trickster.

In this chapter, I have presented my approach to the trickster in the novel. Departing from other trickster studies that describe the trickster using an archetypal model or a matrix of characteristics, my approach engages trickster sensibilities and behavior as a continuum while remaining aware of the historical and spatial context of the realist novel. My trickster paradigm focuses on the literary trickster in the realist novel that extends the function of the mythic and folkloric tricksters. As previously noted, there is a legacy of the trickster that stretches from mythic tricksters in African and

Chinese folklore through writers from the early and late twentieth century.

Contemporary African American and Chinese American authors continue to use the trickster to investigate the impact of race relations on ethnic groups. Subsequent chapters of my study consist of close readings of novels by John Edgar Wideman, Gloria Naylor, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston in an effort to illuminate the personalities and behavior patterns of tricksters, and elucidate how these tricksters embody the racial strategies advocated by the respective authors. Through their tricksters, each author raises issues such as definitions and the preservation of ethnic cultural values, pressures from the dominant culture and unique pressures related to gender. Collectively, these authors present tricksters that address these issues in different ways with varying results.

CHAPTER II
“NO NATURAL MAN”: BLACK MALE TRICKSTERS IN JOHN EDGAR
WIDEMAN’S *REUBEN*

There are plenty of people who live in that shadow world. We can’t say for sure whether they are demented or whether they are mystics; we really don’t know. And they are not going to tell us. They are like the classic fool, the jester, the trickster.
—John Edgar Wideman

You ain’t no natural man come to Samantha’s door, is you?
You some kind of hoodoo or trickster, ain’t you?
—John Edgar Wideman, *Sent For You Yesterday*

John Edgar Wideman’s novels often explore the lives of blacks in a variety of circumstances, and many of his works focus on the lives of black men. *Reuben* (1987) is no different, for through his depiction of two male tricksters, Wideman reveals a racial strategy whereby diverse black men establish nurturing relationships and sustain a sense community in an effort to ward off the debilitating effects of discrimination and racism. In the popular imagination, black men occupy two poles. They are either associated with the negative side of urban America or considered assimilated members of the middle and upper class. In other words, there are black men like Puff Daddy and black men like Colin Powell. These traditional models of black men do not recognize a continuum of black male personas, nor do they allow for the potential interaction between the Puff Daddys and Colin Powells of the world. Black men are consistently portrayed at either end of the spectrum, often with little depth of character. Such images are one-dimensional representations of African American men. In response, Wideman depicts

two tricksters that represent “the brother on the block” and “the brother in the suit.” The trickster is especially “suited” to Wideman’s project because of his ability to understand society’s construction of confining portrayals of African Americans and use trickster agency to create definitions for himself beyond these stereotypes. Through his tricksters, Wideman promotes the notion of a community of black men to challenge reductive popular images.

From the backdrop of the black neighborhood of Homewood (a shadow world like that alluded to by Wideman in the first epigraph), emerge two black male tricksters who possess distinct perspectives of the world. Reuben, a community lawyer, has the ability to transform into a variety of identities. This gift reveals an indigenous modern personality that reconciles competing cultures while maintaining a commitment to the preservation of the black community and its cultural values. Reuben is grounded in Homewood, but he also spends a great deal of time in the white world and in other cultural arenas. By navigating, manipulating and challenging societal expectations, Reuben gains knowledge of different cultures. His stories, advice and interior monologues promote an alternative scenario and emphasize the value and preservation of community.

Like Reuben, Wally, a black basketball recruiter, is also able to adapt to his cultural environment, but he has the tendency to see the world principally in terms of his self-interest. Wally moves easily from streetwise homeboy to official of the university, demonstrating his familiarity with both the white and black worlds. Ultimately, Wally uses all roles to give himself an edge. Defined primarily by an aggressive black masculinity, Wally’s personality complements his career as a basketball recruiter who

exploits recruits in order to receive a paycheck. Because he considers all other cultural forces as threats to his masculinity, he neither pursues nor values cross-cultural knowledge. While Reuben meditates on the preservation of the community, Wally fantasizes about killing white men. Because Wally embraces the multiplicity that comes with the ability to adapt but interprets the world primarily according to his own desires, he possess a postmodern sensibility.

The women in Wideman's novels are not tricksters like Wally and Reuben, but they play a vital role. Toodles, the only female character with trickster qualities in the novel, falls outside the scope of my trickster paradigm because she resembles mythic African tricksters. But Toodles and Kwansa together highlight the limits of the tricksterism represented by Wally and Reuben.

Wideman's interest in the relationship between black men and an often-hostile society is a consistent theme in his fiction. In his early novels, he contemplates the theme of alienation with regards to black men. In *Hurry Home* (1970), Cecil Braithwaite, Wideman's protagonist, feels excluded from the 'American Dream' and disconnected from the black community around him. This sense of alienation mirrors Wideman's own perceptions early in his career, when he saw himself disassociated from an African American literary tradition. In an interview with James Coleman, Wideman concedes that he did not have "the sophistication and knowledge to be able to pick and choose, because I was only familiar with one tradition [the Western literary tradition]."¹

¹ John Edgar Wideman, "Interview with John Edgar Wideman," interview by James Coleman, in *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, ed. Bonnie TuSmith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 66.

Doreatha Mbalia adds that “*Hurry Home* marks Wideman’s highest acceptance of the Euro-centered perspective: the capitalists’ manipulation of their own people—all hype, no substance.”²

In novels like *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983), Wideman depicts an array of black male characters, including responsible husbands, questionable con men, and young black boys engaged in friendship. Keith Byerman notes that Wideman’s dramatization involves “the breaking down of discursive boundaries” to get at the different experiences of black men.³ Wideman himself echoes this sentiment when he writes: “People’s lives resist a simple telling, cannot be understood safely, reductively, from some static stillpoint, some universally acknowledged center around which all other lives orbit.”⁴ Wideman attempts to get beyond mere summaries of the lives of men and delves into the reasons for their choices and the forces that impact their decisions.

The latest stage of Wideman’s work, which includes *Reuben* (1987), represents an exploration of both alienation and diversity and their impact upon black men and the relationships between them. Using *Reuben* and *Wally*, Wideman interrogates two ways in which black men may respond to the challenges of their lives.

While scholars of Wideman’s work have not investigated the trickster figure in *Reuben*, they have addressed the role of the intellectual in the novel, which has significant ramifications on our study of the trickster. Both the intellectual and the

² Doreatha Mbalia, *John Edgar Wideman: Reclaiming the African Personality* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 86-87.

³ Keith E. Byerman, *John Edgar Wideman: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), x.

⁴ John Edgar Wideman, “The Architectonics of Fiction,” *Callaloo* 13, no. 1 (1990): 43.

trickster have the opportunity to interpret the community. Much like a trickster who reconciles contending forces while maintaining a commitment to ethnic cultural values, James Coleman's intellectual acts as a bridge between the white world and the black community.⁵ Conversely, Mbalia contends that the intellectual fails to connect with the community: "It is as if Wideman believes the intellectual has the power—an abracadabra power—to create reality."⁶ Mbalia's interpretation of the intellectual illuminates the kind of trickster who attempts to create his/her own reality. In any case, both critics provide insight on the unique power that tricksters and intellectuals possess in Wideman's texts.

Wideman's novel falls within a tradition of contemporary works by black male writers that explore race and masculinity. Clarence Major's *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975) interrogates the impact of fragmented experience represented by 20th century American life on the consciousness of his black male protagonist. William Melvin Kelley's *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* (1970) explores the theme of diversity within the identities of black men in its depiction of twin brothers, one, a Harvard-educated yet racially unconscious black man, and the other, a streetwise, racially aware black man.

Wideman's novel uses a non-linear and sometimes ambiguous plot to relate the experiences of several interesting characters.⁷ The major narrative threads center on

⁵ James Coleman, *Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 115.

⁶ Mbalia, 94.

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, references to the novel by John Edgar Wideman are quoted from *Reuben* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987).

three characters: Reuben, the community lawyer, Wally, a hip basketball recruiter, and Kwansa, a struggling single black mother.

Reuben is the neighborhood attorney to whom Homewood residents turn when they have legal troubles. From his small trailer, he dispenses legal and personal advice. In lengthy interior monologues, Reuben recalls his past as a valet for a white fraternity house at a law school, his mistreatment by its members for surreptitiously learning the law, and the tragedy that befalls him and Flora, a call-girl and Reuben's love interest. These inner conversations flow from the past to the present, from physical to the ethereal. At one point, Reuben reveals his feelings towards an incarcerated brother that may be real or imaginary. He also waxes poetic about topics as varied as the nature of knowledge, 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge and African folklore.

Wally is significantly less esoteric. Reuben's friend and client, he recruits players for the predominately white university that employs him. On various trips, Wally engages in fantasies usually focused on killing white men. His loathing stems from his own past experience as a college basketball player at a predominately white university, where he encountered discrimination and felt alienated. Wally also recalls his past and his childhood friendship with Bimbo, who later becomes a successful, though paraplegic R & B singer who wants to end his life. What brings Wally to Reuben is the more pressing matter of his current employer's accusations of embezzlement.

Kwansa, the most significant female character, has her own troubles that bring her to Reuben. She comes to Reuben for aid in keeping custody of her son, Cudjoe. Her son's father and her estranged boyfriend, Waddell, has been an absent parent, but suddenly wants custody of the child. Between Reuben getting the case and doing

something about it, the reader learns of Kwansa's history: her troubled relationship with her grandmother, her pregnancy, and her relationship with Waddell. When Waddell abducts the child, Kwansa finds comfort with Toodles, the woman in whom she confides.

By the end of the novel, Wideman ties these disparate story lines together to a certain degree. The book ends with Reuben's arrest for impersonating a lawyer, Wally's confession of murder or fantasies of murder, Toodles' murder of Waddell and Reuben's collection of Cudjoe from child protective services.

In an effort to contribute to the existing critical discussion of these unique characters in Wideman's fiction, I explore the personalities and behavior of Reuben and Wally as tricksters.

Reuben

Reuben's personality incorporates several different impulses against the backdrop of his obligation to the black community. As the community lawyer, Reuben moves between cultural worlds and acts as an advocate for his people. He challenges various cultural narratives and proposes alternatives through stories and interior monologues with himself.

From his very first appearance in the novel, Reuben calls to mind certain mythic trickster figures. Reuben possesses transformative abilities that mirror the shape-shifting talents of Esu. Descriptions of Reuben change with the observer. Whites see Reuben as a flunky, while blacks in Homewood view him as a hero. Other lawyers describe Reuben as everything from moron to a wizard. Reuben reflects a complex personality, the type

described by Pauline Rosenau as one who “submits to a multitude of incompatible juxtaposed logics.”⁸

In addition to transformative abilities, Reuben also looks like the mythic Esu.

Note the narrator’s description of Reuben’s physical appearance:

Reuben was a small man. His face was long and his hands long, but Reuben never grew taller than the average twelve-year-old boy. That long head atop a puny body, the way he carried one shoulder higher than the other, reminded people how close Reuben had come to being a hunchbacked dwarf. . . . Reuben’s long bony face tapered to a point. From the splotched gray hair on his head to the splotched gray of his Vandyke beard, the face narrowed drastically. (1-2)

Students of African folklore will notice the similarities between the appearance of Reuben and the Yoruban trickster, Esu-Elegbara, in that they are both small of stature with large heads and small bodies. Reuben’s long head atop a small body recalls photographs of African art in Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit*, which show Esu as a figure with a tapered head and a small body.⁹

The physical attributes shared by both Reuben and Esu function as a metaphor for knowledge. John Roberts asserts that in African American folklore, the trickster possesses “a physical stature smaller than that of his dupes against whose physical power the trickster had to match wits for his survival.”¹⁰ In the case of both Esu and Reuben, small stature decreases physical intimidation and highlights intellectual prowess. Bodily deformities of both tricksters also function as a sign for wisdom beyond mortal

⁸ Pauline Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 55.

⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1984).

¹⁰ John Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 35.

understanding. Reuben has one shoulder higher than the other, and as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has noted, “Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because . . . he keeps one [leg] anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world.”¹¹

Such physical characteristics indicate comprehensive knowledge that encompasses other worlds. Through his meditations, Reuben takes the reader from the realm of action into the realm of consciousness. For example, after Kwansa leaves his office, Reuben slips from one realm to another:

Reuben studied the document, committing names and dates to memory. On a sheet of lined, yellow paper, below his client’s name, the date, he copied other names and dates from the official paper. . . . Not that he’d forget. The prodigious well into which he dropped everything he needed to know was still unclouded. He could still hear the little splash when some new piece of information entered the cold, clear pool in the shaft’s gut. He could feel the subtle disturbance, the ripples expanding outward, the illusion of light as deep in the well a black shimmer cut across the blacker surface. (13-14)

Reuben goes from describing the physical world of pens, paper and documents to the esoteric realm of his memory. Instead of clear descriptions, he uses lyrical language and metaphor to compare his memory to a well with clear water and the addition of new knowledge to the ripples across water. The reader knows that Reuben has some expertise in the material world, for people come to him for assistance, but glimpses into his meditations on his own psyche reveal his knowledge of his own consciousness.

Reuben is also knowledgeable of worlds of the past and present. In one of his meditations, he effortlessly goes from a description of the past to one based in more contemporary times. Reuben starts by contemplating a story of the Dogon, an ethnic

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

group of south-central Mali, and their sage, Ogotemmel, a man who claimed authority from the Dogon priests of Sanga. He drifts from this oral tale to a 20th century soul song by Aretha Franklin. “Aretha’s song danced from nowhere into his daydream. Uptempo, electronic funk, tambourines ringing, sounding brass. Into the quiet of that old African’s story shaped by hands and eyes and breath” (18). Reuben links the cadence of the story to the rhythm of Aretha’s song, eventually blending the two. In this way, he easily moves from the distant African past to a more contemporary American time period.

These various psychic impulses are to a great extent governed by Reuben’s commitment to the black community and black cultural values. But what are these black cultural values? The historical conditions of slavery, Reconstruction and segregation conditioned blacks to adapt the African sense of community to their African American experience. Ward Nobles asserts that such centralization of community reflected an African worldview based on the belief “that the community (tribe) made, created or produced the individual” and is epitomized in the phrase, “I am because we are; and because we are, therefore, I am.”¹² Just as survival of tribes in Africa depended on sustaining the group as a whole, the interdependence of the community strengthened black Americans who could not always depend on the larger society for support. Notions such as the primacy of the community represent a cultural value, the kind that Reuben is committed to preserving.

Reuben is committed to preserving black cultural values because he also exhibits a well-developed racial identity. In describing the highest stage of black identity

¹² Ward Nobles, “African Philosophy: Foundations of Black Psychology,” in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald L. Jones (Berkeley: Cobb and Henry, 1991), 55.

development, W.E. Cross notes that individuals like Reuben possess “a sense of belonging and social anchorage” while engaged in “transactions with people, cultures, and situations beyond the world of Blackness.”¹³ Such prodigious psychic resources allow Reuben to move among the residents of Homewood as well as the denizens of the courts, all the while catering to the needs of the black community.

Reuben’s commitment to such black cultural values challenges Mbalia’s assertion that his intellectual mediations are merely “magic which in the long run make him less accessible to the community.”¹⁴ The black community’s appreciation for Reuben demonstrates its acknowledgement of Reuben’s commitment: “Reuben helped people in trouble. People with pesky problems, people in big, bad trouble with the law. Nobody else in Homewood would do what Reuben would do for the little bit of money he charged. . . . for as long as anybody could remember Reuben had been performing these tricks for the poor and worse than poor in Homewood” (2). Residents of Homewood understand Reuben’s responsibility to the community.

Ruben enacts this commitment by moving between cultural worlds and acting as an advocate for his people. He explains his role to Wally in one of their many conversations: “I’m a sort of go-between. I stand between my clients and their problems. I intercede, let them step aside awhile. I take the weight. For a while at least ease a bit of their burden. I invite my clients to depend on me, lean on me” (198). Wideman has

¹³ W.E. Cross, “The Stages of Black Identity Development: Nigrescence Models,” in *Black Psychology*, ed. Reginald L. Jones (Berkeley: Cobb & Henry, 1991), 93.

¹⁴ Mbalia, 95.

acknowledged Reuben's role in an interview with Coleman: "It's his job to untangle people from the negative effects of the dominant culture, to protect people . . . from these invidious forces that are all around them."¹⁵

More often than not, Reuben's commitment to the black community motivates his legal work. One of his clients, Mr. Tucker, is hired by anonymous white men to cart away bricks from old houses. The police arrest him for stealing because the houses belong to the city and the cleanup was not authorized. In the wake of Reuben's own unfortunate incarceration, the narrator recalls Reuben's response to Mr. Tucker's plight: "Reuben knew the truth when he heard it and knew how futile it was. . . . Brick dirt and plaster dust and not saying a word to anybody and big so it was like they'd carted one of those half-wrecked houses out of Homewood and stuck it in the corner of a cell. Would probably still be sitting there today in that cell, mute, beat, if Reuben hadn't found him and led him home" (190). Reuben feels empathy for Mr. Tucker, and while the text does not say how Reuben gets him out of jail, it does stress that he is instrumental in Mr. Tucker's release. It is these types of legal errands that characterize Reuben's efforts on behalf of the people of Homewood.

Despite his good intentions, Reuben sometimes shows shades of Esu's chaotic side in the unintended consequences of his actions. Reuben is indirectly responsible for Toodles' murder of Waddell because he overextends himself and does not give proper attention to Kwansa's case. His schemes also sometimes tragically backfire on him, as when the fraternity boys discover his deception. Reuben hints at these unexpected results

¹⁵ Wideman, "Interview," by Coleman, 69.

when he elaborates on his role in the community to Wally: “When I retire from the picture, things are often better. And if they’re not, I’m available to blame. . . Reuben on the battlefield, in the smoke, on the firing line” (198). Like Esu, Reuben may make things worse before he can make them better and sometimes fails altogether.

Reuben retains his commitment to the black community even when his tasks take him into the realm of the white world, a trend that can be traced back to Reuben’s first trickster act. As a valet, he uses the racist assumptions of the white fraternity boys he serves to gain access to the legal knowledge of the university. While this position places Reuben squarely within the white world, he has definite intentions of using his position to his advantage. Reuben explains to Flora, a call-girl he falls in love with, his reasons for using subterfuge: “For a while longer I need to use them. I’m dependent. Not so much the money as the job. Where it places me. The access it affords me to the university. . . . That’s why I slave at Alpha Omega. I’m learning through keyholes. When they’re not around I avail myself of their books, notes, et cetera” (82). In this initiation of the role he plays throughout the novel, Reuben deliberately deceives the frat boys not only for communal empowerment, but also for the personal satisfaction of putting one over on the “white boys.” Reuben’s deception also reveals his ambivalence toward a white world that, in his mind, holds the keys to power and denies access to them. He tricks the frat boys by playing to their own racist stereotype of the solicitous darky, while stealing knowledge in the tradition of the folkloric trickster whose actions were based on real black people acting under the siege of oppression.

Reuben seeks legal knowledge in order to use it on behalf of his people. The narrator explains: “Reuben took pains to learn things because information could be

forged into weapons and what he didn't know would always be used against him" (76). Such knowledge is a tool of authority, and as such, Eric Sundquist notes that it is "linked to the power to enslave and, alternatively, the power to . . . redeem one's community."¹⁶ If Reuben can gain such knowledge, he can use its powers to protect his people from injustice.

However, Reuben runs a significant risk if his true motives are discovered. Reuben's quest for knowledge would be interpreted as a affirmative act, and ever since the end of legal slavery, Cornel West notes that "a proud, self-affirming black person who truly believed in the capacity of black people to throw off the yoke of white racist oppression and control their own destiny usually ended up as one of those strange fruit that Southern trees bore."¹⁷ Nevertheless, Reuben attempts to gain this cross-cultural knowledge.

Unfortunately, Reuben's greatest fears are realized when the fraternity members discover his deception and subsequent 'theft' of knowledge. In punishing Reuben for his 'crime,' the fraternity members seek to squelch Reuben's desire for such knowledge. Initially, the fraternity boys believed Reuben was a trusted domestic, a flunky that did not pose a threat. When Reuben crosses over into their knowledge-laden world, they seek to 'put him back in his place.' They whip Reuben in order to teach him a lesson. The punishment imposed by the fraternity boys alludes to whippings employed by slaveholders for transgressions by slaves. During slavery, such whippings were designed

¹⁶ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1993), 106.

¹⁷ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 96.

to break the body and spirit, destroying any sense of agency and dignity, especially for black men. By subjecting Reuben to this particular chastisement, the frat boys symbolically re-impose a historically subordinate status upon him and seek to kill the spirit that motivated him to cross cultural boundaries in the first place. The incident also represents Reuben's first conscious acts as a trickster, and he is exposed. Not only does he receive lifelong physical and psychic scars, but Flora, the love of his life, and his good friend, the piano player, are both killed.

Reuben's response to the incident proves that the punishment is ineffective. While the punishment at the hands of the frat boys eradicates one avenue of knowledge, he explains to Wally that he finished learning the law as an act of revenge. He goes on to become a productive force for the people of Homewood in the white courts.

Reuben also traverses other cultural boundaries as well. Just as Mbalia suggests that "the African, centered in his own culture, may extract the positive elements from cultures other than his own," Reuben also knows Jewish culture.¹⁸ His understanding of the intimate details of the lives of the Jewish merchants on Fifth Avenue allows him to link Jewish and African American cultures through the shared experience of being ethnic minorities in America. Both cultures centralize memory and remembrance. West suggests that the Jewish experience of extreme, systematic oppression parallels the experience of African Americans: "There was a *better* age when the common histories of oppression and degradation of both groups served as a springboard for genuine empathy

¹⁸ Mbalia, 16.

and principled alliances.”¹⁹ Reuben’s cultivation of relationships with the merchants is not without a certain amount of ambivalence and resentment. He knows that the names they call him may not be meant in the most flattering way. Yet he continues his interaction with the merchants because his survival in the streets depends upon the depth and breadth of his knowledge of other groups of people.

As a result of encountering other cultural arenas, Reuben challenges cultural codes that make grand truth claims and exclude other kinds of knowledge. His discursive strategy is multilayered. On one level, he reveals incongruities and omissions of existing cultural codes. On another level, he offers an alternative in the form of stories that acknowledge black experience. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson asserts that blacks like Reuben involved in such deconstruction and reconstruction must be adept in “familial or *testimonial* and public, or *competitive* discourses—discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectations” of those around them.²⁰ Reuben’s stories complement the ethnic community and challenge master narratives.

Reuben counters the authority of legal and journalistic cultural narratives by revising the depiction of incarcerated black males. Both discourses function as sites of authority and legitimization that exclude alternative values. Rosenau describes legal discourse as “a system of self-contained, codified rules in some way independent of arbitrary and compromising . . . factors.”²¹ It promotes rules that exist to eliminate

¹⁹ West, 71.

²⁰ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Meridian, 1990), 120-121.

²¹ Rosenau, 125.

ambiguity and seeks to eliminate doubt and validate versions of events that arrive at a single, incontrovertible interpretation. Similarly, journalistic discourses use language to produce an authoritative version of events. Rosenau notes that journalism, through its function as representational discourse, validates its own power to “represent, to speak for others, to re-present their views in the public sphere.”²² News articles bear the authority that, Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes, has traditionally been ascribed to writing in general: “Reason was privileged, or valorized, over all human characteristics. Writing . . . was taken to be the visible sign of reason.”²³ Because of this authority, incidents that appear in print take on the significance of fact.

Reuben encounters the defining power of juridical and journalistic accounts when he sees a lengthy article on his own unfortunate incarceration in the local newspaper. The story recounts his arrest for impersonating a lawyer and his handling of legal issues for the inhabitants of Homewood:

A Reuben chained by words, Reuben locked up forever. . . .

. . . may have been an imposter or simply a do-gooder. In either case, he didn't lack for clients. . .

Most of his clients were poor persons who either could not afford the fees of a regular attorney or were unsure about how to engage one. . .

According to many who know him, he has been adept at mediating disputes, handling paperwork, and untangling problems with government bureaucracies. . .

You don't necessarily have to be a lawyer to do such work. . .

²² Rosenau, 98.

²³ Gates, *Signifying*, 130.

. . . his lawyerlike representations either helped or hindered the matters at hand. . .

. . . he was finally arrested as a phony and jailed overnight. . .

Unquestionably, he provided considerable assistance—some of it legal or quasi-legal in nature—to many of his appreciative neighbors. . .

The possibility that for years he may have provided misguided advice to many who sought his help, however well intentioned, cannot be lightly dismissed. (191, 194)

The media ultimately discredits his efforts on behalf of the residents of Homewood.

While most of the news story presents a balanced view of Reuben's activities, the conclusion presents opinion as fact. The conclusion makes a value judgement, stating that his transgression is more serious than any positive result from his legal intervention. The appearance of Reuben's arrest in the newspaper bolsters the validity of that conclusion, as the media has traditionally defined itself as a disseminator of fact. So if one believes everything one reads in the newspaper, then the integrity of Reuben's character is seriously in question.

The article also reflects the authoritative function of the juridical account. The legal discourse characterizes Reuben as a criminal, as he is "arrested as a phony," and by doing so, figuratively and physically incarcerates him by negating any positive depiction of him. Although legal statements purport to support the innocent until proven guilty, they actually linguistically confer guilt. They brand men who serve time with the stigma of inmate and confine them to the identity of convict. Furthermore, the label of criminal alienates them from other members of society, linguistically categorizing them as outsider and other. Black men in particular are characterized as incorrigible threats to

society and stripped of personal agency, control and humanity.²⁴ By consistently promoting such ideas about black men, the legal accounts impose a literal and figurative lock-down that encourages hopelessness and helplessness.

Reuben exposes the flaws of such legal statements and undermines their authority. Many of the oppressed and the marginal feel the law is arbitrary and often unfair. Reuben explains to Wally how making a way for his clients challenges its supremacy: “My clients get by, get through. A sort of sleight of hand. This paper, this plea—now you see it, now you don’t. Presto-chango—the bear goes over the mountain, the mountain comes to Reuben—whatever it takes. I understand how the law works; my clients’ business gets done” (197). By revealing to Wally the loopholes in the law he uses to help his clients, Reuben dismantles the notion that the juridical statements represent a complete, binding, unerring set of rules.

Having exposed the shortcomings of legal accounts, Reuben constructs what critic James Coleman describes as a “positive counter-illusion,” an alternative interpretation through his story of the surreal relationship with his possibly imaginary brother.²⁵ Wideman does not provide concrete evidence whether or not Reuben’s brother is real. While Reuben’s brother remains a shadowy figure who only enters the text through the

²⁴ Wideman further illuminates this idea when speaking of his own brother’s incarceration: “It’s not the number of doors or their thickness or composition or the specific route from the visitors’ annex to the prison, not the clangorous steps and drafty, dank passageways and nightmare-size lock and keys. . . it’s the idea, the image of myself these things conspire to produce and plant in my head. That image, that idea is what defines the special power of the prison over those who enter it. . . subjected to the same sorts of humiliation and depersonalization. Made to feel powerless, intimidated by the might of the state” (*Brothers and Keepers* [New York: Penguin Books, 1984], 51-52).

²⁵ James Coleman, *Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 120.

prism of Reuben's memory, he clearly symbolizes black men in general. The narrator describes Reuben's brother as a charm, "not a bullet, not a miniature whistle or pencil but a man, severely stylized, African style, all torso and brow and arching crown" (65). A lack of detailed, realistic characteristics and the identification with a distinctive African style underscores the charm's function as a symbol of black men. The use of 'brother' could mean a biological relationship or the more vernacular usage denoting a close relationship between black men.

Reuben's story about his brother promotes the re-inscription of the bonds between individuals, bonds that are linguistically destroyed by the judicial account in its de-emphasis of humanity of black men in the criminal justice system. The narrator relates Reuben's daily ritual, and his feelings towards his brother, and by extension, black men who are physically or figuratively imprisoned: " To see the charm Reuben had to pull his watch from his vest pocket and to check his watch he had to drag out the charm. Since the watch was linked to a chain and the chain pinned inside his vest and his vest fastened around his mid-section, the container of his heart, lung, liver et cetera, Reuben sometimes thought of the charm wearing him" (65). While chains are a negative symbol of incarceration in the legal narrative, Reuben's chains symbolize the bond between his brother and himself. The intimacy of the bond is illustrated by the degree to which Reuben is entangled in the chain and its proximity to his vital organs. The chain imagery suggests that without this bond he would cease to exist. By inverting the meaning of the

chain imagery and countering the alienation of the law, Reuben establishes them as bonds key for survival and crucial for community between men.²⁶

Reuben's counter-illusion also advocates a link between incarcerated and free black men. Rather than avoiding getting involved, Reuben encourages compassionate empathy. He finds meaning in his own brother's situation because "he needed his brother to complete a Reuben larger than both of them. He needed his brother's eyes to see around corners, just as his brother needed Reuben's oversize, crippled fingers to worry the clasp each morning" (66, 68). He implies that the survival of black men inside prison is linked to the fate of those outside, and vice-versa. Wideman expresses his sentiment in speaking of his own incarcerated brother: "I could never run fast enough or far enough. Robby was inside me. Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him."²⁷ Reuben revises the image of incarcerated black man from isolated prisoner to valued member of a concerned group, countering legal accounts that society at large does not care about the fate of the incarcerated.

In addition to the media and judicial master narratives, Reuben challenges a Western intellectual discourse based on an extreme individualism represented by Eadweard Muybridge, a 19th century photographer. Reuben describes Muybridge as an egomaniac who "complicated his name with extra *e*'s and *a*'s because that's how he guessed Anglo-Saxon kings had spelled Edward" (15). Linking him with Anglo-Saxons

²⁶ This kind of community among men is explored by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, when Paul D is sent to a chain gang and the members keep each other alive through silent moral support (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1987).

²⁷ Wideman, *Brothers*, 4.

implies a particular cultural code, one obsessed with origins, arrogance and the belief that, by using reason, individuals can completely explain the world around them. The name also has allegorical significance to some extent. “Eaedweard” is an echo of “weird” and “Muybridge” is an echo of the personal pronoun “my.”

The individual figures prominently in Muybridge’s system of knowledge, for everything lies in his/her control. While he attempts to freeze time with his photographs in an effort to provide fragments of certainty, when Reuben encounters him in a dream, he insists that time is at the mercy of individuals: “Like good Christian soldiers, we drive it upward and onward, worshipping duration, process. We’ve debased time. It’s no longer a playground we share with the gods; it’s a commodity we buy and sell, get and spend, save and lose” (63). According to Muybridge, individuals give time its meaning and significance.

But not all individuals are equal in the Western narrative that Muybridge represents. While reason defined the civilized white person, many 19th century philosophers rationalized that people of color did not possess reason. Sentiments such as those offered by Thomas Jefferson as early as the 18th century argued that blacks did not possess the same endowments of mind as whites.²⁸ The *Africana Encyclopedia* notes that by the middle of the 19th century, “even those who insisted that all human beings had the same rights largely acknowledged that nonwhite people lacked either the intelligence or

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1954), 143.

the vigor of the white races.”²⁹ Like many 19th century individuals, when Muybridge privileges the individual, he does not necessarily include people of color in that category.

Reuben mocks Muybridge’s soulless rationalism for its seeming lack of any kind of empathy. Reuben imagines that Muybridge would claim that Reuben never suffered the outrage of incarceration because no one with reason would confirm his experience. To provide an alternative to Muybridge’s version of events, Reuben uses the black folk tradition of storytelling to “develop a constructive myth of black culture and personal history that allows him to help black people.”³⁰ Storytelling depends on a sense of communality between the storyteller and the audience. It parallels the dynamic of call and response, which, according to Craig Werner, “emphasizes the connection rather than the difference between the artist’s and the audience’s sense of reality.”³¹ Like call and response, storytelling is successful when storyteller and audience share a common culture and can understand the cultural references within the story. Reuben uses this communality to communicate “the repressed history encoded in the mask that the white audience accepts as reality” in his stories, which assert “an alternative to the historical understanding of the dominant myth.”³²

In his stories that revolve around Africa, Reuben promotes communalism. He retells the myth of Osiris to Wally, where a woman takes years to restore her son’s body

²⁹ *Encyclopedia Africana*, s.v. “slavery.”

³⁰ Coleman, 129.

³¹ Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernist to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 165.

³² Werner, *Changes*, 69.

after it had been torn to pieces. With the restoration, seasons return to the earth. The story centers on preservation of family, a group bound together by concern, in the face of disintegration. The woman restores her family by restoring piece by piece the physical body of her son. By emphasizing her efforts to reconstitute her family, Reuben's story advocates hope, perseverance, faith and the rewards of agency for the community in the face of hostility from the dominant culture.

The African contextualization is significant because it gives even more meaning and resonance to this story to the experience of blacks in America. Marion Berghahn suggests that Africa in stories offer African Americans "a positive image of themselves" and "some protection against the soul-destroying impact of racism."³³ African folktales also depend upon accretion, or expansion based on the addition of details, while in Muiybridge's view, motion represents simple, isolated acts. African Americans could take the lesson from African folktales, and supplement them with details from their lives in America. In this way, Reuben offers a communal, ethnically specific alternative to Muiybridge's individualistic discourse.

As Reuben's stories, meditations and speeches show, he is driven by his commitment to the black community. His psyche blends several impulses within the context of black cultural values. His life's work is to serve the residents of Homewood. Even though Reuben may not always succeed, the lessons of his stories counter discourses a hostile host culture. While Reuben reconciles cultural forces and meditates

³³ Marion Berghahn, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1977), 31.

on the preservation of the community, Wally tends to see the world principally in terms of his self-interest and engages in fantasies where he satisfies his own desires.

Wally

Wally is more than Reuben's client. Like Reuben, Wally can change his identity and move between cultural spheres. More than a foil, Wally is quite a different sort of trickster than Reuben. While Reuben reconciles cultural influences, Wally neither pursues nor values cross-cultural knowledge. He moves between cultures to satisfy his desires. Unlike Reuben, who meditates on the preservation of the community, Wally fantasizes about killing white men to alleviate his rage and anger at the world.

Wideman instills key trickster traits in Wally, whose malevolent use of his ability to transform links him to the darker aspects of the mythic Esu-Elegbara. This is evident in the narrator's description of Wally's penchant for masking when he travels:

Gradually he learned to be an efficient packer. He could go for days out of one folding carry-on and a briefcase. In the bag would be an elegant junior exec, a baggy-tweed assistant prof, a hip cookie just this side of pimp and gangster, college boy jeans, T-shirt and sandals. Disguises in a way. And part of the game was the fun of fooling people. . . . No one knows. No one cares. Wally packs in order to make impressions. Impressions are what's called for. All anybody wants to know, to deal with. . . . Wally can go along with the program, but what makes him happier is an edge, a way of getting over. Secrets. (32, 33-34)

Wally's disguises suggest not only a change in appearance, but in identity, and the range of identities shows his versatility. Unlike Reuben, who uses his transformative ability in service to the black community, Wally takes on different identities in order to gain an advantage over other individuals. His transformation also implies that self-interest takes precedence over the welfare others, suggesting a more sinister aspect to his masking that

mirrors the darker side of Esu-Elegbara, whom Erik Davis describes as a “malevolent being” with violent and lawless desires.³⁴

The sinister aspect of Wally’s psyche links him to other folkloric and mythic figures. Wally’s personality evokes the ndoki, or sorcerer in Kongo culture, described by Robert Farris Thompson as lacking a social conscience and acting selfishly.³⁵ Wally’s bad attitude also mirrors the black bad man of folklore. John Roberts describes the ‘bad nigger’ as “a champion of violence” who “killed not merely in self-defense but from a sadistic need and sheer joy.”³⁶ The folkloric bad man and the ndoki describe individuals who often act at the expense of others, and Wally shares their indifference.

Such self-interest on Wally’s part is complemented by a masculine antagonism. Wally defines himself first and foremost as a man engaged in conflict. In recounting Wally’s college basketball days, the narrator reveals this tendency in Wally: “He needed action. Needed to go against some other body. That’s who he was. That’s what being a jock all these years had done. He needed to beat on somebody, have somebody lean on him, try to kick his ass. Then Wally could get it on. One-on-one. Mano a mano contact. His pride at stake. His life at stake. For real” (162). In order to exist, Wally needs to exhibit his masculine prowess in adversarial contact. His personality reflects the correlation between competition and manhood that William Grier and Price Cobbs describe: “[Boys] learn early that to express a certain amount of aggression and assertion

³⁴ Erik Davis, “Trickster at the Crossroads: West Africa’s God of Messages, Sex, and Deceit,” *Gnosis* Spring, 1991: 26 October 1999, <http://www.levitv.com./figment/trickster/html>.

³⁵ Thompson, 107.

³⁶ John Roberts, *From Badman to Trickster: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 173-174.

is manly. Every playground, every schoolyard is filled with boys fighting and attacking, playing at being grown up.”³⁷ A significant portion of Wally’s core consists of establishing himself as a man through antagonism.

Such antagonism colors Wally’s interactions with others. In Wally’s mind, everyone is out to emasculate him. When describing a break up with a girlfriend, Wally characterizes the split as a battle that he wants to win. On a business trip, when a stewardess asks if he wants a pillow, Wally is rude to the woman. Rather than acknowledging the failure of a relationship or declining the pillow from the stewardess, Wally transforms these scenes into opportunities for confrontation. Although these examples feature Wally’s interaction with women, the ramifications of his antagonistic personality are more far-reaching. When Renée Olander asks whether Wally should be regarded primarily as a misogynist, Wideman replies: “I think he is a very dangerous person, a very unhappy person, and I wouldn’t want to necessarily get close to him—man, woman, or child—and that’s part of the problem.”³⁸ Wideman highlights the fact that Wally views everyone as an adversary.

The antagonistic nature of Wally’s personality is underscored by a pronounced ethnicity. Nowhere does the impact of race manifest itself more than against the backdrop of the college basketball court. Fueled by racial discrimination, Wally transfers conflict onto the basketball court that pits black men against white men. He uses this

³⁷ William Grier and Price M Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 60.

³⁸ John Edgar Wideman, “An Interview with John Edgar Wideman,” interview by Renée Olander, in *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, ed. Bonnie TuSmith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 172.

setting to define himself as a *black* male. Anthony Lemelle asserts that “for black men, one element of basketball is to disrupt the total operation of the system. . . .Black men seek to destroy the power relationship” of whites over blacks.³⁹ Like others with a binary view of race, Wally exhibits “a need to confront the ‘man’ as a means of dramatizing, concretizing, or proving” his blackness.⁴⁰ Wally sees himself specifically as a black man in a hostile white world.

From Wally’s self-interest, masculine antagonism and simplistic notion of blackness emanates an interpretation of the world through the prism of his/her personal whims. He sees the world through the eyes of a wronged black man. His past encounters with basketball teammates and his harsh treatment of women represent behaviors that serve to bolster Wally’s positive sense of self. Since these behaviors define Wally’s masculine identity, they represent a ‘cool pose,’ a term used by Richard Majors and Janet Billson to identify a ritualized set of masculine behaviors: “Black males who use cool pose are often chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation or audience.”⁴¹ Based on establishing a purely oppositional masculinity, the cool pose describes a limited perspective, for “the ironclad façade of cool pose is a signature of true masculinity, but it is one-dimensional. If it fails, masculinity fails.”⁴²

³⁹ Anthony Lemelle, *Black Male Deviance* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995), 51.

⁴⁰ Cross, 206.

⁴¹ Richard Majors and Janet Manikin Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992), 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

However, Wally should not be viewed as an evil counterpart to Reuben.

Wideman himself suggests that Wally is meant to represent the perspective of many young black men who feel abandoned and persecuted by the societal circumstances that force Wally to define himself as he does: "A guy like Wally, what he doesn't do or does do is less important than that edge, that violent edge that he's forced to live on. Because that's destructive of his personal integrity; whether or not he strikes out and hurts someone else, he is already a victim, he has already lost."⁴³ Wally's disturbing qualities indicate a troubled young man, but it also points to the forces that make Wally violent, self-centered and destructive.

Wally's personality traits serve him well in his job as basketball recruiter, in which he divorces himself from his environment and its influence. Wally explains the solitary nature of being a basketball recruiter to Reuben: "You got no ties. You ain't part of where you land, you ain't really no part of what you left behind. You float. You're a floater. People begin to see you that way. Which amounts to not seeing you at all. Invisible. Prince of the air. Nobody expects you to stick around" (117). Wally does not want to be part of anything and shuns prolonged interaction with most people. This self-imposed exclusion mirrors the kind of individual, who has no "need to contribute to society" and "has no desire to assume responsibility or insist on his/her role as agent."⁴⁴

Wally also sees his job as an opportunity to exploit others. He feels no obligation to tell the families of these players of the abuse and corruption that prevails in university

⁴³ Wideman, "Interview," by Coleman, 74, 75.

⁴⁴ Rosenau, 55-56.

basketball programs. He lies to the parents and the recruits, and would do nearly anything to get them to sign a contract. The narrator goes so far as to characterize Wally's recruiting as betrayal. Wally is the ruthless recruiter because this vocation ultimately benefits him, even to the detriment of others.

The fact that his job keeps him moving from place to place may augment his detachment from individuals, but it also makes him adept in navigating cultures. The fact that his employers at the predominately white university keep sending him out on recruiting runs demonstrates his success at navigating this particular cultural terrain. Wally also remains of the black neighborhood. When he returns from his trips, he regularly stops at a local restaurant, the Hi-Hat, and easily falls into familiar conversation with Miss Myrtle, owner of the establishment. Wally would not be accepted as regular patron if he were an outsider. One could also argue that Wally, like Reuben, is anchored, if tenuously, in the black community, despite his ambivalence about both worlds.

Despite these traversals of cultural boundary, Wally is not very interested in gaining knowledge of other cultures beyond what he needs to navigate other cultural worlds. Wally disparages other cultural realities that do not fit into his own perspective of the world. For example, the only story that Wally liked in a literature class in his youth involved murder, something he will later fantasize about a great deal. Unlike Reuben, who values enlightenment outside of his cultural sphere, Wally roundly rejects it even though he has access to it. Wally measures the worth of such knowledge by its relevance to himself. In the case of the literature class, Wally surmises that since the stories are not about him and his struggle against the 'Man,' then they have no value. In other words, Wally is something of a monomaniac.

Given Wally's view of the world, it should not be surprising that he fantasizes as a means of dealing with oppression. His fantasies of murder represent his response to injustice he feels. Wally tells Reuben a story in which he meets a recruiter on a plane who kills a white man to get rid of his anger: "Dude claimed he'd killed a man. Wasted him in a public bathroom. Whamo. Just like stepping on an ant. Killed him a perfect stranger to get rid of the abstract hate poisoning his system" (119). Wally retells this story in different ways several times in the novel. He refuses to confirm or deny whether the murder actually takes place, and whether he, in fact, committed the murder. Equally important, the narrator never clears up this small, grisly mystery.

However, Wally bears a more than passing resemblance to the murderer: "A dude in a sharp, three-piece suit, dap, down. You know. A recruiter like me. College educated. Getting ahead in the white man's world. A ballplayer. An intelligent, smooth-talking, sensible person swearing to me he's just killed a white man in a toilet" (119). It is not a coincidence that these two men share physical appearance, occupation, and educational training. Such clues imply a connection between Wally and the recruiter. Wally's murderous alter ego in some respects resembles Reuben's 'brother.' Both are symbolically impersonal, and just as Reuben acts on behalf of his 'brother,' Wally may act on behalf of his psychotic alter ego. Whether Wally uses misdirection to talk about himself, or the murderer represents his alter ego, Wally and the murderer are intimately connected.

Neither the character nor the text ultimately proves or disproves the existence of these phantom characters because it is important that they exist at all. Wally's alter ego may represent Wally's past murder, the potential for Wally to murder, or Wally's desire

to do so. In all scenarios, Wally derives a sense of satisfaction from the fantasy murder. It becomes less important whether or not the murder takes place than Wally's overwhelming desire for it to take place to appease an overwhelming anger. Wally's use of the fantasies for the resolution of rage can be seen when he explains the concept of 'abstract hate' to Reuben:

Abstract hate means you don't got nothing against any particular person. You may even like or respect a particular individual but at the same time there's something about that person, 'the white part' you can't ever forgive, never forget. . . . Murder one of the motherfuckers you wanted to kill ever since they killed a piece of you. Nothing personal, you dig. Letting off steam in a way. You free yourself from the burden of what they've done to you. (116, 117-118)

Abstract hate reflects a rationalization of violent thoughts towards others and promotes acting on those violent thoughts. These violent propensities benefit Wally because they allow him to vent his rage.

Such fantasies of violence may allow Wally to feel better in the face of racism, but his responses do not necessarily represent healing coping strategies. Wally is an emotionally unstable, paranoid person. He has only one real friend in Reuben. He lives with the guilt of having killed a man, or wanting desperately to do so. Wally's fantasies fail to promote survival, for himself and for others.

Wally's persona, his approach to other cultural experiences and his fantasies demonstrate that he is a different kind of trickster than Reuben. Wally is motivated to fulfill his own desires. Because his personality is formed upon an adversarial masculinity and a reductive sense of ethnicity, Wally sees his life as a series of encounters where he must overcome the enemy. Given the chasm between Reuben and Wally, and my assertion that they are not representatives of good and evil within the text, why does

Wideman not only put these two characters in the same novel, but also have them form a friendship?

Relationships Between Tricksters

By having Reuben and Wally form a relationship, Wideman advocates a racial strategy based on the sense of community among different black men. He describes a relationship between the two radically different men that results in survival for both. By doing so, he challenges the traditional images that break the spirit of black men and the bonds between them. Wideman reveals that even men with differences can interact with each other in a healing and positive way and counteract the negative stereotype of anti-social groups of black men in society.

Wally and Reuben represent elements that are missing in each other's personality. Yet even with all his specific knowledge, Reuben lacks Wally's emotional experience of life. He does not rant and rave at the erroneous newspaper article describing his activities on behalf of the inhabitants of Homewood as a sham. He merely attempts to rationalize such experiences away. Wideman has noted that Wally provides an emotional compass for Reuben: "Reuben sees possibility in him; in fact, Reuben likes him, has a kind of affection for him, and in fact he turns to Wally when he's in trouble."⁴⁵ Yet, Wally lacks Reuben's penchant for deep philosophical thought. He tends to fly off the handle at any little thing. He fails to see his anger as a response to discrimination ingrained in American culture. After Reuben is incarcerated, Wally confesses to the possible murder of a white man in Chicago and admits that his anger has a negative impact on his

⁴⁵ Wideman, "Interview," by Coleman, 75.

emotional state. Through talking to Reuben, Wally realizes that external factors affect his reaction to situations that enrage him. Wideman has noted that “[Wally’s] not totally lost. . . he cares about this Reuben, and he’s smart enough to know that he’s missing something.”⁴⁶ Reuben provides that missing meditative process.

Wideman uses Reuben and Wally to form a community of black men based on their exposure to similar experiences. Reuben suffers at the hands of the fraternity boys because he overstepped his “bounds,” and Wally experiences discrimination as a basketball player at the predominately white university. They both encounter the attitude Wideman identifies in this reference to a dictum spoken by Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney: “Blacks have no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”⁴⁷ Both tricksters have been disrespected as black men and denied agency. Wideman elaborates that “the choice, difficult beyond words, to say yes or say no is made in light of the knowledge that in the end neither your yes nor your no matters. Your life is not in your hands.”⁴⁸ They share the sense of loss of control felt by black men who find they are subject to the whims of a society that barely sees them as human and more often sees them as a walking pathology.

Poised against a society that stigmatizes black men, Wideman also uses Reuben and Wally to demonstrate how to negotiate a world where choices for black men are few. In this sense, their trickster gifts are indispensable for Wideman’s project. While they

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁷ Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, 187.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 84.

use their abilities in different ways and for different ends, both Reuben and Wally understand the black man's relationship to the world at large because of the trickster's ability to understand the very construction of culture and the images it produces. They realize that black men have been confined by images that deny them agency. They also realize that they must use society's own racist expectations to achieve their goals. By being aware of the popular images of black men and consciously working around them, Wally and Reuben provide models of survival for other black men in their encounters with white society.

By creating a community between two black trickster men, Wideman also adaptable model of survival that addresses the myriad of circumstances in which black men find themselves: "The point is there is a kind of continuity, that sort of rainbow of faces, and types and kinds. [People who question the idea of a continuum of black men] have their own idea of who the black man is and what the black experience is. Somebody who is really engaging that issue has to take in Colin Powell as well as the many brothers who're in prison or who're suffering as the oppressed at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. . . I try to look at the whole continuum."⁴⁹ Equally important and inextricable is black consciousness, for Wideman explores the trickster from the inside out, rather than solely examining the cultural forces that bombard them. Wideman concedes, but does not necessarily celebrate, that American society produces both Wally and Reuben, who have vastly different approaches to life.

⁴⁹ John Edgar Wideman, "John Edgar Wideman," interview by Rebekah Presson, in *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, ed. Bonnie TuSmith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 108.

Wideman spends a great deal of the novel following the exploits of these two male tricksters, but he incorporates Toodles and Kwansa into his story to illuminate some of the limits of their tricksterism.

Toodles and Kwansa

While Toodles possesses trickster traits, she is not a trickster like Reuben and Wally, and as such, she falls outside the purview of my trickster paradigm. She is more like mythic tricksters. Yet, Toodles and Kwansa highlight the limits of the male tricksterism of Reuben and Wally.

Toodles embodies several characteristics common to tricksters. She possesses agency and can transform her appearance, for the narrator describes her as “one who wiggles out of her softness like a snake, shedding its skin fifty times in a day” (208). While on-lookers think Toodles is a crazy woman, Kwansa sees her as a fount of wisdom. Toodles seems to have the ability to modify how others apprehend her. One could also argue that Toodles transforms herself by enacting both masculine and feminine expectations. She both nurtures and defends Kwansa.

Despite these key trickster traits, Toodles falls outside the parameters of my model because she resembles an African mythic trickster more than a literary trickster. Wideman fails to imbue Toodles with lengthy interior monologues and explications of past life that reveal her sensibility as he does with Reuben and Wally. Toodles is more like Esu, in that she appears on the scene, impacts the situation, and leaves just as inexplicably. She does not seem to be affected by historical and cultural circumstances, which can be seen in her role as a permanent fixture in the Blue Velvet, a Homewood bar: “Toodles holds nothing back. Her shit out front for you to see. Today. Yesterday.

Tomorrow. Holds nothing back and gives nothing away either. Because whatever happens it's always Toodles sitting there on her stool" (208). Toodles is one of those unchangeable aspects of the Homewood landscape, unlike Reuben and Wally who adapt to several cultures.

While Toodles is not a literary trickster like Reuben and Wally, she and Kwansa successfully highlight the failure of the male tricksters to apprehend a distinctly feminine experience of the world. Even with his wisdom and familiarity with the legal system, Reuben fails to anticipate the abduction of Kwansa's child because of his masculine focus. Kwansa criticizes Reuben's reliance on the rules of law over her maternal intuition about the dangers facing her son. Reuben is so concerned with resolving her custody case through the legal system that he assumes Waddell will operate within that system. Kwansa does not take the legal system seriously until she receives papers from the sheriff's office. While Reuben continues to rely on the rule of law, Kwansa remains wary and continues to worry about the safety of her son during her interview with Reuben. When Cudjoe is abducted, she curses herself for not following her female intuition. By emphasizing that Reuben is a man, Kwansa suggests that his masculine point of view prevents him from validating her female intuition.

Conversely, Toodles, Kwansa's girlfriend, acts in a way that acknowledges Kwansa's maternal concerns. Kwansa consults Toodles when she sees the futility in confronting Reuben. She finds comfort in Toodles' words because Toodles acknowledges how she feels as a mother. Coleman observes that Toodles' words provide

feminine consolation: “Toodles’ participation in Kwansa’s life gives her the female empathy she needs desperately.”⁵⁰ Masculinity lacks this feminine aspect.

Wideman creates these male tricksters to expand the conception of the personalities of black men and challenge reductive images of black men in the popular imagination. In allowing Wally and Reuben to be friends, he suggests that those with destructive approaches to the world should not be abandoned. Those with perspectives that are aimed at the preservation of the community should continue to reach out to them. However, by concentrating on the black male trickster experience, Wideman underplays the kinds of perspectives black female tricksters may develop as a result of engaging a hostile environment. Gloria Naylor examines this void in trickster discussion in her novel.

⁵⁰ Coleman, 134, 135.

CHAPTER III
"MORE WISE THAN WICKED:" BLACK FEMALE TRICKSTERISM IN GLORIA
NAYLOR'S MAMA DAY

"A true conjure woman. . . . it ain't about right or wrong or truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge."

--Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

"My grandmother was like the matriarch I saw what women would do for each other. In my own life, when there's a problem of any nature, I turn to a woman. Your female friends are the ones you have the longest history with, for the most part, because they understand; they understand."

--Gloria Naylor

Like John Edgar Wideman, Gloria Naylor is disturbed by negative images of African Americans and recognizes the potential for the trickster figure to act as a model to address racism and discrimination inherent in these images. While Wideman focuses his attention on black men, Naylor depicts three female tricksters who each use their trickster gifts differently and behave according to different motives. She advocates a racial strategy based on the reconciliation of traumatic memories as a means of survival. The trickster is key to her approach, because it possesses the adaptability needed to harmonize disparate experiences and even paradoxes that make up the lives of African Americans. In promoting such a strategy, Naylor also challenges a utopian feminist vision of communities of women in *Mama Day* (1988). This vision homogenizes women's experiences and fails to link the destinies of women and men. Naylor's strategy promotes the diversity of women's communities as well as the preservation of the black community as a whole.

Naylor's depiction of the continuum of trickster women's experiences involves conjure and tricksterism. Conjure may refer to practicing natural healing methods or summoning supernatural power. It may also involve the determination of meaning, for conjurers are known to have second sight, which implies the ability to discern. This discernment is linked to interpretation, for Lindsay Tucker suggests that "what is often denoted as second sight or precognition is actually an acute awareness" of meaning.¹ Both conjuring and tricksterism involve interpretation, for tricksters explain the world through the way they see and act in the world and conjurers use their second sight to discern and explain. Conjuring and tricksterism also have positive and negative applications. Conjurers can heal or they can use their power to harm, just as tricksters can help a situation or cause more chaos by their presence.

Naylor seems particularly interested in the way in which conjure women engage in trickstersim. Naylor grapples with traditional representations of female characters that strictly define women as 'good,' in the sense of the Good Witch of the North, and 'evil,' in the sense of the Wicked Witch of the West. Because of the paradoxical nature of the trickster, Naylor can examine these so-called good and evil characteristics within one person rather than characterizing women as wholly good or evil. Deldon McNeely observes that female tricksters enact the same kind of complexity in character that Naylor seeks to depict. They may be characterized negatively because they undermine male authority and order, or they may be characterized positively because they use their

¹ Lindsey Tucker, "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor's Mama Day*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 151.

powers to nurture others.² Naylor explores a similar continuum of characteristics in her female trickster figures.

Rather than represent a radical departure from Wideman's work with tricksters, Naylor's novel represents an extension of his project. Like Wideman, Naylor explores the relationships different tricksters have with the community. For example, she depicts Dr. Buzzard, a conjure man who plays the role of a laughable trickster while using the mantle of conjure to mask his questionable moonshine ventures. William Hynes notes that "fools and tricksters seem to have an affinity for linking foolishness and play with wisdom and work," and Dr. Buzzard certainly fits into this category.³ While his limited power eliminates him as a threat to the community, he does possess enough wisdom to recognize the importance of the survival of the community. Dr. Buzzard's recognition of the importance of community also allows him to be used as an agent of more powerful tricksters in the novel.

In the bulk of the novel, Naylor focuses on three black conjure women and their impact on the black community. Sapphira, the originator of the Day family line, is a legendary conjure woman. Portrayed only through the half-forgotten memories of inhabitants of the all-black island of Willow Springs, she is literally pre-text, for ordinary characteristics have been washed away by history and myth, leaving the projected desire that perpetuates her legend. Known for her healing and conjure abilities, she is purported

² Deldon McNeely, *Mercury Rising: Women, Evil and Trickster Gods* (Woodstock, Conn: Spring Publications, 1996), 113-114, 125.

³ William Hynes, "Inconclusive Conclusions: Tricksters—Metaplayers and Revealers," in *Mythic Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993), 206.

to have secured the island for her descendents by killing her master. Yet through the years, even the residents of Willow Springs forget the significance of her essence that remains in the oral tradition. Just as tricksters with an indigenous modern sensibility acknowledge different cultural spheres while maintaining a commitment to ethnic culture, Sapphira recognizes the disparities that come from the slave system and kills her master to provide freedom for her people. But unlike other tricksters with this sensibility, Sapphira is not grounded in the Willow Spring community, for after her decisive act, she returns of Africa. Her subsequent legendary status also makes it difficult for her to act as a mediator for Willow Springs inhabitants.

Generations later, Miranda “Mama” Day, Sapphira’s great-granddaughter, inherits her legendary conjure power. Grounded in the black community of Willow Springs, she uses her powers to act as a bridge between the material world and the spirit world for the benefit of the black community of Willow Springs, thus demonstrating an indigenous modern sensibility similar to that of Wideman’s Reuben. Mama Day’s great powers of discernment allow her to construct a coherent family history that provides an alternative to the erroneous popular version handed down from generation to generation. Her story reconciles the racial and gender tensions among different members of the Day family. In the process Mama Day discovers how to save the life of Cocoa, her grandniece. This story also acts as an alternative to the strictly rational knowledge system of George, Cocoa’s husband.

While Mama Day relies on her ability to reconcile contending forces, Ruby, another conjure woman and contemporary of Mama Day, tends to view the world primarily through a prism of jealousy. Because Ruby has the potential to embrace

multiplicity but possesses a worldview that privileges herself, she enacts a postmodern sensibility. Ruby chooses to use her conjure abilities to eliminate potential romantic competition. By getting rid of rivals, Ruby can maintain her belief in herself as the ultimate woman in the eyes of her husband, Junior Lee. This privileging of self-satisfaction harkens back to Wideman's Wally, who is also motivated to protect his self-interest.

Naylor's concentration on these female trickster figures in *Mama Day* represents a culmination of sorts of her continuing exploration of diverse black female experiences and the forces that shape them. Her previous novels use an array of women to illustrate various responses to the influences on black women's lives. Her first and perhaps most popular book, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), explores the successes and failures of a variety of women who live in a predominately female community. *Linden Hills* (1985) shows, among other things, the impact of the absence of women on a black community. In *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), Naylor uses several stories to examine the development of women's personalities that range from the simple to the sadistic.

Critical responses to *Mama Day* often focus on experiences unique to women which helps illuminate the impact of women's behavior on trickster activities. Amy K. Levin identifies themes of mothering and Dorothy Perry Thompson reveals a distinctly feminine comprehension of black space in the novel.⁴ Their focus on feminine forms of interpretation is useful in determining the gendered ways in which tricksters interpret the

⁴ Amy K. Levin, "Metaphor and Maternity in *Mama Day*," in *Gloria Naylor's Early Novels*, ed. Margot Anne Kelley (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 70; Dorothy Perry Thompson, "Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe*," in *Gloria Naylor's Early Novels*, ed. Margot Anne Kelley (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 89.

world. Elizabeth Hayes explores magic realism as a critiquing tool, which centralizes the practice of deconstruction of discourses by tricksters in Naylor's text.⁵ Margaret Early Whitt focuses on the centralization of black cultural identity and Susan Meisenhelder examines the relationship between that identity and other cultural influences.⁶ The attention to culture by these scholars complements the study of the different cultural arenas encountered by tricksters. Still others specifically emphasize the significance of the conjure woman, revealing the parallels between the conjurer woman and the female trickster. Lindsay Tucker specifically addresses the black female trickster as conjure woman.⁷ Trudier Harris discusses Naylor's revision of the conjure woman from dangerous figure to community healer.⁸

Naylor's emphasis on women's lives places her in a black female literary tradition. Her attention to realism recalls the portrayal of the urban black woman's struggle in Anne Petry's *The Street* (1946), which Henry Louis Gates calls "the classic work of black feminist naturalism."⁹ Parallels can also be drawn to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), where Hurston gives her female

⁵ Elizabeth Hayes, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as Magic Realism," in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor's Mama Day*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁶ Margaret Early Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Susan Meisenhelder, "'The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor's Mama Day*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁷ Tucker, 150

⁸ Trudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

⁹ Henry Louis Gates, preface to *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), ix.

protagonist not only a voice, but agency to change her life. Naylor mirrors Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in her interrogation of the impact of white culture on the self-perception of black women. Like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Naylor's work explores the development of female characters as a struggle between societal expectations and personal independence.

Naylor's saga in *Mama Day* opens with fictional documents that include a map of Willow Springs, the magical island setting of the novel, the Day family genealogical chart, and a bill of sale for Sapphira, conjure woman and matriarch of the Day family. In addition, there is a brief introductory chapter that explains the legends of Willow Springs and the current state of the black inhabitants of the island. According to the narrator, during the 19th century, Sapphira bore her Norwegian slave master, Bascombe Wade, seven sons, obtained freedom and land for her descendents by killing him, and disappeared across the ocean. This portion of the novel also interweaves two timelines: one of the past, to which the extra-literary materials refer, and one of the present, where the action of the novel takes place.

In the present timeline, the novel branches off into several plot arcs. One involves the experiences of Miranda 'Mama' Day, great-granddaughter of Sapphira. Inheriting many gifts from her legendary ancestor, Mama Day acts as the island's communal healer, midwife and all-around wise woman. When she is not tending to her garden, feeding her chickens or participating in domestic wizardry with her sister, Abigail, Mama Day assists the inhabitants of Willow Springs with natural remedies for their ailments. She also helps Bernice, a young woman, to conceive a child using her conjure abilities when other medical means have failed.

The other narrative thread follows the development of the relationship between Ophelia ‘Cocoa’ Day, granddaughter of Abigail and grandniece of Mama Day, and George Andrews, her eventual husband. Cocoa and George take turns relating the various episodes of their meeting, courtship and marriage.

These story lines converge when Cocoa brings George to Willow Springs for the first time to meet Mama Day and Abigail. Cocoa’s return sparks the jealous ire of Ruby, a rival conjurer, who retaliates against Cocoa’s alleged advances towards her husband, Junior Lee, by giving her a life-threatening illness. In the midst of this crisis, Bernice’s baby dies in a hurricane, and Mama Day blames herself for circumventing the natural order of things. To atone and find a cure for Cocoa, Mama Day must reconstruct the Day family history. She discovers that she can only save Cocoa with the faith of George. While he succeeds in saving Cocoa, George’s faith in reason and his failure to acknowledge alternative ways of seeing the world result in his own death. The Day family line can continue, for Cocoa remarries and has children. The novel concludes with evidence that the dialogue and love between Cocoa and George persist from beyond the grave.

Mama Day intertwines the lives of three conjure women with individuals that vary in their awareness of the larger picture of life. While these conjure women form a kind of community, they also represent varying degrees of trickster ability and behavior. Their personalities and perspectives reveal the different ways they respond to their lives. These responses often have ramifications not just for those immediately around them, but for generations to come. This pattern of influence begins with Sapphira.

Sapphira

As matriarch of the Day family, Sapphira manifests a strong black femininity. She is a legendary conjure woman who uses her powers to ward off destructive forces as well as to heal members of her community. While she has the potential to act as a mediator for her community, her mythic status and ties to Africa prevent her from doing so.

Naylor bestows on Sapphira the mantle of ultimate conjure woman. Like most conjurers, Sapphira has the ability to change her form. Her link to the uncanny is clear in the first description of Sapphira by the narrator: “A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her” (3).

¹⁰ In addition to transformations, the narrator also describes Sapphira’s use of her conjure abilities to sustain her people using the forces of nature: “She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (3). Sapphira could use the power of lightning as a weapon, but she transforms it into a source of heat for her medicine pot, which is used to heal, not to harm. She also converts the power of the moon and the stars into instruments of healing.

Readers can glean that Sapphira’s brand of conjure underscores her African woman-centered identity. Her persona is defined by feats of distinctly feminine power.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise stated, references to the novel by Gloria Naylor are quoted from *Mama Day* (New York: Random House), 1988.

She is referred to as the Great, Grand Mother, in part because she bears seven sons in a thousand days. Patricia Collins asserts that such an empowered femininity “serves as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence.”¹¹ Naylor links Sapphira’s feminine persona with an African identity.¹² The bill of sale in the extratextual documents clearly delineates her as being of “pure African stock,” an enslaved woman who “has served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse.” Her Africanness is further underscored by her identity as a conjurer, for Lindsey Tucker notes that “conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves.”¹³

As a grand conjure woman, Sapphira challenges the 19th century institution of slavery. She recognizes that the key to Wade’s oppression of her and her people lies in his position as a slave master. By disposing of Wade, Sapphira eliminates the key figure in the institution of slavery that represents the potential for sexual, racial and economic domination.¹⁴ Thompson notes that “Sapphira’s power deconstructs the kyriarchal

¹¹ Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 118.

¹² I surmise that Naylor seeks to distinguish Sapphira as an African woman, rather than an African-American woman. In the process of writing her next novel, Naylor has indicated that Sapphira is distinctly African, just as Bascombe Wade is Norwegian. Naylor consciously does not depict them as hyphenated Americans, because the identity of American has not been firmly established during slavery. See Gloria Naylor, “Interview: ‘The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Think,’” interview by Michelle C. Loris, in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997).

¹³ Tucker, 146.

¹⁴ Sapphira also challenges the antebellum images of black women as Sapphires. See Collins, 74 and Patricia Bell Scott, “Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science” in *All the*

[master-dominated society] structure and empowers the previous underclass.”¹⁵

Sapphira’s power as a conjure woman crucial for such deconstruction, for Virginia Fowler asserts that as “n archetypal subverter of such oppression, Sapphira demonstrated a self-possession that no amount of brutality could shake and that no bill of sale could revoke.”¹⁶

Despite her legendary power, Sapphira’s character and exploits only come to the reader through the half-formed recollection of others. Sapphira was, to some extent, grounded in her contemporary community by virtue of her relations with certain people, her husband and her sons. In an ironic way, she remains in the present community through their memories. Yet, until Mama Day reclaims her spirit through a dream, the significance of Sapphira remains obscured by legend. In the introductory chapter, the narrator concedes that a clear picture of Sapphira remains elusive because she “don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (4).

In fact, it is Sapphira’s legendary status that complicates a full analysis of her actions.¹⁷ Sapphira exists at the level of myth due to her impressive acts, such as producing seven sons in a thousand days. Over the years, residents of Willow Springs

Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982), 87.

¹⁵ Thompson, 94.

¹⁶ Virginia Fowler, *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 95.

¹⁷ Sapphira represents an often overlooked female mythic tradition. Henry Louis Gates interpret mythic trickster figures like Esu-Elegbara as a “phallic god of generation and fecundity”, other critics elucidate a distinct role of the feminine in West African folklore (Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* [New York: Oxford UP, 1988.]). Conversely, Deldon McNeely notes that trickster women “represent a subversion of male authority. They are considered . . . powerful because of their close association with the supernatural”(113-114).

latch on to what they think they know and embellish her persona and increase the grand aura around her, elevating her to a legend. Sapphira also attains a divine stature, which comes through in the narrator's description of the origin of Candle Walk, a yearly ritual held during Christmas, where individuals walk from house to house with candles to exchange homemade gifts:

The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. "Leave 'em here, Lord," she said. "I ain't got nothing here but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light." (110)

Sapphira rises to nearly the same level as the Creator. Helene Christol suggests that Sapphira "is close to the sublime, the stance of unchallenged authority."¹⁸ Her 'creation' is linked to her feminine identity, for Tucker contends that "whereas the god of Genesis doesn't use the seventh day for creation, Sapphira does, making out of the words *seventh day* another creative event—a special son, wrought out of body and word."¹⁹ Even Naylor thinks of Sapphira as the "guiding spirit" of her work.²⁰ Such descriptions of her ephemeral nature prevent her from being grounded in Willow Spring affairs.

Furthermore, Sapphira's ties to Africa prevent her from acting as an intermediary within Willow Springs society. She travels east after Bascombe's death because she still perceives Africa as her home. Her return to Africa signals a commitment to African culture, not to African American culture, for Thompson asserts that Sapphira represents

¹⁸ Helene Christol, "Reconstructing American History: Land and Genealogy in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Culture*, ed. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 353.

¹⁹ Tucker, 154.

²⁰ Naylor, "Interview" by Loris, 256.

“a new woman-centered spirituality and ancient African ancestor worship.”²¹ Whitt notes that Sapphira’s return to Africa also mirrors the folktales of the flying Africans, in which “the slaves, tired and worn out or seeing little promise in their future in the American South, made their way back to Africa.”²² Sapphira’s actions reinforce the notion that she is of Africa, and not of Africa America.

Sapphira represents a powerful conjure woman who works on behalf of her people. She introduces a woman-centered identity and an African version of women’s power. Yet her mythic status precludes her ability to act as a bridge for her people. This work falls to Mama Day.

Mama Day

Unlike Sapphira, Mama Day forges a complex identity out of multiple influences and acts as a potent force within contemporary Willow Springs society. Such an identity implies a strong ability to interpret, to ‘see’ the truth of situations. It is this ability that allows her to recover Sapphira’s spirit, and create a more comprehensive Day family history by reconciling the successes and tragedies of the Day family. As a result, she saves Cocoa, who will continue the Day genealogical line as well as the tradition of conjuring. Mama Day’s family history also critiques George’s rational belief system.

Like most tricksters, Mama Day is a unique character in the community of Willow Springs. As a “direct descendent of Sapphira Wade, piled on the fact of springing from the seventh son of a seventh son,” Mama Day possesses ‘special sight,’ or

²¹ Thompson, 93.

²² Whitt, 122.

special knowledge, as descendents from seventh sons are rare and are believed to possess special powers.²³ One such power is the ability to transform. When George recounts his first impression of Mama Day to Cocoa, he describes her malleable appearance:

I don't know why I thought your Mama Day would be a big, tall woman. From the stories you told about your clashes with her, she had loomed that way in my mind. Hard. Strong. Yes, it definitely showed in the set of her shoulders. But she was barely five feet and could have been snapped in the middle with one good-sized hand. On second thought, I wondered: the dark brown skin stretched tight over those high cheekbones and fine frame glinted like it was covering steel (176).

Mama Day defies expectations. George thought she would be large, yet even when he encounters the small frame of Mama Day, he still envisions physical strength. Mama Day's appearance, and by extension, her identity, changes shape depending on who describes her.

In addition to shape-shifting abilities, Mama Day's possession of two names represents a multifaceted personality that, according to Lindsay Tucker, allows her to act as a "bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world."²⁴ The dynamic of Mama Day's personality results in an enhanced ability to 'see' or interpret. This ability allows Mama Day to comprehend the contemporary lives of the residents of the island as well as apprehend the past like no one else. Mama Day possesses a complex sense of identity described by W.E. Cross that balances "Blackness with other demands of one's

²³ W.E.B. DuBois notes in his coining of the phrase 'double-consciousness', that a black individual represents "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight" (*The Souls of Black Folk*. In *Three Negro Classics* [1903; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1965], 214). In "Contested Visions/Double Vision in *Tar Baby*," Judylyn Ryan elaborates on the specialness of this kind of progeny: "The person 'gifted' with this double vision achieves an understanding that is greater than the sum of the constituent realities" (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 39, no. 3&4: 605).

²⁴ Tucker, 152.

personhood, such as one's sexual identity, occupational identity, spiritual or religious identity, and various role identities."²⁵

On one hand, the name Miranda links Mama Day to the fantastic. Mama Day tells George when she meets him: "I'm Mama Day to some, Miss Miranda to others. You decide what I'll be to you" (176). Miranda, her given name, alludes to William Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Several critics see Naylor's Miranda as a revision of Shakespeare's Miranda which places her in the role of Prospero on the island of Willow Springs, which emphasizes her links to another realm. Gary Storhoff suggests that "this naming displaces the reader from an accustomed position; no longer depending on Prospero's focal point of view, the reader must now listen to an unfamiliar voice—not the father's but the daughter's."²⁶ Miranda's relation to Willow Spring's first sorceress, Sapphira, further underscores her link to a world beyond the one we can see.

Naylor's Miranda uses her link to the spirit world to glean knowledge of things to come. For example, when she is sewing Cocoa's quilt, she hears the whispers of the future:

She pushes the needle through, tugs the thread down—two ticks of the clock. *She ain't bringing that boy home mid-August.* Miranda feels a chill move through the center of her chest. She doesn't want to know, so she pushes the needle through and tugs the thread down—tugs the thread up. *Or the next August, either.* She tries to put her mind somewhere else, but she only has the homespun, the gingham, and the silver flashing of her needle. *Or the next.* (138)

²⁵ W.E. Cross, "The Psychology of Nigrescence: Revising the Cross Model," in *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*, ed. Joseph Ponterotto et al., (New York: Sage Publications, 1995), 116.

²⁶ Gary Storhoff, "'The Only Voice is Your Own': Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*," *African American Review* 29, no. 1(1995): 37.

The italics represents voices revealing the future to Mama Day. She surmises that Cocoa will not bring George, her intended husband, to the island for a while. Elizabeth Hayes asserts that Mama Day can have such conversations because she can “perceive a much more fluid boundary between the natural and the supernatural than do rationalists.”²⁷ Mama Day’s ability to hear and interpret such voices suggests her discernment of another realm of reality.

On the other hand, Miranda is also called Mama Day, a name that characterizes her as a dependable member of a community who can ‘read the signs’ in the world we can see. The moniker implies a sense of familiarity. As a matriarchal figure, Mama Day works on behalf of others, much like Reuben in Wideman’s novel. A house call to a neighbor’s sick baby illustrates how Mama Day uses her ability to interpret a situation. When Carmen Rae summons Mama Day, the latter diagnoses the child and the household:

Miranda guessed that all them children coulda used a good worming with a dose of warm castor oil and jimson. But when Carmen Rae told her that he was running a fever and his eyes were bloodshot, she knew it couldn’t wait till morning. Sounded like that baby had the croup, and Lord knows how long it had been going on. . . . Carmen Rae gets read the riot act: A sow takes better care of her young. And don’t be sitting there whining about a no-good daddy—if he ain’t never here, it means he ain’t stopped you from cleaning this house. And he ain’t the cause of you stuffing this child with white bread and sugar lard to keep him quiet while you’re watching them soap operas. (193-194)

Mama Day comes off as part physician and part social worker. She uses close observation to determine that Carmen Rae neglects her children in favor of her own

²⁷ Hayes, 180.

pursuit of entertainment. That ‘reading’ comes directly from Mama Day’s ability to discern ‘what’s going on.’

Mama Day’s personality is also complemented by a flexible black female consciousness. Collins asserts that “Black women’s both/and conceptual orientation, the act of being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it, forms an integral part of Black women’s consciousness.”²⁸ This consciousness contributes to Mama Day’s commitment to the black community, for her efforts on the part of the black community often involve maternal activities such as nursing, midwifery and general healing.

Mama Day’s role as the medicine woman of the island acts as a manifestation of her commitment to the Willow Springs community. While daydreaming, Mama Day recalls her first understanding of her responsibilities regarding the community: “Gifted hands, folks said. You have a gift, Little Mama. John-Paul’s eyes so sad. It ain’t fair that it came with a high price, but it did. . . . We need you, Little Mama” (88-89). Mama Day realizes that she must use her gifts, both natural and supernatural powers, in the service of those around her. She exhibits what Ward Nobles describes as an “extended self” where “a single person’s conception of the self and/or his identity is rooted in being whatever his people’s definition is.”²⁹ Trudier Harris argues that Mama Day’s conjure skills underscore her role in the community, for “she does not have one black and one blue eye, the blue-black skin coloring, or the physical deformity characteristic of

²⁸ Collins, 207.

²⁹ Ward Nobles, “African Philosophy: Foundations of Black Psychology,” *Black Psychology*, Ed. Reginald L. Jones (Berkeley: Cobb & Henry, 1991), 302.

conjurers. . . . she is not isolated from the community” and she does not exhibit flamboyance that may cause people to scorn her.³⁰

As a mediating figure, Mama Day’s role is clearly contextualized by maternal nurturing. Mama Day’s memories of her abilities are described in maternal terms:

Little Mama. The cooking , the cleaning, the mending, the gardening for the woman who sat in the porch rocker, twisting, twisting on pieces of thread. . . . Being there for mama and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. Why, even Abigail called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own right. Abigail’s had three and I’ve had –Lord, can’t count ‘em—into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now. (88-89)

At an early age, Mama Day recognized that her healing ability was the expression of maternal instinct. She used these skills to compensate for the absence of a mother figure in her own life and in the process, became a mother figure to those around her. In this way, Naylor casts Mama Day as a distinctly feminine community figure.

Despite her amazing powers and gifts, Mama Day possesses quirks that highlight her human frailties. Sometimes, Mama Day exhibits an extreme pride. Valerie Lee observes that Naylor sometimes portrays her as “a toothless, fussy, arthritic old lady.”³¹ Mama Day exposes such pride when she becomes indignant when George compares her to Dr. Buzzard in ability. She can also be controlling. Sometimes, she believes her knowledge of everyone’s business gives her leave to interfere in their lives. She provokes an argument with Cocoa by preventing her from going out because she does not think she should. Mama Day hurls insults at Cocoa, causing Cocoa to call her “an

³⁰ Trudier Harris, 69-70.

³¹ Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 72.

overbearing and domineering old woman” (156). Such a need to control represents a less than appealing aspect of Mama Day’s character.

Such character flaws imply that like most tricksters, Mama Day has the potential to disrupt harmony and make situations worse instead of better. Deldon McNeely reminds us that the trickster can harbor mischievous tendencies: “If we try to confine him [or her] to the home and hearth there is bound to be discord, for he [or she] . . . is not a positive force when confined to a limited role in a limited space.”³² Mama Day’s ability to cause chaos is best demonstrated by her disastrous efforts to help Bernice conceive a child when conventional medical methods have failed.

While Bonnie Winsbro argues that Mama Day does not transgress in helping Bernice to conceive because she does not use black magic to help Bernice conceive, I contend that Mama Day knows she runs the risk of making her situation worse by using her otherworldly knowledge.³³ From the start, Mama Day attempts to rationalize her actions. Even before she helps Bernice, she speculates on whether or not she could receive forgiveness for helping Bernice. After Little Caesar, Bernice’s child, dies in the hurricane, Mama Day reveals her awareness of the fact that she makes things worse for Bernice in the end: “You play with people’s lives and it backfires on you. As another wave of grief passes over her, she clutches her teacup and tries to rock it back into an ebb. More crushing, just a bit more crushing than that baby’s death, is the belief that his mama came to her with” (261). By taking the process of creation into her own hands

³² McNeely, 115.

³³ Bonnie Winsbro, *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 119.

with her ritual, Mama Day wreaks havoc on Bernice's life. If the storm represents in part nature's retribution for Mama Day's interference, then Mama Day wreaks havoc on the whole island as well.

This episode does not mean that we should view Mama Day as dangerous conjure woman. We are to see her as human, having frailties and having limits. I agree with Valerie Lee's conclusion that Naylor makes Mama Day more human and accessible to the reader "by writing physical infirmity and a love of family into Mama Day's personality, and by making her an ethical human being."³⁴

As a human character, Mama Day can know human nature, even in different cultural arenas within the known world. Mama Day's knowledge of activities in the black-dominated island of Willow Springs is undisputed. She knows everything of note that goes on in Willow Springs, from the illegal activities to relationship squabbles. Trudier Harris describes Willow Springs' inhabitants as a community of people who "are on the same wavelength; they appreciate the same things, they believe in the same kinds of correctives."³⁵ Mama Day is so cognizant of those communal beliefs that she can speak on their behalf. When developers attempt to persuade the inhabitants of Willow Springs to sell their land, the narrator shows that Mama Day, fully aware of the will of the people, speaks for them: "Like Mama Day told 'em (we knew to send 'em straight over there to her and Miss Abigail), they didn't come huffing and sweating all this way in them dark gaberdine suits if they didn't think our land could make them a bundle of

³⁴ Valerie Lee, 75.

³⁵ Harris, 60.

money. . . . Weren't gonna happen in Willow Springs. 'Cause if Mama Day say no, everybody say no" (6). When Mama Day can speak for the whole island, it is clear she is privy to these communal values and shapes them as well.

Mama Day also comprehends life beyond the island, life representative of white, mainstream American society. For example, she can 'read' the motives of the guests on the Donahue show with the sound turned down. The show is devoted to bringing the stories of 'ordinary people' to viewers across the country, but more often reveals the inner lives of mainstream white America. Without even hearing the conversation, Mama Day determines the underlying causes for the guests' behavior. Margaret Early Whitt asserts that "in Mama Day's mind all big cities are the same," so if she can ascertain the secret motives of Chicago residents, then she can glean knowledge from white society in general.³⁶

Mama Day uses these gifts of discernment not only to delve into other cultures, but also to recover the lost past when she reconstructs the history of the Day family. By recovering the lost spirit of Sapphira and the forgotten role of Bascombe Wade, Mama Day reconciles the racial and gender relationships of family members.

Mama Day's interpretation of her family chronicle responds to the popular version that has been handed down from generation to generation. Naylor gives the reader important details through documents. The genealogy of the Day family tree confirms that Sapphira indeed gave birth to seven sons, who gave birth to seven sons. It also implies that these links are significant to the living relatives today. Virginia Fowler

³⁶ Whitt, 134.

asserts, “the family tree visually links the living members of the Day family—Miranda, Abigail, and Cocoa—to the dead members, a connection that is central in the novel itself.”³⁷

In addition, the narrative voice that permeates the novel provides details denied to other characters in the novel. While Gary Storhoff identifies this voice as a manifestation of free indirect discourse, I am inclined to favor Fowler’s assertion that the voice represents the community’s memory, for it describes itself in the plural.³⁸ It is this communal narrative voice that tells the reader the basic thrust of the Day family account by including all the versions of the story describing Sapphira’s role in obtaining the land from Bascombe Wade:

And somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by person or persons unknown. . . . Say you’d hear talk then of a slave woman who came to Willow Springs, and when she left, she left in a ball of fire to journey back home east over the ocean. (3, 111)

All versions agree on two points: Bascombe Wade died and Sapphira left the island. They differ on the circumstances of Wade’s death and Sapphira’s leaving. One version describes a powerful woman who kills a slave master with brazenness. This murder represents a violent response to an exploitative relationship between enslaved woman and slave master. Such a characterization would be in line with Jacqueline Jones’

³⁷ Fowler, 94.

³⁸ Fowler, 97.

descriptions of the relationship between enslaved black women and white male masters, where “white men considered free and uninhibited access to black women as their prerogative.”³⁹ Another version describes a more mutual, loving relationship that ends in tragedy when Sapphira stabs Wade. Still another version suggests that Sapphira tricked Wade to deed his land and then killed him.

How will Mama Day reconcile these different versions of the story? Just as Mama Day sews a variety of fabrics into a single quilt, she will reconcile these different versions into one story. In making a quilt for Cocoa, Mama Day seeks to make it truly inclusive by putting “a little piece of her [mother] in here somewhere.” She hesitates, anticipating Abigail’s negative reaction due to the pain and tragedy their mother caused them through her emotional neglect and suicide. When Mama Day has problems physically working in her mother’s piece of fabric, her solution demonstrates her ingenuity in bringing dissimilar items together:

Too precious to lose, have to back it with something. Rummaging through the oranges, she digs up a piece of faded homespun, no larger than the palm of her hand and still tight and sturdy. Now, this is real old. Much older than the gingham. Coulda been part of anything, but only a woman would wear this color. The homespun is wrapped over and basted along the edges of the gingham. She can shape the curve she needs now. . . . It was too late to take it out of the quilt, and it didn’t matter no way. . . . When it’s done right you can’t tell where one ring ends and the other begins. (137-138)

The age of the homespun and the fact that only a woman could have worn its color strongly suggests that it belonged to Sapphira. As Fowler observes, by using Sapphira’s fabric to back up the fabric from her mother’s dress, Mama Day’s quilt figuratively lays

³⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 149.

the foundation for “the unity achieved through the stitching together of narrative fragments tends also to make us less aware of the individual fragments and more aware of larger patterns and themes.”⁴⁰ In this way, the quilt anticipates Mama Day’s efforts at reconciling the complex Day family history.

Just as Mama Day weaves different and difficult fabrics into her quilt, she reconciles the problematic relationships between men and women in her family. This process begins during Candle Walk, where Mama Day recovers the complex role Bascombe Wade played in her family history. She thinks during her walk home from the festivities:

She tries to listen under the wind. The sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots, heading straight for the main road, heading toward the east bluff over the ocean. It couldn’t be Mother, she died in The Sound. Miranda’s head feels like it’s gonna burst. The candles, food and slivers of ginger, lining the main road. A long wool skirt passing. Heavy leather boots. And the humming—humming of some lost and ancient song. Quiet tears start rolling down Miranda’s face. Oh, precious Jesus, the light wasn’t for her—it was for him. The tombstone out by Chevy’s Pass. How long did he search for her? Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart. (118)

Using her conjure gifts to listen to nature, Mama Day realizes that it was Wade who walked on the road searching for Sapphira, not Sapphira using a lamp to guide her way back to Africa. Margaret Early Whitt asserts that this new information points to the very real possibility “that Bascombe was not conjured, but gave the island willingly and out of his love for Sapphira.”⁴¹ With this knowledge, Wade is not transformed into a wholly sympathetic character, but his role in the family history is made more complex.

⁴⁰ Fowler, 99-100.

⁴¹ Whitt, 123.

The recovery of a more complex character in Wade has sweeping ramifications for his legacy in the Day family. Wade represents a source of male emotionalism. He demonstrates what appears to be devotion to Sapphira by dying in his search for her the night after she leaves. Yet, selfishness accompanies this emotionalism, for Wade's search on the road also represents a man who wanted to keep Sapphira to himself rather than let her go on her own way uncontested.

This reconceptualization of Wade results in a revision of his racial legacy as well. Mama Day rejects the wholly negative characterization of whiteness described by bell hooks as "the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing."⁴² Once again, Mama Day does not exonerate Wade's participation as a white slave master in the exploitation of transplanted Africans just because he may have loved her great grandmother, but she does include him in her concept of the Day past. However, Mama Day does not really discuss the racial implications, for if Wade loved Sapphira, then her great grandfather and their descendents would not be 'pure' black but to some extent mixed. These speculations remain unanswered by the text.

Recovery of Wade's legacy causes Mama Day to reconceptualize her view of later generations of Day men, like her father, John-Paul. While at the well that had been sealed after the death of a sibling, Mama Day realizes that Wade and her father share both selfishness and devotion regarding the women they loved. Mama Day hears this after the screaming from the well subsides:

⁴² bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 170.

And then she opens her eyes on her own hands. Hands that look like John-Paul's. Hands that would not let the woman in gingham go with Peace. Before him, other hands that would not let the woman in apricot homespun go with peace. No, *could* not let her go. In all this time, she ain't really never really thought about what it musta done to him. Or him either. It had to tear him up inside, knowing he was willing to give her anything in the world but that. And maybe he shoulda, 'cause he lost her anyway. But she wasn't sent out here for that. . . . It was to feel the hope in them that the work of their hands could wipe away all that had gone before. Those men *believed*—in the power of themselves, in what they were feeling.(285)

Mama Day realizes that just as John-Paul refused to let Ophelia, her mother, join Peace, her sister, in death because he did not want to lose the woman he loved, Bascombe Wade refused to allow Sapphira to leave peacefully because he was too selfish. Virginia Fowler goes so far as to suggest that by linking Wade and John-Paul, Naylor finds parallels between ownership of human beings and matrimony if both are based on the idea of controlling women.⁴³ At the same time, John-Paul and Wade also embody a strong devotion to the women they loved. They attempt to do everything humanly possible to make them content.

From this new information, Mama Day gains a new understanding of the men in her family. The legend of Sapphira had overshadowed Wade's feelings, as evidenced in the misunderstanding of the origins of Candle Walk. The emotions attached to her mother's death diminished her consideration of her father's feelings. Meisenhelder observes that "Mama Day finally weaves a male perspective into her family quilt, appreciating her relationship to her male ancestors."⁴⁴ As a result, Mama Day has a

⁴³ Fowler, 101.

⁴⁴ Meisenhelder, 124.

clearer understanding of the flaws and complexities of the men in her family and incorporates them into her familial history.

While Mama Day's recovery of Wade reintroduces a lost male presence, her reclamation of Sapphira's spirit reintroduces a lost sense of the maternal to the Day family story. The loss of Sapphira's spirit translates into a lack of the maternal in generations of the Day family. As children, Mama Day and Abigail were deprived of a maternal example when their mother, Ophelia, emotionally withdrew after losing a child. Perhaps the reason why the Day family "ain't had much luck with the girls" is due to this lack of the maternal. So deeply lost, Mama Day can only recall Sapphira's significance in a dream:

Miranda opens door upon door upon door. Door upon door upon door. She asks each door the same thing: Tell me your name. . . . Daughter. The word comes to cradle what has gone past weariness. She can't really hear it 'cause she's got no ears, or call out 'cause she's got no mouth. There's only the sense of being. Daughter. Flooding through like fine streams of hot, liquid sugar to fill the spaces where there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers. Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. . . . Melting, melting away under the sweet flood of waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain't known existed. Daughter. (283)

In this dream, Mama Day searches for Sapphira's name, and by extension, the maternal spirit it represents. Mama Day recovers the lost maternal spirit by assuming the role of daughter, something she had never done because she did not have a viable role model. Even her father thought of her as Little Mama instead of a daughter. While she does not find Sapphira's name, she finds the maternal spirit she represents.

The recovery of Sapphira's spirit appears crucial for the continuation of the Day family line. Her lost maternal spirit gives Mama Day the strength to engage the repressed painful episodes of the Day family line and find the solution that will save Cocoa. It is a

strength Mama Day did not possess prior to this point. Earlier, when Mama Day takes George on a walking tour of the island, and they stop at the family graveyard, she is afraid to recall the trauma of the past. With the addition of Sapphira's lost maternal spirit, Mama Day has a newfound strength that allows her to uncover the well and face the pain of the past. As a result, she realizes that she needs George's help to save Cocoa's life, which would have been impossible without Sapphira's maternal spirit helping Mama Day.

Mama Day's version of the Day history encapsulates problematic aspects of the Day story. The legend of the Days now includes Wade's love and selfishness. It includes Sapphira's lost maternal spirit. It also leaves questions unanswered. Why did Sapphira leave? How did the story get so misinterpreted? Is Wade an ancestor? Mama Day suggests that Cocoa will answer some of these questions. She represents the next recipient of the special gifts handed down from Sapphira to Mama Day. On one hand, Cocoa she has the ability to hear voices of deceased Willow Springs inhabitants and can interpret the motives of those who are still alive like Mama Day. On the other hand, Cocoa has not reached Mama Day's level of skill of discernment and reconciliation. She cannot interpret the voices that she hears and she has difficulty coming to terms with the possibility of having a white man as an ancestor. Unlike Mama Day, Cocoa does not realize that Ruby means her harm.

While Cocoa remains somewhat unaware of the full range of her inherited powers by novels end, Mama Day has faith that Cocoa will grow into her inherited gifts and use them in the future. At the Candle Walk after George's death, Mama Day tells George: "One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time—that I

won't be here for—when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days” (308). Mama Day believes that Cocoa will eventually fully gain the ability to reconcile the spirit world with the material world. She will be able to interpret the voices of the dead and act on behalf of others. Mama Day hints at this inevitability in the last pages of the book, when she sees Cocoa sitting on the bluff at some time in the future: “And some things are yet to be. . . . When she turns around, there are fine lines marking off the character of her face—the firm mouth, high cheekbones, and clear brown eyes. It's a face that's been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of answers, so at last there ain't no need for words as they lock eyes over the distance” (312). Mama Day envisions a future when Cocoa will gain her level of discernment and understanding.

Whereas Mama Day's reconstruction of the Day family history helps to save Cocoa and place her on the path to greater understanding, it also represents a challenge to George's more rational outlook. The episode where Cocoa hangs on the brink of death provides one of the clearest examples of the differences between the discourses of Mama Day and George. Cocoa lies near death from a spell placed on her by the jealous Ruby. The hurricane has washed out the bridge, eliminating access to professional medical help. Under these conditions, Mama Day attempts to enlist George's help in saving Cocoa. She instructs George to go to her chicken coop and bring her back whatever he finds. George is appalled at Mama Day's plan, questions her sanity but takes the ledger and cane to the henhouse. In his frustration, he wrecks the henhouse and dies from the physical exertion.

Cocoa's illness is the field upon which Mama Day's emphasis on community contests American individualism, a key component of George's perspective. Recall that

this incident occurs right after Mama Day has recovered Sapphira and Bascombe Wade's lost significance to her family history. At this point, Mama Day realizes the importance of the community they represent, a realization that can have life and death repercussions for Cocoa. So when she attempts to persuade George to help her, Mama Day admits she needs to form a community with this black man in order to save Cocoa and keep the Day family line alive: "I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of—no less believe—but this time they ain't no good alone. . . . Now, I got all that in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other and take yours" (294). If George acknowledges the primacy of community, he can save Cocoa's life as well as his own. Meisenhelder observes that Mama Day sends George on "a quest designed not to acquire a symbol of his individual prowess but to transcend those very values."⁴⁵

However, George chooses to believe that Cocoa's life rests solely in his hands. He scoffs at Mama Day's plan for saving Cocoa. He is confident he can rescue Cocoa on his own, right up to the moment of his own death. In fact, George has always held strong ideas about his abilities as an individual. This faith in self is a consistent part of George's worldview. George explains to Cocoa that his need for self-sufficiency developed during his childhood as an orphan: "Our guardians at the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys were adamant about the fact that we learned to invest in ourselves alone. . . . And what else did we have but ourselves?" (22,26). From early childhood, George has been the kind of individual described by Cross who sees "personal progress as a matter of freewill,

⁴⁵ Meisenhelder, 124.

initiative, [and] rugged individualism” instead of within the context of a supportive community.⁴⁶ As a result, he cannot envision himself depending on others.⁴⁷

In addition to her emphasis on community, Mama Day’s reconciliation of masculine and feminine perspectives challenges George’s privileging of his own masculinity. Mama Day is only able to come up with a plan to save Cocoa by recovering the maternal spirit of Sapphira and revising the role Bascombe Wade played in her family. Day family history reveals disastrous consequences when men and women do not come together. So when Mama Day wants George’s hands, she wants to join the power of his masculinity with her femininity, “so together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over” (285).

By attempting to save Cocoa by himself, George enacts the archetypal male hero who is expected to save the maiden from danger. Before going to the chicken coop, George characterizes Mama Day’s advice as the ramblings of a crazy old *woman*. These ideas about masculinity go back to his experiences as a child. The methods of Mrs. Jackson, supervisor of the boys shelter where George grew up, are aimed at producing not just citizens for society, but *male* citizens of society capable of taking care of themselves. As an adult, he privileges masculinity over femininity. When Cocoa tells George of the legend of Sapphira, he becomes more fascinated with Bascombe Wade and

⁴⁶ Cross, 191.

⁴⁷ George specifically fails to see how black communities like Willow Springs act to guard individuals against the debilitating forces of a hostile dominant society. See Meisenhelder, 116. Also, George’s insistence on the power of the individual is linked to an American individualism. Nina Baym describes the ideal American character as a “pure American self divorced from specific circumstances” who “will be able to achieve complete self-definition” in the face of a society that “exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality” (“Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude

how he died and lost his land and fails to see Sapphira as a legend in her own right.

Meisenhelder asserts that George's attempts "to understand black women's history in white male terms. . .erase Sapphira's existence and importance by focusing on her white 'master.'"⁴⁸

Mama Day's acknowledgement of things unseen questions George's reliance on the powers of rationality. Mama Day believes that the cure for Cocoa lies in a man who has a strong belief in himself but also has enough will to believe in something outside of himself: "He believes in himself—deep within himself—'cause he ain't never had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to *hand* it over to her. She needs his hand in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place" (285). Mama Day knows she needs to get George to believe in something he cannot see, something other than himself. After all, she had found the cure for Cocoa by communing with the spirits of her dead relatives.

Mama Day also employs Dr. Buzzard as an agent in her advocacy of faith. When she realizes that she needs George's help, she also realizes that she has the monumental task of convincing George of the power of extra-rational forces. She asks Dr. Buzzard to talk to George and try to explain the seriousness of Cocoa's situation. But George will not hear of it: "What do you do when someone starts telling you something that you just

Women Authors," in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox [1981; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999], 224.

⁴⁸ Meisenhelder, 118.

cannot believe? You can walk away. You can stand there and challenge him. Or in my case, you can fight the urge to laugh if it wasn't so pathetic: the grizzled old man with his hat of rooster feathers and his necklace of bones, shifting his feet and clearing his throat as he struggled to provide me with the minute details" (286). Not only does this incident show the depth of George's disbelief, but it demonstrates that even though Dr. Buzzard is a lesser trickster in his own right, he can act as an agent of Mama Day's revision of the world.

But George chooses to cling to his rationalism, dying in the process of saving Cocoa because he cannot acknowledge otherworldly forces. Elizabeth Hayes asserts that "George is a 'separate knower,' who employs hierarchical, either/or thinking," which prevents him from having the faith.⁴⁹ George is hesitant to go to the henhouse initially because he thinks Mama Day is crazy, or lacks reason. He fails to follow Mama Day's instructions once he gets to the chicken coop is because they do not make sense to him. Logic tells him to bring something back, so he is looking for an object. When he dimly conceives that Mama Day wants only his hands, it is too late.

Mama Day's perspective simultaneously challenges George's rationalistic outlook while preserving Cocoa as a potential trickster. Her worldview emanates from her efforts to reconstitute a fuller version of her family history and incorporate a variety of racial and gendered aspects left out or erroneously reported in the popular version. Mama Day's perspective also comes from her personality and her role as healer and moral authority on the island of Willow Springs. Yet, even with her great powers of discernment, Mama Day

⁴⁹ Hayes, 185.

still possesses human frailties. While Mama Day appears to be the kind of conjure woman residents of Willow Springs are glad to have around, Ruby, a rival conjurer, is a conjure woman that the community could do without.

Ruby

Ruby is more than just another colorful resident of Willow Springs. She represents a black female trickster who uses the more destructive aspects of conjure to get what she wants. Motivated by jealousy, Ruby is driven to be the ideal woman. She benefits herself by eliminating rivals that may spoil the illusion of her hyper-femininity.

As the second most famous conjurer on the island, Ruby's impressive transformational abilities complement her complex identity. Ruby can give the impression of being as solid as a mountain, or as ephemeral as the wind. She can be the church-going, "proper widow woman, trying to make ends meet," or the vengeful conjure woman who retaliates against potential rivals by casting spells that drive them insane(93).

Despite her multifaceted personality, Ruby uses her special gifts primarily to bolster an extreme form of femininity. Ruby's ultra-femininity is based on her dependence on Junior Lee, and is expressed through an all-consuming jealousy. The conventional femininity recognized by some feminist scholars is defined primarily by male expectation of women's behavior. Beverly Green notes that women may internalize the notion of subordination to men and mold their behavior to fit the expectations of

men.⁵⁰ Ruby acts fiercely to protect her identity as Junior Lee's wife when she feels threatened by Cocoa. When Ruby thinks Cocoa wants to steal her man, she invites Cocoa to have her hair braided. The methodical way in which Ruby braids Cocoa's hair represents a ritualized action by which she conjures Cocoa in retaliation for her attempted seduction of Junior Lee. It is this act that brings Cocoa to the brink of death. Meisenhelder asserts that "Ruby turns hairbraiding (and the sisterhood it symbolizes) into an act of jealous murder."⁵¹ By doing so, Ruby uses her conjure abilities to, once again, carry out an act of vengeance.⁵²

Ruby causes destruction not just to individuals, but also threatens whole communities. When Ruby conjures Cocoa, she puts the fate of the entire Day family line in jeopardy. Given how Mama Day's family is instrumental in the survival of the inhabitants of Willow Springs, Ruby symbolically threatens the harmony and survival of the black inhabitants of Willow Springs lives by injuring the last Day descendent.

Implications of Multiple Female Tricksters

Through her depiction of a variety of black female tricksters, Gloria Naylor articulates a racial strategy whereby African Americans reconcile a vast array of experiences as a means of preserving the black community against damaging societal forces. Such a racial strategy also promotes the concept of a diverse community of

⁵⁰ Beverly Greene, "African American Women," in *Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy*, ed. Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 1994,) 15.

⁵¹ Meisenhelder, 125.

⁵² This dark use of conjure brings to mind the negative connotations associated with conjure women as well as tricksters who cause chaos. See Tucker, 149.

women and the common destinies of men and women. By doing so, it questions utopian feminist notions of community that homogenize the experiences of women and divorce the fates of men and women.

The kinds of reconciliatory tactics advocated by Naylor respond to the increasing fragmentation of the black community. In the past, African Americans created communities in the midst of hostility because there was no outside source to turn to for aid. They were forced to depend on each other for help, partly due to proximity.⁵³ Economic prosperity allowed blacks to leave urban areas for more suburban locales, which were and continue to be overwhelmingly white. With so few blacks, the physical proximity that fostered community-building is absent. In addition, perennial issues such as poverty, injustice and discrimination continue to erode the black community from without, and unresolved tensions involving class and gender divisions threaten to divide the black community from within. Despite such diversification and fragmentation, black communities need to find a means of consensus in order to survive, for they still face common issues. Cornel West argues that “all people with black skin and African phenotype are subject to potential white supremacist abuse. Hence, all black Americans have some interest in resisting racism.”⁵⁴

Naylor’s racial strategy based on reconciliation represents one way in which the black community can retain a sense of consensus and survive. The adaptability and

⁵³ Enslaved persons formed networks that crossed blood relational lines and extended over generations from the very old to the very young. During Reconstruction, blacks used such networks to weather the changing political climate, particularly in the South. The age of segregation, once again, placed blacks in physical proximity to one another, fostering the creation of community.

⁵⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 25.

negotiation skills of the trickster are key in addressing and resolving the fissures within the black community. Naylor recognizes that community for African Americans means a constellation of differences based on geography, gender, class and generations. Rather than using these unresolved tensions to divide and diminish the power of community, Naylor advocates coming to terms with such differences: "I feel that we have more in common than we have differences, in terms of gender lines, racial lines, and national lines. We have, of course, attempted to exterminate ourselves over those tiny differences, but they are in fact minor."⁵⁵

Part of Naylor's scheme requires a redefinition of community. By forming a link between Mama Day and Sapphira, Naylor implies that one can have community, even if there is no physical proximity. Mama Day draws strength from Sapphira's spirit to help her help Cocoa in the present. This idea of a community without presence can serve as a model for African Americans now who may not be able to form communities in the traditional sense. This model also emphasizes the formation of communities across generational lines. Naylor implies that such links between generations are crucial for survival, and mirrors Toni Morrison's emphasis on the significance of the ancestor: "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection."⁵⁶ These alternative ideas about community ideally address the increased fragmentation of the black community in recent times.

⁵⁵ Gloria Naylor, interview by D.C. Denison, *The Writer* 107 no. 12 (1994): 21.

⁵⁶ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*, ed. D. Soyini Madison (1984; reprint New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 497.

Naylor's racial strategy not only provides a model for black communities, but it also challenges popular feminist utopian notions about women's communities. Naylor uses Mama Day and Ruby to reject exclusionary, conflict-free conception of women's communities. They are two contemporary conjure women who fail to form a bond of sisterhood because of Ruby's attempts to destroy Mama Day's family. Their relationship demonstrates the diversity of black women's dispositions. Patricia Collins notes that "diversity among Black women produces different concrete experiences that in turn shape various reactions. . . . when faced with stereotypical, controlling images of Black women, some women. . . [deconstruct] the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group. . . in contrast, other women internalize the controlling images."⁵⁷ Naylor acknowledges that women react to situations in different ways. She does not impose harmony where sometimes there is none.

This acknowledgement of conflict among women counters the feminist notion of an unproblematic sisterhood. When feminist critics recall the early days of their work in consciousness raising and theorizing about the impact of gender expectations on women, they remember a harmonious community of women. In an introduction to one of the most groundbreaking collections of feminist criticism, Elaine Showalter recalls an environment of camaraderie with common goals. Women are seen as consensus builders and women's communities function as safe havens from the ways of men.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Collins, 23.

⁵⁸ In reality, most early feminist writers were white women largely from the middle class, so their feminist vision does not address the differences in perspective of women of color or of the working class. See Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa [1982; reprint San Francisco: Aunt

Naylor's racial model also rejects the wholesale separateness of women's experience often found in the feminist vision of women's communities by advocating the common destinies of men and women. The trickster make such reconciliation possible, for Sandra Kumamoto Stanley observes that women writers of color use the subversive nature of the trickster to critique multiple systems of domination which include female systems of domination.⁵⁹ In the novel, Naylor reveals how Sapphira's legend eclipses a comprehensive understanding of Day family history. Only when Mama Day recovers the role of Bascombe Wade and the inner life of John-Paul can she gain the knowledge necessary to ensure the continuation of the Day family line. By having Mama Day recover the male side of the story, Naylor challenges the articulation women's experience that excludes of men. She suggests a more womanist reading of female community, reflecting the commitment "to the survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, male *and* female."⁶⁰

Naylor's view challenges the tendency for some feminists to completely divorce the experiences of men and women. Mark Kann speculates that even feminist academics depict men as victimizers and obstacles to women's agency.⁶¹ They work from the

Lute Books, 1990], 26; and Lynet Uttal, "Inclusion Without Influence: The Continuing Tokenism of Women of Color," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa [San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990], 42.

⁵⁹ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, introduction to *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 1.

⁶⁰ Alice Walker, "Definition of Womanist," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 370. [from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1983].

⁶¹ Mark Kann, "Ongoing Tensions Between Men's Studies and Women's Studies," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2000): 11 August 2000, Expanded Academic ASAP, Infotrac.

premise that men always operate from a position from which they can oppress women. By so sharply delineating women's agency and women's space, these feminists divorce the fate of men from that of women.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor depicts a diverse black female trickster community rather than a sisterhood with no conflict. Through Sapphira, she explores the importance of connections with an ancient and mythic maternal spirit. Yet without performing a central role in the community, Sapphira cannot act as a mediator for the community. Through *Mama Day*, Naylor interrogates the complex maneuverings of a mediatory figure who must reconcile racial and gendered experiences. Through Ruby, Naylor reveals the limits of hyper-femininity. Collectively, these three tricksters represent Naylor's efforts to articulate a racial strategy based on the reconciliation of different experiences into a meaningful whole.

However, both Wideman and Naylor contextualize their racial strategies within a black/white racial paradigm. Does the persona and behavior of tricksters change when they encounter multiple cultural arenas? Do gender and racial experience differ for Chinese Americans? Do Chinese American writers sample from the ways in which African American writers deal with race? A consideration of Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston will help answer these questions.

CHAPTER IV
“EXILE ON THE ROAD OF LIFE”: HEROIC TRICKSTERISM IN FRANK CHIN’S
GUNGA DIN HIGHWAY

You are the stone monkey come to life. To learn the difference between stone idea and living flesh and blood, you must learn everything Chinese and American there is to know, you must master all the knowledge of heaven and earth, become The Sage equal to The Emperor of Heaven so as to see the difference between the real and the fake, the knowledge of what being neither Chinese nor *bokgwai* means.”

“The world, the giant, and the Mother of Humanity create a world where every hero is an orphan, a failed scholar, an outlaw, an outcast, an exile on the road of life through danger, ignorance, deception, and enlightenment.”
--Frank Chin, *Gunga Din Highway*

“Those ‘Chinamen,’ those yellow men who worked on the railroad, the people whites collapsed mines on, paved over, and built towns on, called names on, made laws against, and made their children want to forget, they, the Chinamen, were good men. They’d fought.”
--Frank Chin, “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy”

While Gloria Naylor and John Edgar Wideman investigate racial strategies within a black/white context, Frank Chin articulates a racial strategy for Chinese Americans based on individuality and a masculinized Chinese American culture to combat discrimination and challenge the traditional racial paradigm. By satirizing his three trickster characters, Chin shows the inadequacy of the manipulation of cultural expectations without a consideration of Chinese cultural heritage. He introduces a range of Chinese Americans experiences as well as the different ways in which Chinese Americans interact with other cultures. He simultaneously adapts African American strategies of dealing with race and questions the applicability of those strategies to Chinese Americans. Chin also contests the view of some Chinese American critics who argue for assimilation as a strategy for addressing racial discrimination. Finally, Chin

uses his tricksters' bad examples to promote a strategy whereby Chinese Americans take agency while expressing cultural pride.

Unlike Naylor and Wideman, Chin situates his tricksters within a multiethnic environment in order to address the complex cultural influences that impact Chinese Americans. White society discriminates against Chinese Americans, but it also pressures them to reject their Chinese heritage and assimilate to mainstream society. Some Chinese Americans also promote assimilation for others in their community while many continue to be mistreated as a racial minority, even when they adopt white cultural values. Chinese Americans fall under the ethnic umbrella of Asian America, but they also carry memories of antagonism with other Asian American groups, such as the Japanese. African Americans and other racial minorities acknowledge the discrimination directed against Chinese Americans, but they remain aware of the benefits that Chinese Americans receive from American society when they behave according to the 'model minority' stereotype.

Because Chin addresses key issues that affect Chinese Americans, he enacts a dialogue with Maxine Hong Kingston, a major Chinese American literary influence. In *Gunga Din Highway* (1994), Chin responds to issues raised by Kingston in her 1989 novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. He also interrogates topics central to Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976). These issues include the nature of Chinese American expression, the relationship between Chinese American men and women and the use of Chinese myth in contemporary fiction.¹

¹ Because Chin's novel is published after Kingston's, one could read Chin's work as a response to Kingston's. Chin has passages that take to task Kingston's treatment of male characters as the source of sexism in the Chinese American community. In addition, Chin includes certain aspects of *Tripmaster*

Deliberations on Chinese American culture not only link Chin and Kingston's novels, they link Chin's fiction with his non-fiction work. Rather than arguing that Chin's novels should be interpreted based on intention derived from his essays, I suggest that some of the ideas most prevalent in his essays undergo a satirical representation in his fiction in his attempt to teach the reader what not to do. Through his essays, Chin seeks to represent a profoundly personal experience and redefine Chinese American culture. His essays relate first-hand accounts of his interactions with racism, discrimination and pressures to assimilate. He even uses his imaginative skills in his use of anecdotes and long narrative passages to speculate on how such interactions can result more positively for Chinese Americans. But Chin's imagination takes center stage in his fiction, transforming some of those ideas that form the foundation of his essays. In the novel, Ulysses Kwan, the primary protagonist, explains that "satire is where you make fun of *how* they think, and what *they* say in order to make *them* look *stupid*" (257).² The novel takes up some of the ideas Chin expresses in his essays, but it may parody them, reject them or imaginatively endorse them in order to express a particular point. In this way, Chin can experiment with the possible ramifications of his personal opinions in a way that essays do not allow him to do. I suggest that Chin uses irony in his depiction of his three tricksters in an effort to show Chinese Americans how not to use trickster behavior. While Chin's essays do not act as a standard of interpretation for the novel, they do have a relationship to his fiction.

Monkey into his own novel, such as the centrality of the theater and playwriting in Chinese American creative expression.

² Unless otherwise stated, references to the novel by Frank Chin are quoted from *Gunga Din Highway* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1994).

In *Gunga Din Highway* (1994), Chin uses three Chinese American male tricksters to explore race relations from a Chinese American point of view. Ulysses S. Kwan, his primary trickster, capitalizes on his ability to change identity as he pursues a variety of professions. Profoundly affected by a desire to enact a bold Chinese American masculinity, Ulysses takes advantage of white, black and Chinese cultural expectations. Just as a trickster with a postmodern sensibility embraces multiplicity but also possesses a worldview that is centered on the individual, Ulysses engages multiple cultures, yet interprets his environment through a lens that privileges individual agency. Ulysses becomes disillusioned with attempting to maintain a connection with his Chinese cultural heritage and comes to rely on this extreme sense of individualism. His fantasies, artistic expression and interior monologues often represent insightful cultural critique, but they also possess serious flaws because they are defined solely in opposition to competing discourses.

Ulysses' childhood friends, Benjamin Han and Diego Chang, represent tricksters who also manipulate their way through cultures and distance themselves from their Chinese cultural heritage. Having rejected Chinese culture in early childhood, Ben Han promotes a form of Chinese American culture that caters to white society in order to make a profit for himself. Ben Han could use his actions as a mask for more subversive work, such as the infiltration of the white cultural system, but he is primarily motivated by self-satisfaction like Ulysses. Diego Chang exploits his alienation from mainstream society to achieve self-satisfaction from the beginning, using Chinese culture when it suits him. He later exploits white, black and Chinese American culture equally. Both Ben Han and Diego Chang use their ability to metamorphose and manipulate the

expectations of various cultures to their advantage. Because their use of transformative abilities is motivated by personal desires, in their case, self-interest, they also enact a postmodern worldview. Yet, they are lesser tricksters because they do not perform the sustained cultural critique and examination of cultural discourse like Ulysses.

Gunga Din Highway is the latest of Chin's fictional works that address the ways in which Chinese American men grapple with race and identity. In *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1971) and *Year of the Dragon* (1974), both plays, Chin explores the father-son relationship and its link to the search for cultural roots in the midst of pressures to conform to societal expectations. In his novel *Donald Duk* (1991), Chin explores the adolescence of a Chinese American boy awakening to racial pride.

The critical response to Chin's work often focuses on his efforts to articulate a distinct Chinese American culture and helps illuminate how his use of tricksters reflects his view of that culture. Elaine Kim reveals Chin's belief that "literary creativity is the proper domain of men."³ This observation underscores the masculine Chinese American culture that Chin promotes through his tricksters. David Leiwei Li argues that Chin uses the Chinese heroic tradition to define the 'true' Chinese American experience.⁴ Li illustrates how Chin rejects other definitions of Chinese American culture by insisting on the "true" nature of his own articulation. King-kok Cheung reveals that Chin's reliance on heroism overshadows the experiences of women and rejects the critiques of Asian

³ Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 180.

⁴ David Leiwei Li, "The Formation of Frank Chin and Formations of Chinese American Literature," in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed. Hyung-chan Kim and Stephen S. Fugita (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991), 211-221.

American feminism, shedding light on the nature of Chin's critique of the more prominent purveyors of Chinese American culture in the mainstream society.⁵

Chin's attention to the experiences of Chinese American men in *Gunga Din Highway* places him within a group of Asian American male novelists who explore masculinity and ethnicity. To cite a few of these writers, John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) depicts a Japanese American man's response to pressures to assimilate against the backdrop of a father-son relationship. Louis Chu portrays the experiences of a Chinese immigrant bachelor in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), while Shawn Wong explores the complexity of contemporary Chinese American male life in his novel *Homebase* (1979).

Gunga Din Highway weaves a loose narrative thread through a collection of stories, narrative voices and references to fiction, newspaper articles and films. The novel begins not with its chief protagonist, Ulysses S. Kwan, but with his father, Longman Kwan, an actor whose roles include the stock Asian character in war movies and one of Charlie Chan's sons. Longman goes to Hawaii to convince Anlauf Lorane, the last white man to portray Charlie Chan in cinema, to make an appearance at a music festival. Their encounter reveals Longman's desires to assimilate into American culture, for he dreams of being tapped as the first Chinese American to portray Charlie Chan.

The novel then abruptly switches to Ulysses' recollection of his early childhood. A retired white vaudeville couple raises him until his Chinese family retrieves him at around age six. When Ulysses enrolls in Chinese after-school as a youngster, he meets Benedict Han and Diego Chang, two other Chinese American boys who become the

⁵ King-kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marriane Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990).

closest thing to life-long friends that Ulysses will have. Born in China to opera star parents, Ben Han aspires to assimilate into American culture and leave his Chinese heritage behind. Diego Chang lives in a black neighborhood and identifies strongly with black culture as a youth and musical culture as a young man, but as he matures, he chooses to remain on the margins of most cultural arenas.

The novel alternatively traces the adventures of these friends. Ulysses' path seems the most convoluted. Between pressures to emulate Longman Jr., his older brother who serves in the military, and neglect from his father, Ulysses apprentices himself to an eccentric Chinese poet. While participating in extra-curricular activities, he befriends Jason Peach, a young black man who seeks to take advantage of the status quo whenever he can. From then on, Ulysses explores various avenues: attending Berkeley, working on the railroad, covering a riot in a black neighborhood, participating in the Chinese version of the Black Panthers and writing Chinese activist theatre. When he becomes disillusioned with the state of Chinese American drama, he gives up on cultural reform and becomes a writer of zombie movies in Hollywood.

Ulysses' two childhood friends follow divergent paths. Ben Han, desperate to shed any connection to Chinese culture that prevents his total assimilation, adopts an acceptable Chinese American identity as a writer of politically correct plays and a conservative Asian American professor. He marries Pandora Toy, an Asian American feminist who promotes passive stereotypes and assimilation for Asian American men through her columns and novels. Diego Chang becomes a musician and lives on the fringes of society, both in a commune in Hawaii and later back in the United States.

The paths of all characters converge at many points during the novel, but it is the death of Longman Kwan Sr. that sparks the final reunion of the childhood friends. With Ulysses completely alienated from his family, Ben Han estranged from his wife and Diego divorced and retired from the stage, the novel ends with these childhood friends barreling towards the hospital in Ulysses' mother's car, along with Diego's pregnant housekeeper, her husband and Jason Peach.

The novel winds through the very different experiences of Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang, but they all begin with similar mindsets, for they share the event where they realize their trickster potential.

Common Trickster Characteristics

From the beginning of the novel, Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang reflect aspects of mythic tricksters. During Chinese after-school, they are told that they are neither welcomed by American nor Chinese culture. One day, Mr. Mah, their teacher, observes that they are like the mythic stone monkey in a speech, part of which makes up the epigraph to this chapter:

The Chinese kick you around for not being Chinese. And the whites kick you around for not being American. Obviously you are neither white nor Chinese, but you tell me what does that mean? What is it? You are the stone monkey come to life. To learn the difference between stone idea and living flesh and blood, you must learn everything Chinese and American there is to know, you must master all the knowledge of heaven and earth, become The Sage equal to the Emperor of Heaven so as to see the difference between the real and the fake, the knowledge of what being neither Chinese nor bok-gwai [white European Americans] means.
(93)

As children who receive their Chinese heritage through immigrant parents, the childhood friends are distanced from Chinese culture. At the same time, their appearance and Chinese cultural expressions prevent them from fully assimilating into mainstream

America. Mr. Mah suggests they adopt a trickster persona like that of the mythic stone monkey, the early form of the legendary Monkey King. Jing Wang asserts that the stone monkey “assume[s] a liminal existence by wandering between the mundane world and the sacred realm.”⁶ Rather than conforming to just one culture, Mr. Mah urges his students to move between American and Chinese cultures like the stone monkey moves between realms.

Mr. Mah’s exhortation gives Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang the idea that they are free to create their own identities. Ben Han expresses this realization after hearing Mr. Mah’s speech: “Unlike anyone else in the world, we were neither Chinese nor American. All things were possible. No guilt. We were pure self-invention” (93). If they are free to create their own personas, then they are also free to forge their own paths through American and Chinese cultures. Like the Chinese Monkey king, the childhood friends believe that they can use their agency to manipulate societal expectations for their own benefit.

Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang demonstrate that Chinese Americans can proactively choose their own path and embrace Chinese culture rather than blindly accepting the expectations of mainstream society. Their later actions demonstrate that Chinese Americans can become caught up in the pursuit of individualism to the point that they lose connections with their Chinese American culture. Their lives invite an in-depth investigation of this kind of response to a race-conscious America.

⁶ Jing Wang, *The Story of the Stone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 221.

Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang

Ulysses' trickster personality is shaped by his marginalization from white, black and Chinese cultures as well as from social groups. In the midst of these cultural influences, he develops agency as well as the freedom to accept and reject various cultural influences. His various professions reflect a trend whereby he becomes more distant from the Chinese American culture that initially contextualized his individualism. His childhood friends, Ben Han and Diego Chang, also share Ulysses' penchant for exploiting cultural expectations for their own benefit, as well as the tendency to separate themselves from Chin's brand of Chinese American culture.

Ulysses' psyche develops partly as a result of marginalization, which begins early in childhood when he is distanced from American culture. Because Ulysses is the product of a union between his mother and his mother's uncle, his family sends him to live with a retired, white vaudeville couple far away from Chinese relatives to avoid negative publicity. The new environment reinforces Ulysses' distance from the norms of white and Chinese America, at least in this point in his life. The narrator's description of an incident at a local grocery store underscores Ulysses' marginalization:

“What are you doing with a Jap kid?” the one eyed soldier says in the dim bar by the feed, ice and coal store. Light glances off the blue of his one eye and the blue of something on his uniform. Auntie Bea and Uncle Jackie are blue-eyed, white-haired, old white people . . .

To all who see us three together, it is obvious I am not their child. Their eyes get more blue and glow in the dim light.

“I'm not a Jap kid,” I say, “I'm an American of Chinese descent.”

. . . I have no idea what an American of Chinese descent is; it's what Auntie Bea and Uncle Jackie teach me to say when people call me a Jap kid. (51-52)

The vaudeville couple attempts to lessen Ulysses' sense of alienation by giving him an identity that accounts for his physical difference. Characterizing him as American of Chinese descent makes his physical appearance acceptable, as opposed to characterizing him as a 'Jap kid,' which makes him the enemy.⁷ The similarity of eye color in Auntie Bea, Uncle Jackie and the soldier metaphorically defines Ulysses out of their shared circle, which is uniformly white. They form a triad against which Ulysses' difference is shown in relief.

Ulysses maintains a sense of marginality when he returns to his Chinese family at the age of six. Upon leaving the vaudeville couple, Ulysses ponders the significance of the change: "No one tells me I'm never coming back to Mother Lode. Not even the people who take me tell me they mean to keep me away from what I have always known as home, forever. . . . I am in the hands of strangers whose language means nothing to me" (52-53). This time, Ulysses realizes he is different because he cannot speak or understand Chinese. Ulysses is marginalized by a language that is foreign to him. He can never go back to what was his old home, and remains uncomfortable in his new one.

During his formative years, Ulysses also feels distanced from African Americans. While covering the riot in the black neighborhood, Ulysses thinks about how out of place he feels: "I don't know this ghetto. This ghetto doesn't know me. . . . I'm a Chinaman.

⁷ During World War II, there was a significant effort to distinguish Chinese Americans from Japanese Americans. Ronald Takaki notes this strategy after the bombing of Pearl Harbor: "Previously maligned as the 'heathen Chinese,' 'mice-eaters', and 'Chinks', the Chinese were now friends and allies engaged in a heroic common effort against the 'Japs.' . . . The information distributed in *Time* and the chorus of praises for the Chinese gave them little assurance they would not still be mistaken for the enemy. They remembered how they had previously been called 'Japs' and how many whites had lumped all Asians together" (*Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* [New York: Penguin Books, 1989], 370).

Why am I trying to feel like I've been here before? Everywhere outside of the Mother Lode country I have been a stranger all my life. . . . 'Home,' the way the Negro dishwasher standing at a urinal talks about 'home' in New Orleans, is not the Oakland ghetto or Chinatown. Ma and the aunts don't understand. I don't know, understand, or want 'home' (173, 177-178). Ulysses equates his general marginalization to his feelings of uneasiness in this black neighborhood. While Ulysses expresses his sense of not belonging to any kind of home, he especially does not relate to the sense of community like the black man when he thinks of home.

Not only does Ulysses feel estranged from various cultural arenas, he also experiences alienation as a result of his distrust of others. Ulysses suspects that others may usurp his individualism. In a letter he writes to Ben Han, Ulysses expresses his wariness of social groups: "I have never trusted groups, even groups that had aims and opinions similar to my own, because within the group, these aims and opinions, the ideals which are the group's definition, become sacrosanct dogma" (305). Ulysses fears relinquishing personal agency to the whims of others. Donald Atkinson et al. assert that individuals like Ulysses feel a conflict between potential alliance to a group and maintenance of personal autonomy to the point that there is real concern about individuality.⁸

Ulysses' marginalization is also fueled by his failure to have a meaningful relationship with his father. Ulysses has a troubled relationship with his father, even before he finds out that Longman is not his real father, which he ascertains near the end

⁸ Donald Atkinson, et al, "Within Group Differences among Racial/Ethnic Minorities," *Counseling American Minorities* (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1979), 32.

of the novel.⁹ A crucial bonding experience is missed because Ulysses spends his early childhood years with the white vaudeville couple. When he returns to his Chinese family, Ulysses' interaction with his father is cool and even antagonistic at times because Longman is too preoccupied promoting his career to pay much attention to his son. Ulysses recalls a family picnic where his attempt to win his father's approval by joining him in a chase for parachutes ends in a near stampede of his small body. Longman does not seem to care; he never inquires about Ulysses' possible injuries. His lack of concern demonstrates the chasm between himself and his son.

Ulysses' troubled relationship with his father may have also developed as a result of the abuse he suffers at his hands. When Ulysses refuses to go to another tong picnic and embarrasses his father by his absence, he is greeted at home by corporal punishment administered by his father. Then Longman makes Ulysses' mother hit him as well. Such encounters contribute to Ulysses' resentment of his father, which he reveals to his Chinese half brother Joe Joe: "I never had my father's love, never missed it, and never wanted it. . . . [Longman was] a lousy father. He's a rotten man. A shitty husband" (349, 386).

Marginalization from cultural arenas and lack of connection with his father act as a catalyst in Ulysses' choices of aspects to incorporate into his identity. He chooses to incorporate mainstream society's notions about masculinity into his psyche. Traditional masculinity defines men as strong, dominant, courageous and brave individuals. The

⁹Jeffery Paul Chan and his colleagues assert that a common theme in Asian American literary tradition is the failure of Asian American manhood to express itself in the relationship between father and son ("An Introduction to Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literatures," in *Three American Literatures*, ed. by Houston Baker, (New York: MLA, 1982), 224.

very name Ulysses recalls the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* and the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, both of whom represent a particular kind of masculine characterization in the Western cultural tradition. By naming his protagonist Ulysses, Chin also connects him to Lord Tennyson's poem, "Ulysses." Since Chin's novel is named after a character in a poem by Rudyard Kipling, a contemporary of Tennyson's, the link seems even more viable. Tennyson's poem extols the virtues of traditional masculinity and links it to dominance and strength. As king, Tennyson's Ulysses develops a sense of superiority related less to his royal stature and more to his perception of himself as a masculine hero. In relating his past adventures, note how Ulysses characterizes his fame to his aging compatriots:

I am become a name;
 For always roaming with a hungry heart
 Much have I seen and known—cities of men
 And manners, climates, councils, governments,
 Myself not least, but honored of them all

 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
 (Lord Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses")

The popularity of Ulysses the king is based on his manly virtues of courage and pride. His status as a celebrity and his accolades are a testament to his masculinity. His quests, the cause of his fame, are feats of masculine prowess. Even in old age, these characteristics, as symbols of manhood do not diminish.

The aforementioned traits of traditional masculinity complement Chin's Ulysses, who internalizes a form of Chinese heroism also focused on masculinity. Chin defines Chinese culture using terms like courage and bravery, traditional attributes of

masculinity.¹⁰ Ulysses demonstrates the Chinese heroic aspect of his persona by challenging Mr. Mah's authority during Chinese after-school. He argues with him until he wins. Ulysses' behavior rejects the notion that Asian American males are not assertive and represents an instance of Chinese heroism. It garners the awe and respect of others, like Ben Han, just as the exploits Tennyson's Ulysses gained him the favor of his men. Ulysses' behavior also harkens back to Chinese heroes, for just as they fought for the honor of China, so too Ulysses 'fights' for his own Chinese American identity in Mr. Mah's classroom.

In addition to Chinese heroism, Ulysses' masculinity also mirrors black masculine traits such as an antagonistic stance based on ethnicity. Diego Chang explains that reviews of Ulysses' acting "say that Ulysses is trying to create an unrealistic macho-but butch image of the Chinese man. . . . They quote Pandora Toy's book to put us down: 'Chinese men do not get angry'" (278). Ulysses acts tough to discourage weak characterizations of him as a man. The reviewers, who remark on its resemblance to antagonistic black male behavior, note his aggressiveness. As Wideman demonstrates through his trickster Wally, black men may adopt a tough stance to ward off potential threats to masculinity. Laura Uba speculates on the possibility of adaptation of this behavior by Chinese American men when she asks: "Would Asian Americans raised in predominantly African American neighborhoods and schools identify with this predominant minority or still identify with Euro-Americans who predominate in the

¹⁰ Chin argues that "true" Chinese heritage is marked, not by submissiveness but a warrior tradition: "All of us—men and women—are born soldiers. The soldier is the universal individual. . . .Life is war. The war is to maintain personal integrity in a world that demands betrayal and corruption. All behavior is strategy and tactics. All relationships are martial" ("Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong [New York: Meridian, 1991], 6).

United States as a whole?”¹¹ Ulysses seems to identify somewhat with black men, for he incorporates an aggressive antagonism often linked to black masculinity into his psyche.

Just as Ulysses chooses to incorporate cultural aspects such as Chinese heroism and black masculine behaviors into his personality, he rejects others. Ulysses repudiates the stereotypically weak masculinity emulated by his father. Longman Kwan gladly accepts roles that portray Asian American men as helpless or inferior, such as the ‘Chinaman Who Dies,’ a stock Asian actor in war movies who always ends up dead to elicit a sentimental response from the audience, and the stock evil Japanese character in war movies , who dies to underscore the heroics of the white leading man.

Longman’s burning desire to be the first Chinese American to portray Charlie Chan reveals the clearest example of his willingness to embody a weak Asian American masculinity. Longman is gleeful when he reads Pandora Toy’s article advocating his selection for the role of Charlie Chan. Uba states that individuals like Longman who adhere to such assimilationist tendencies “completely prefer. . .to adopt the cultural values and lifestyles of Euro-Americans and, at the same time, consciously and unconsciously denigrate the physical and cultural characteristics of their minority group . . .to elevate their status by identifying with members of the dominant group).”¹² The role of Charlie Chan would allow Longman to accede to societal expectations by representing an image that is acceptable to mainstream white America.

¹¹ Laura Uba, *Asian Americans: Personality Patterns, Identity and Mental Health* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 93.

¹² Uba, 92.

What makes Charlie Chan an example of weak Asian American masculinity? He is a character deliberately created to be inferior, thus making him the epitome of American society's failure to confer masculinity on Asian American men. Anlauf Lorane explains that Charlie Chan was designed to provide comic relief to white men. Charlie Chan represents an amalgam of Chang Apana, a famous Chinese gunslinger, and Charlie Chaplin, comic of the silent screen. As such, the figure does not incorporate the traditional masculine attributes ascribed to Chang Apana and takes more comic characteristics from Charlie Chaplin. Jeffery Paul Chan and his colleagues cite a general lack of agency in this image of Asian American masculinity, asserting that "the white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood. . . . At worst, the Asian-American male is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage and creativity."¹³

In addition to the inferior masculinity embodied in the roles Longman Kwan takes, Ulysses also rejects the image of the patriotic Chinese American represented by Longman Kwan Jr., Ulysses' older brother. Longman Jr. gains kudos by joining the service, thus emulating the expectations of the dominant society. His service in the army represents a historic willingness to renounce ethnic culture in favor of American values. During World War II, Chinese Americans were motivated to prove their loyalty by enlisting in the armed services and appear 'safe' in the eyes of American society, lest they be mistaken for Japanese Americans, who were considered potential spies and

¹³ Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn H. Wong. "An Introduction to Chinese American and Japanese American Literatures," in *Three American Literatures*, ed. Houston Baker (New York: MLA, 1982), 211.

traitors.¹⁴ In Longman Jr.'s case, the appellation of hero represents the same kind of non-threatening masculinity conferred on his father, for he is not a danger if he fights for America against other Asians.

Just as Ulysses expresses individual agency in choosing to incorporate or reject certain cultural aspects into his psyche, he exercises individuality through the series of vocations he takes on during his life. These series of professions take Ulysses steadily away from appreciating his "true" Chinese cultural heritage. Ulysses first professional leanings are toward being a poet like his Chinese mentor, Fat Jack. He teaches Ulysses how to be a Chinese artist. Later, Ulysses becomes a railroad brakeman, emulating his Chinese immigrant ancestors who helped build the rails.

Ulysses takes a giant step away from "authentic" Chinese culture that contextualized his earlier individualism when he decides to abandon activist Asian American theatre. Initially inspired to change the face of Asian American theatre, Ulysses quits in disgust. Rather than starting a new theatre group with more agreeable actors, Ulysses becomes a Hollywood screenwriter, stating "no more doing it for the people. No more organized poetry" (346). Ulysses goes from directing Chinese American activist theater to writing Hollywood zombie movies, a far cry from the aggressive Chinese American culture Chin endorses:

There are advantages to being a minority no one takes seriously, no one is afraid of, no one stands up for. I mean, no one in Hollywood is about to give Eldridge, Huey or Stokely a job writing zombie movies. . . . If *The Night of the Living Third*

¹⁴ Ronald Takaki refers to similar sentiments of Harold Liu, a Chinatown resident: "In the 1940s for the first time Chinese were accepted by Americans as being friends because at that time, Chinese and Americans were fighting against the Japanese and the Germans and the Nazis. Therefore, all of a sudden, we became part of the American dream" (*Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* [New York: Penguin Books, 1990], 373).

World Dead brings in just \$30 million, I can quit writing for the Four Horsemen [Hollywood executives] and be rich enough to be forgotten. . . . If not, I'll never have to work again in my life, anyway, and I can go back to writing art that goes nowhere, without ever again worrying about eating out and paying the rent. (345-346)

Unlike Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton and Stokely Carmichael, key figures of the 60s who were dedicated to black social movements, Ulysses embraces the self-serving art of commercial writing. He wants to make enough money to be able to make art for art's sake, with no obligations to an audience, especially a Chinese American one. Because Ulysses is "pure self invention," he is free from cultural obligations and expectations, including those imposed even by Chin's brand of Chinese American culture. Zombie movies fail to engage the distinct experience of Chinese Americans, for they do not discuss race at all. In the end, Ulysses takes individualism beyond a contextualization of Chinese American culture.

Ulysses' sense of individual agency is shared his childhood friends, Ben Han and Diego Chang. As youths, they shared an interest in Chinese epics like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and took on the roles of Lowe Bay, Chang Fay and Kwan Kung, three soldiers who meet against the backdrop of the collapsing Han dynasty and agree to work together to save the virtue of China. As the novel progresses, Ben Han and Diego Chang develop individual agency in radically different ways. Each eventually distances himself from the "real" Chinese American context of their childhood personas.

While Ben Han acquiesces to being a part of the Chinese version of the Three Musketeers, his connection to "genuine" Chinese culture has always been tenuous. When they were children, Ben Han, Diego Chang and Ulysses each envisioned themselves as one of the Brothers of the Oath of the Peach Garden. Ben Han's description of himself

reveals his early disidentification from Chinese culture: “I was Lowe Bay, the first brother, the pretender to the throne of the Han, because my mother was Orchid Han—the opera star who turned her company into a guerilla band to fight the Japanese in Kwangtung. . . . My mother was so special in the Chinese-speaking world. . . . She was the star of opera I intended never to hear. She was a guerilla hero from a war that was over. I was a prince of a country that didn’t exist” (73-74). As a young man, he rejects everything Chinese. He admires Ulysses because he “speaks English like an American” (75). He likes Ulysses’ science fiction stories because they do not have any Chinese characters. Out of the three childhood friends, only Ben Han likes Longman’s movies.

When Ben Han grows up to promote an assimilationist version of Chinese American culture, it is the logical consequence of a life built on a conscious separation from “true” Chinese culture. As an adult trickster, he uses his knowledge to exploit Chinese American culture to gain favor in the dominant society. After meeting Pandora Toy, Ben Han becomes a vocal advocate for a brand of Chinese American culture that excoriates Chinese cultural heritage that is not acceptable to mainstream American society. During rehearsal for his play, he explains his stance to Ulysses: “If anyone deserves to profit from the white racist fantasy, we Chinese Americans do. . . . The only way we can make it in America is to sell ourselves. No one wants to buy our folk tales. But they like buying exotic Oriental women and men who are either sinister brutes or simpletons. So why not sell it to them?” (261-262). Ben Han crafts version of Chinese American culture that rejects the martial tradition in order to curry favor with white society. He gains acclaim by doing so, for according to Diego Chang, the play in New York turns him into “Mr. Asian American Studies.” (277).

While Ben Han uses his agency as a trickster to exploit Chinese American culture, Diego Chang uses his gifts to exploit several cultures. Like both Ulysses and Ben Han, Diego is aware of his Chinese cultural heritage, but chooses to distance himself from it. The embryo of Diego Chang's attitude begins in childhood with his identification with blacks. Ben Han recalls: "Except for the other Brothers of the Oath, all of Diego's friends in San Francisco were Negroes. He lived above a Chinese restaurant on a Negro street, in a Negro neighborhood. Diego talked like Negroes. He said he liked Negroes better than *Iofan*. He said the Negroes were 'really American'" (76). By associating with blacks, Diego Chang places himself metaphorically on the borders of both American and Chinese American society, for both cultural spheres marginalize African Americans.

As the novel progresses, Diego Chang uses this marginal position to scam others, including Chinese Americans. Ben Han remembers that Diego Chang was always involved in potentially illicit activities, such as getting into movies for free. As a young adult, Diego Chang uses his position in the Chinatown Black Tigers, a Chinese activist group, to get money from Chinese tongs, the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce and the restaurant owners under the pretense of raising awareness of social injustice. He helps the Black Panthers sell Mao's *Little Red Book*, parlaying pennies into dollars for himself. Diego Chang later uses his position as counselor in Ben Han's Asian American studies program to help Chinatown gang kids fence stolen goods. Such activities could be interpreted as subversive to the status quo if they provided a benefit to an oppressed group. But Diego Chang exploits his people for his own benefit.

Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego initially enact the model of the Chinese Monkey King, but they eventually distance themselves from their "true" Chinese cultural heritage.

Ulysses responds to his marginalization from individuals as well as other cultures by developing a strong sense of individual agency. Infused with a sense of masculinity, Ulysses uses his agency to choose which cultural influences he accepts and rejects. While he initially chooses to contextualize his individualism within Chinese American culture, he eventually separates himself from that culture. Both Ben Han and Diego Chang use their trickster agency to exploit societal expectations and separate themselves from “true” Chinese American culture, but neither critiques cultures as Ulysses does. In the references to the ‘Movie About Me,’ which represent fantasies and daydreams, Ulysses challenges the assumptions of a variety of dominant, Chinese American and black cultural discourses.

Cultural Discourses

While Ulysses’ series of professions reveal a general retreat from “genuine” Chinese American culture, his engagement with a variety of cultural discourses belies a connection with his Chinese heritage. It is significant to note that most of the cultural critique he performs occurs before his complete break from Chinese culture. In his analysis of culture, Ulysses targets dominant cultural narratives of assimilation and ethnic emasculation. He elevates a Chinese martial tradition as an alternative. Ulysses advocates the parody of stereotypical images as an alternative to what he sees as the internalization of conformity by Chinese Americans. He also critiques the alleged superficiality of the Black Panthers and advocates apathy in its stead. Ulysses raises important questions about a variety of cultural discourses, but because his alternatives are created solely in opposition to the cultural discourses under review, they fail to comprehensively address those competing discourses.

One of the most significant narratives of assimilation and ethnic emasculation enters the novel under the spectre of the character of Gunga Din. Rudyard Kipling's poem, "Gunga Din," like most of his work, invites a colonialist reading. In the following passage, the British soldier narrator assumes an imperialist position over the native Gunga Din in describing his character:

If we charged or broke or cut,
 You could bet your bloomin' nut,
 'E'd be waitin' fifty paces right flank rear.
 With 'is mussick on 'is back,
 'E would skip with our attack,
 An' watch us till the bugles made "Retire,"
 An' for all 'is dirty 'ide
 'E was white, clear white, inside
 When 'e went to tend the wounded under fire!
 (Kipling, "Gunga Din")

The narrator praises Gunga Din for his service to the British soldiers, which mirrors the service of the Indian people to the British empire. Gunga Din is a good man, not because of intrinsic characteristics, but because he serves his masters well in a war to promote British imperialism. The western voice of the British soldier confines Indian men, and by extension, all Asians and Asian American men, to the position of servant. B.J. Moore-Gilbert suggests that Kipling's poem falls into Edward Said's conception of orientalism, which "has as its aim 'dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' . . . It conceives of the East as radically 'other' and alien to the West."¹⁵ In this context, Gunga Din embodies a representation of Asian and Asian American male helplessness and dependence.

¹⁵ B.J. Moore-Gilbert, *Kipling and 'Orientalism'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 1-2, 3.

Ethnic emasculation and assimilation represented by Gunga Din have a tradition in film as well. Many films fail to realistically portray people of Asian descent. In *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), the title character, a Japanese warlord, perpetuates the notion that Asian men are morally depraved and without empathy. *Back to Bataan* (1945) reinforces ideas that the Japanese are capable of unusually cruel wartime conduct. Asians are consistently portrayed as drug-addicted fiends that engage in female slavery in films like *The Sand Pebbles* (1962). Whereas these films concentrate on sinister portrayals, movies such as *Auntie Mame* (1958) employ Asian characters for comic relief through caricatures and stereotypes.

The film *Gunga Din* (1939), directed by George Stevens, underscores the link between the pressure to assimilate and ethnic emasculation.¹⁶ Set in a British camp in the midst of rebel uprisings in India, the film stars Cary Grant, Douglass Fairbanks and Vince McLaughlan who play soldiers who create an atmosphere of male bonding. Both Grant and Fairbanks are introduced in a scene where they are embroiled in a bar fight, firmly establishing them as men. Grant's character seeks to maintain the 'boys club' by sabotaging Fairbanks' efforts to get married and leave the service. He succeeds, for Fairbanks chooses to help free the captured Grant rather than get married, explaining to his bride-to-be that "he's a man first."

Analysis of Gunga Din's role in the film reveals an absence of masculinity conferred upon men of color and a promotion of conformity to the Western way. Sam

¹⁶ George Stephens. *Gunga Din*, RKO Pictures, 1936. There are several expositions of the film in the novel. The most revealing one is where Ulysses recounts the funeral scene in the movie after the funeral of his own father.

Jaffe, a white man, dons dark make-up and an Indian accent to portray Gunga Din.¹⁷

During the film, the white stars perform their masculinity by extricating themselves from ambushes and bar fights, while the Indian men are depicted as purely evil, like the leader of the rebel Indian forces, or docile followers, like Gunga Din. At the same time, Gunga Din tries desperately to emulate the soldiers. He mimics their marching and seems eager to serve the British soldiers and gain their acceptance. Despite his efforts, he is consistently shunned and regarded as merely a servant. Only after Gunga Din risks his life to save the British soldiers and dies in the process do the British soldiers confer masculinity on Gunga Din. The three 'heroes' survive to eulogize Gunga Din in Kipling's poem, implying that they only really consider Gunga Din a man after he dies.

Ulysses critiques the sentiments of Stephen's film and Kipling's poem for their promotion of cultural conformity and emasculation of Asian men. Ulysses rejects Gunga Din as a role model, as he explains in one of the novels many monologues: "George Stevens' *Gunga Din*, with Cary Grant, Victor McLaughlan and Douglass Fairbanks Jr., in pith helmets, playing three British soldiers in Colonial India and Sam Jaffe in a turban as Gunga Din, their water boy, who helps the British make war against his people. This is not *The Movie About Me*" (394). Ulysses challenges the weak masculinity ascribed to Gunga Din. He recognizes it as an affront to his desire to maintain a heroic Chinese American identity.

¹⁷ Jaffe's portrayal represents a form of minstrelsy. Eric Sundquist quotes Saidya Hartman's assertion that minstrelsy calls "attention to the artifice of racialism but at the same time aggressively asserted the black subject's given place in the social order" (Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 1993], 153).

Ulysses' preference for Chinese heroes acts as an alternative that confers masculinity on Asian men. As a child, it is Ulysses who constantly seeks out books on the old Chinese heroic sagas, such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. When Ben Han's girlfriend, Pandora Toy, publishes her version of a Chinese legend, Ulysses counters with the 'true' Chinese tradition:

The fact is that Chinese literature—The Three Brothers of the Oath of the Peach Garden, Sam Gawk Yurn Yee, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Fung Sun Bong and Kwang Kung—has nothing to do with your fiancée's strange tales. The stories she says are Chinese aren't and never were. She's not rewriting Chinese anything, man. She's just doing a rewrite of Pearl Buck and Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. . . . This isn't Chinese. This isn't the Three Brothers. This isn't Kwan Yin. How does she get away with this bullshit?" (261, 275)

Ulysses points to 'true' Chinese literature made up of heroic sagas and daring acts of bravery. He advocates retaining the battles and courageous deeds of the heroes. These attributes, as Cheung asserts, "show further that Chinese . . . have a heroic—which is to say militant—heritage."¹⁸ Ulysses defines real Chinese literature as those tales that relate the heroic exploits of Chinese men.

Because Ulysses' heroism is primarily in response to emasculation of ethnic men, it fails to expose the limitations of traditional masculinity or advocate alternative definitions of masculinity. Ulysses makes the same mistake Chin does, for Kim observes that "Chin flails out at the emasculating aspects of oppression, but he accepts his oppressor's definition of masculinity."¹⁹ Ulysses does not question why heroism is the only proper measure of a man. He does not challenge masculinity defined by the power men can wield over others. Ulysses also fails to explore alternative masculinities. He

¹⁸ Cheung, "Warrior and Chinaman," 241-242.

¹⁹ Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 90.

privileges the hero over other masculinities identified by Ian Harris, such as the scholar, the teacher and the humanitarian.²⁰ A more flexible form of heroism not solely defined opposite emasculating forces would create a more comprehensive discourse on masculinity. King-kok Cheung points to the Chinese male image of the *sushen*, or poet-scholar, as a Chinese alternative masculinity: “The poet-scholar, far from either brutish or asexual, is seductive because of his gentle demeanor, his wit and his refined sensibility. He prides himself on being indifferent to wealth and political power and seeks women and men who are his equals in intelligence and integrity. . . . surely reclaiming the ideal of the poet-scholar will combat [the] cultural invisibility [of Asian American men].”²¹

In addition to dominant cultural discourses, Ulysses targets the assimilation promoted by Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans. He questions the eagerness of Asian Americans to portray stereotypical roles. When Ulysses gets frustrated at the lack of participation of Asian Americans in his workshop, he blasts the unresponsive actors:

Fame and money are the only truths American yellow respect. They don't want to act. They want to be stars. They don't want to write. They want to be stars. They don't want Asian American plays. They want stardom. No swearing in front of whites. No criticism of white racism. No railroad stories or Japanese-American concentration camp stories that do not confirm the stereotype and reassure whites. Yellows are a pathological victim people. They don't want Asian-American theater. They want the secret of the stereotype. They want to learn to be the Keye Luke, Benson Fong, Victor Sen Yung, Longman Kwan,

²⁰ Ian Harris, *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities* (Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1995).

²¹ King-kok Cheung, “Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 190.

Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan of their generation. This isn't theater, Ulysses says. This is a meat market. (284)

Ulysses chastises his students' desire to be accepted by the mainstream. He thinks these actors fail as 'true' Chinese American actors because they do not want to portray roles that foreground their Chinese heritage in a way that challenges mainstream images. Ulysses' reaction echoes Jeffery Paul Chan et al's concern over the validation of assimilation by Asian Americans: "The subject minority is conditioned to reciprocate by becoming the stereotype, live it, talk it, believe it, and measure group and individual worth in its terms. . . . The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. The race poses no threat to white supremacy. It is now a guardian of white supremacy, dependent on it and grateful to it."²² Ulysses critiques members of his own culture for refusing to emulate 'true' Asian American culture in favor of expectations of dominant society.

In addition to actors, Ulysses also blames Asian American critics for shaping Asian American cultural discussion according to the dictates of the mainstream society. Asian American women writers become primary targets of Ulysses' contempt. When complaining to Ben Han, Ulysses accuses Pandora of distorting Chinese culture as merely an oppressive, patriarchal culture: "Were your mother's feet bound? Did Pandora's mother have bound feet? It was never a popular or common practice. Nothing in Chinese folk tales praises women with bound feet or even mentions it because the folk didn't do it. To the folk, binding women's feet was always the behavior of perverts. And not one woman ever had her feet bound in Chinatown in the States" (261). Like Chin,

²² Jeffery Paul Chan et al, 208.

Ulysses chastises successful writers Chinese American women for removing material objectionable to the mainstream society sensibility and following the feminist fad of emasculating Asian American men in an effort to curry favor with the mainstream society.²³ Instead of portraying the true heroic Chinese culture, Pandora perpetuates stereotypical notions about Chinese men by accusing them of making Chinese American women adhere to a painful standard of beauty.

As an alternative to such critical discussions, Ulysses offers parodies of stereotypes in the play, *Fu Manchu Plays Flamenco Guitar* as cultural critique. During rehearsal, Ulysses explains why he can sing a racist song about Chinese Americans: “That’s why I *am* singing this song. I know it’s racist. We all know it’s racist and makes fun of the Chinese, that’s why I’m singing it. . . . “Satire is where you make fun of how *they* think and what *they* say in order to make *them* look *stupid*” (257). Ulysses performs a kind of critique by reappropriating racist expressions. In effect, Ulysses believes he transforms the racist intent of a slur like ‘ching-chong-chinaman’ because he is a Chinese American making fun of the song. The same reasoning applies in his portrayal of Fu Manchu. Ulysses makes such an outrageous portrayal of Fu Manchu to highlight its racist connotations.

By focusing the parody primarily on the Fu Manchu character, Ulysses fails to reveal how the emasculation of men also serves to undermine Chinese women, and the

²³ Chin identifies what he calls racist love on the part of successful Asian American writers and accuses them of catering to the dominant society project: “Kingston, Hwang, and Tan are the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry, to so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history. And, to legitimize their faking, they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories. This version of history is their contribution to the stereotype.” (“Real and Fake”, 3).

Chinese American community as a whole. As King-kok Cheung explains, Chinese American men attained the stereotype of being effeminate partially because they were consigned to virtual bachelorhood as immigrants during the late 1800s by such immigration policies like the Page Law of 1875. By including most Chinese women under the category of prostitutes, the policy effectively eliminated immigration by Chinese wives. This characterization underscored the exotic, sexualized image of Asian women in the popular imagination. Cheung cites Gina Marchetti's description of the link between gender and racial hierarchies: "Thus, fantasies of threatening Asian men, emasculated eunuchs, alluring Asian 'dragon ladies,' and submissive female slaves all work to rationalize white, male domination."²⁴ Because Ulysses' critique of negative images is primarily aimed at men, it misses how stereotypical characterizations of Asian women impact Asian men and subordinates all Asian Americans.

In addition to critiquing cultural discourses of Chinese America, Ulysses targets black culture by criticizing the Black Panthers. While one could argue that Ulysses owes part of his own ethnic pride to the race consciousness promoted by such groups, he nevertheless critiques this social movement. Ulysses recalls his involvement in the Chinatown Black Tigers, an Asian American activist organization loosely based on the Black Panthers:

If Eldridge or Stokely could only see me now! They were right about no one taking Chinese-American Third World revolutionaries seriously. No one remembers me from the late '60s, early '70s. No. Today, people take the picture poster of me in the wrap-around silvered shades, Fu Manchu moustache, Charlie Chan centerline beard, black turtlenecked sweater, chrome bayonet fixed on the muzzle of an AK-47, 'Power to the People!' emblazoned in exclamatory Chinese

²⁴ Cheung, "Of Men and Men," 173-174.

across the top and “Chinatown Black Tigers” in English on the bottom—as a *joke*.
(345)

Ulysses emphasizes the outer trappings of black nationalism over the actual accomplishments of the group. Ulysses’ parody of the silver shades, the mustache and the black revolutionary turtleneck defines the movement by superficial trappings. In this regard, his performance echoes critics such as Houston Baker, who refer to the lack of a coherent agenda and an emphasis on outer trappings, “those signs of a raised black American consciousness—the Afro hairstyle, the dashiki, and the tricolored black nationalist flag” as the extent of the movement.²⁵ Ulysses reduces the Black Panthers to irrelevant social movement with a catchy slogan. Because he sees the Black Panthers as just a show, he fails to recognize how the Black Panthers advocate a significant response to inequitable power relations in society.

Because Ulysses does not trust groups, he does not advocate any particular social activism as an alternative. His emphasis on individuality preempts the need for group response and allows him to denigrate loyalty to issues of equity and justice. For example, Ulysses admits his participation in the Chinatown Black Tigers is simply for show: “Diego and me are all for fun, the Chinatown Black Tigers are nothing more than a yellow minstrel show. . . The Revolution is fading fast. When the chump change goes, so goes the noble social motives of the gangs” (218-220). Since Ulysses is driven by a strong sense of individuality, he does not see any need to promote a commitment to any cause or social group.

²⁵ Houston Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 81, 135.

However, Ulysses overlooks the real change promoted by the Black Panthers. According to Harvard Sitkoff, the Black Panthers not only waged a rhetorical war, but also instituted real community services that helped alleviate oppression within neighborhoods, such as the free lunch program. More vocal and vociferous than the non-violent protest of the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panthers gained popularity by offering a way of dealing with discrimination that gave blacks responsibility for their own lives rather than depending on legislation from the government.²⁶

Ulysses also overlooks the impact of the group on other social activism involving people of color, including Asian Americans. Kathleen Neal Cleaver recalls that the Black Panther Party opposed the Vietnam war and drew parallels between the struggles of blacks in America and the people of Vietnam.²⁷ This anti-imperialist message carried much weight with Asian American student activists, whom William Wei says “were particularly impressed with the Black Panther party. . . [which] traced all oppressed people’s problems, foreign and domestic, to American imperialism”²⁸ The Panther call for armed self-defense resonated with the Red Guards, a Chinese American activist group whose goal, like the Panthers, was to gain community power. They not only implemented community food programs, but later participated in successfully challenging

²⁶ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954-1992*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 201.

²⁷ Kathleen Neal Cleaver, “Back to Africa: The Evolution of the International Section of The Black Panther Party (1969-1972),” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 233.

²⁸ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 15.

the oppressive authority of the Chinese Six Companies in Chinatown.²⁹ Because he responds to the myth surrounding the Black Panther party, Ulysses fails to draw parallels between blacks' and Chinese Americans' calls for change.

Trickster Behavior as Racial Strategy

Frank Chin satirizes his tricksters in order to articulate a Chinese American racial strategy based on individualism and a masculinized Chinese American culture and to challenge the traditional racial paradigm. The experiences of Ulysses, Ben Han and Diego Chang represent the perils that lay ahead for those who fail to consider their Chinese American heritage in their pursuit of individualism. Chin adapts some African American strategies for interrogating race, but he also questions the tendency to view all minority experience based on the experiences of blacks. By privileging a specific kind of Chinese American individual over the community, Chin also contests the idea that change for Chinese Americans can only take place through group consensus.

Using his tricksters as a negative example, Chin suggests that Chinese Americans should use their individual agency within the context of their Chinese heritage. He uses irony and satire to show that his tricksters deviate from the 'right' racial model, one based on individual agency and contextualized by a masculine Chinese culture. In an essay, Chin notes: "The first strategy we [Chinese Americans] have to learn is how to make the difference between the real and the fake so that we cannot be tricked and used to work against our own interests."³⁰ The three tricksters take in the knowledge and use agency to

²⁹ The Chinese Six Companies, also known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, operated as an umbrella organization that represented the Chinatown community and exerted great power within the Chinese community.

³⁰ Frank Chin, "A Chinaman in Singapore," in *Bulletproof Buddhists and Other Essays* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 334.

accomplish their goals, but they are still tricked into working against Chinese American interests. They also distance themselves from the martial tradition that Chin insists defines Chinese culture. Ulysses chooses to go from a socially conscious Chinese American artist to a Hollywood screenwriter. Ben Han exploits American expectations of Chinese American culture to gain job security. Diego Chang goes for any scam he can. These tricksters revel in the spaces between culture, still not realizing they have been co-opted by the very culture they seek to undermine because they forget about their connection to Chinese America.

In crafting this racial strategy, Chin parallels black writers who create diverse images of ethnic individuals in their fiction to combat reductive images in the popular imagination. In *Reuben*, John Edgar Wideman challenges the notion that black men are either hoodlums or assimilated members of the middle class. Even through he parodies his tricksters, Chin implicitly questions the grossly reductive depictions of Chinese American men as passive and self-effacing. In “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy,” he identifies Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan as two poles that American society uses to categorize Chinese American men. Charlie Chan is the comic version of Chinese American male identity, while Fu Manchu is the evil version. According to Chin, both characterizations undermine manhood for Chinese American men and force them into reductive identities. Neither image operates as a threat to the masculinity of whites.³¹

Chin also mirrors black writers in his promotion of an aggressive ethnic masculinity as a response to racial discrimination. For example, Amiri Baraka describes

³¹ Chin, “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy,” in *Bulletproof Buddhists and Other Essays* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 95-96.

the dominant cultural power as “The Man.”³² In his essay “State/meant,” he sets up tension between black and white men, and urges black men to exercise their masculinity by reappropriating cultural symbols through creative expression.³³ Chin also recognizes that Chinese American men should combat emasculating images through a bold Chinese American masculinity. He asserts that “White America is as securely indifferent about [Chinese Americans] as men, as Plantation owners were about their loyal house niggers. House niggers is what America has made of us, admiring us for being patient, submissive, esthetic, passive, accommodating essentially feminine in character. . . what whites call ‘Confucianist’, dreaming us up a goofy version of Chinese culture to preserve in becoming the white male’s dream minority.”³⁴ Chin sees a parallel between negative images of black and Chinese men, and seeks to depict a pose opposite to the role imposed upon Asian American men by American society. Taking a cue from black writers, Chin advocates an aggressive Chinese American masculinity to challenge images of effeminacy.

Chin also takes a cue from black writers regarding racial discourse. This adaptation stems in part from the legacy of Ishmael Reed. Chin and Reed share a professional relationship, for Reed has edited and published some of Chin’s work. Reed’s ideas might have especially appealing to Chin because Reed acknowledges a

³² See also Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 184, 186.

³³ Amiri Baraka, “State/meant,” *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (1966; reprint, New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989), 169.

³⁴ Chin, “Confessions,” 67.

connection between the experiences of African Americans and Asian Americans. In *Japanese by Spring* (1997), the narrator expresses Reed's sympathies with Asian Americans: "The Japanese and the African Americans had another thing in Common. Both were being blamed for the decline of the United States. And just as economic embargoes were used against yellows, they were also used against blacks."³⁵ In Reed's eyes, both African Americans and Asian Americans were historically subject to cultural and historical imperialism fueled by the discourse of Western superiority. Both have been subject to blame by American society for the alleged decline of American culture.

Chin also emulates Reed's tendency to critique rather harshly his own cultural group. In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Reed critiques the tendency of some African Americans to attain knowledge in an effort to ingratiate themselves into the dominant society and use that knowledge to the detriment of African Americans.³⁶ Chin levels the same charge against fellow Chinese American writers in an essay entitled "A Chinaman in Singapore": "I see all persons of Chinese ancestry, all of them born to speak English. . . writing the very same Christian white racist autobiography, the same old Yung Wing, Leong Gor Yun, Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gus Lee, on and on, the same book about the same old Chinese Christian me me, wanting to be free of a Chinese culture so misogynistic and morally despicable it doesn't deserve to survive."³⁷

³⁵ Ishmael Reed, *Japanese by Spring* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 208-208.

³⁶ Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 37.

³⁷ Chin, "Singapore," 388.

While Chin clearly adapts some African American discourse on race relations, he also questions the applicability of some of that discourse to the experience of Chinese Americans. Often, racial discourse explains the experience of all ethnic minorities in terms of the effect of the oppression suffered by blacks. President Bill Clinton's 1997 Initiative on Race faced early criticisms because it constructed the debate about race relations solely in terms of black and white. Racially motivated uprisings, such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots, are often portrayed as a clash between blacks and whites, with little mention of the significance of Korean merchants.

Chin's racial strategy asserts that Chinese Americans have their own distinct racial experience. Unlike African Americans, Chinese Americans must deal the ramifications of coming from a foreign country that has had a tumultuous relationship with the United States. Historically, the perception of Chinese Americans greatly depended on the relationship between the United States and China. Before 1882, the United States had a favorable relationship with China and extended some courtesies to its citizens. However, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was partially a result of estranged relationships between the United States and China. The image of the Chinese went from thrifty and hardworking to sinister and suspect. Chin argues that the experiences of blacks cannot completely describe the Chinese American experience in American society. By injecting a distinct Chinese American racial experience, he challenges the black/white racial paradigm and creates a space for a more comprehensive discussion of racial attitudes.

In addition to challenging the black/white racial paradigm, Chin promotes individuality in Chinese American culture as an alternative to the communalism

advocated by many Chinese American critics. Such critics argue for Asian American panethnicity, where, as Yen Le Espiritu explains, large-scale identities, concerted action against dominant groups and challenges to the allocation of power in society benefit all under the Asian American umbrella.³⁸ Using the Chinese Monkey King as a model, Chin asserts that individualism is the way to combat discrimination and racism: “Once Monkey starts to learn, men try to trick and control him by keeping him deep in the busywork of ignorance. . . . The book ends with the Buddha naming him a Buddha to try to control him, but the Monkey keeps on learning, beyond nirvana, beyond the bright lights of enlightenment, beyond everything written.”³⁹ Chin sees individuality as a trickster strategy, for the Monkey King does not depend on anyone else to give him wisdom or to help in his own survival. In this way, Chin advocates individuals manipulating expectations of others to combat racism and discrimination.

Chin also advocates using these skills on other Chinese Americans who have been tricked into promoting ‘the fake’ and gaining acceptance by predominately white audiences. In an essay, Chin relates that such audiences “hate me. They love Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. They like the idea of falsifying Chinese culture in the name of art and Westernization.”⁴⁰ These “purveyors of the fake” harm Chinese Americans by teaching falsehood and not telling the truth in order to appease white society. They do the same thing as his tricksters: become distanced from “true” Chinese culture and suffer.

³⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 10, 12.

³⁹ Chin, “Singapore,” 390.

⁴⁰ Chin, “Singapore,” 333, 393.

Chin articulates a racial strategy for Chinese Americans based on individualism and a masculinized Chinese American culture. Rather than accepting the expectations of others, he urges Chinese Americans to define their own racial nature. By insisting on Chinese American agency, Chin's racial strategy also poses a challenge to black racial discourse. Chin also diverges from the Chinese American critical establishment in his insistence on a masculinized Chinese American culture.

Frank Chin uses three Chinese American male tricksters to articulate a racial strategy for Chinese Americans that goes beyond the black/white racial paradigm. Chin's version of Chinese American culture inserts the often-overlooked experience of Chinese Americans. It also brings to light the ways in which Chinese Americans incorporate other cultural influences into their lives while maintaining control of their lives. At the same time, Chin challenges other Chinese Americans who he believes promote assimilationism among the community as a racial strategy. While Chin's approach raises important questions, it also leaves significant questions unanswered. While Maxine Hong Kingston addresses some of the same issues interrogated by Chin, she takes up some of the issues he overlooks in her articulation of Chinese American racial strategy.

CHAPTER V
“NATIVE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE GOLDEN STATE:” THE
COMPOSITE TRICKSTER FIGURE IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S *THE
TRIPMASTER MONKEY: HIS FAKE BOOK*

When you are a person who comes from a multicultural background it just means that you have more information coming in from the universe. And it’s your task to figure out how it all integrates, figure out its wonder and its beauty. It’s a harder, longer struggle.
—Maxine Hong Kingston

“I’m going to start a theatre company. I’m naming it The Pear Garden Players of America. The Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theatre began on Earth. Out among the trees, ordinary people made fools of themselves acting like kings and queens. As playwright and producer and director, I’m casting blind. . . . I’m including everything that has been left out, everybody who has no place.”

He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it.
---Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

Both Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin share a keen interest in the nature and scope of the Chinese American experience. Both seek to articulate a distinct Chinese American culture that challenges traditional racial discourse. They simultaneously adapt the racial discourse of black writers and question a racial paradigm based solely on the experiences of blacks and whites. Chin and Kingston indict white society for its promotion of negative images of Chinese Americans through popular culture and urge Chinese Americans to assume responsibility for defining themselves. Kingston herself has noted in an interview that she and Chin share the same background; they both grew up in northern California and attended classes at Berkeley.

Despite these commonalities, the relationship between Chin and Kingston is a hostile one. Chin often accuses Kingston of purveying a version of Chinese American

culture in her novels that caters to the tastes of white America. Kingston counters by questioning the motives for Chin's critiques: "Why doesn't Frank Chin just shut up and go home and write? The only way he's making a literary reputation is to attack me. He doesn't have anything else going for him. That's his career."¹ Their dialogue represents one of the more popular literary quarrels.

One of the most significant aspects of their disagreement is Kingston's contestation of Chin's racial strategy, which is based on individualism and a masculinized Chinese American culture. She promotes an alternative through a composite trickster figure made up of a male and a female trickster. Emphasizing the critiquing abilities of the trickster, Kingston articulates a racial discourse based on a gender-equitable Chinese American culture and a multicultural communalism. She uses this composite trickster as a model for Chinese Americans to blend male and female perspectives in the construction of a comprehensive Chinese American experience, as African American writers have proposed. She also debunks the notion that the African American racial experience acts as the definitive model of the minority experience in America. Kingston also recommends the trickster's ability to move between cultural spheres as a model for Chinese Americans to interact with the variety of cultural influences that surround them. Kingston provides an alternative way of thinking about how race affects Chinese Americans.

Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1990) introduces a composite trickster figure made up of two complementary tricksters to address the plethora of

¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, interview by Donna Perry, in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 183.

cultural influences confronting Chinese Americans. Wittman Ah Sing, a playwright and draft-dodger, possesses a persona influenced by several cultures. He uses his trickster abilities to negotiate among these cultural forces while maintaining a commitment to the Chinese American community through his art. Because Wittman seeks to reconcile a variety of cultural influences while maintaining a commitment to ethnic cultural values, he embodies an indigenous modern sensibility. However, Wittman's chauvinistic perspective, pronounced individualism and the lack of concern for the past mitigate his effectiveness as a trickster.

Kingston uses Kwan Yin, the narrator of the novel, to complement these shortcomings of Wittman's character. Kwan Yin's identity as a third person intrusive narrator allows her to understand cultures and shape the cultural discourse of the novel. Her comprehensive vision also allows her to adapt to various cultures. With a long memory and a distinctly feminine persona, she consistently acts as the ethical center of the novel. Because Kwan Yin sees the world in a way that culminates in a single meaning, in her case, consistent ethics, she possesses a modern sensibility. Despite role as narrator, her effectiveness as a trickster is diminished by her failure to affect the action of the novel.

Together, Wittman and Kwan Yin make up Kingston's composite trickster. Each character contains unique characteristics that balance those of the other. Kwan Yin's vast historical knowledge provides context for Wittman's historic specificity. Wittman's masculinity requires Kwan Yin's femininity for balance. Together, they address the vast array of cultural discourses confronting Chinese Americans. Wittman and Kwan Yin target issues central to the Chinese American community, such as complicity in the

perpetuation of stereotypes. They proffer alternatives where Chinese Americans take agency and define themselves. Wittman and Kwan Yin also address the relationship between Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, and advocate community as a way to alleviate tensions between the two groups. This composite trickster figure simultaneously acknowledges parallels between African American and Chinese Americans and critiques the omission of Chinese Americans from the black/white racial paradigm. Moreover, Wittman and Kwan Yin challenge the criminal images inscribed in American society and counter with historically based fact.

The articulation of Chinese American culture embodied in this composite figure represents a consistent theme in Kingston's other work. *The Woman Warrior* (1976) centers on a Chinese American girl's attempts to negotiate between Chinese culture, represented by her mother's stories, and her personal experience as a girl growing up in America. *China Men* (1980) consists of stories that depict a variety of Chinese male immigrants and their diverse responses to pressures to assimilate.

While scholars differ in their assessment of *Tripmaster Monkey*, each one contributes to the understanding of the trickster's function in the elucidation of Chinese American culture. Yan Gao traces the Chinese sources of the legends in Kingston's novel, revealing the complexity of this cultural world that in part defines Kingston's tricksters.² By emphasizing Kingston's recovery of a female, pacifistic Chinese narrative tradition that complements the popular Chinese warrior literary tradition, King-kok

² Yan Gao, *The Art of Parody: Maxine Hong Kingston's Use of Chinese Sources* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing), 1996.

Cheung underscores the composite trickster's inclusive version of culture.³ Still other critics identify distinct trickster sensibilities in Kingston's text. Jeanne Rosier Smith asserts that Kingston's practices a trickster aesthetic as an author and may represent a model for interpreting Kwan Yin's behavior.⁴ A Noelle Williams sees Kingston's use of parody as a means of widening the reader's apprehension of the behavior of tricksters.⁵ W. Lawrence Hogue specifically identifies aspects of Wittman's personality that parallel the trickster persona.⁶

Kingston's interrogation of the cultures confronting Chinese Americans places her in a literary tradition of female Chinese American writers. In the mid-20th century, Diana Chang broached the subject of a distinct Chinese American experience by focusing on the bicultural experience of Chinese Americans in *Frontiers of Love* (1956). Amy Tan, a more contemporary writer, explores a variety of Chinese American responses to Americanization over generations in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

Given the multiple cultural arenas Kingston addresses, it should be no surprise that *Tripmaster Monkey* possesses a complex narrative structure. The novel opens with Wittman's contemplation of suicide in San Francisco, but it quickly exposes its sense of irony and play by revealing the vibrancy Wittman has for life. Wittman is a poet,

³ King-kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism" in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge), 1990.

⁴ Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

⁵ A. Noelle Williams, "Parody and Pacifist Transformations in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*," *MELUS* 20, no. 1 (1995): 83-100.

⁶ W. Lawrence Hogue, *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity: A Look at the History and the Literatures of People of Color Since the 1960s* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

playwright, college dropout and draft dodger who seeks to produce his own play. This goal is constantly interrupted by various episodes that prevent Wittman from putting on the play until the end of the novel. Wittman's daydreams, flashbacks, fantasies and monologues that many times last for pages disrupt the narrative flow of the novel. The reader also becomes aware of Kwan Yin, the narrator who provides commentary on Wittman's behavior and serves as his guide. She also disrupts the narrative flow with her own references to American popular culture and Chinese legend.

Excited about the prospect of producing his own play, Wittman arranges a date with Nanci Lee, a former college mate and aspiring actress whom he hopes to cast in his play. Wittman wants to create an artistic space of inclusiveness, one where Chinese American culture, in all its diversity, can thrive. But in his excitement to share his artistic vision through his poetry, he scares Nanci away.

The next day, Wittman prepares for an average day of work as a salesman in a toy store, but abandons the job in protest because the store's promotion of war toys offends his pacifist sensibilities. To console himself, Wittman takes a bus to a party thrown by Lance Kamiyama, a second-generation Japanese-American businessman and Wittman's friend since childhood. Unlike Wittman, Lance decides to assimilate completely to American values by pursuing financial success as a civil servant in the government after the Japanese internment.

In the midst of conversation and psychedelic drug use at the party, Wittman meets Taña de Weese, a white bohemian who will later become his wife. The morning after the party, Wittman commits himself to producing the play and assigns parts to the remaining

partygoers, which includes Judy Louis, a Japanese-American woman he meets on the bus, Sunny, Lance's wife, Charley Bogard Shaw, an acquaintance, Lance, and Taña.

Wittman proceeds to conduct a rehearsal for the beginning of his play. His play begins with a retelling of the exploits of the Monkey King as he seeks to disrupt heaven. Wittman uses the Monkey King's war against heaven as a transition to the beginnings of another Chinese epic, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which features the three warriors who take the legendary oath of the peach garden. Lance protests the martial tone of the play, but Wittman seems committed to portraying acts of war. Kwan Yin often comments on Wittman's emphasis on war as well as his sexist attitude towards the female roles in his play.

Satisfied with this preliminary rehearsal, Wittman leaves the party. He marries Taña and takes her home to meet his parents, Ruby, a retired vaudeville showgirl, and Zeppelin, who spends his time fishing down by the river. During this visit, Wittman finds his grandmother, PoPo, is missing, and endeavors to find her. On his way to do this, he visits the unemployment office, where he resists all enticements to conform to a corporate work ethic. This episode re-ignites his passion for his own creative work. He secures a building and puts on his play using family members, friends, and members of the Chinese-American community.

The play is a pastiche of various sketches that do not adhere to any kind of order or historical parameters. It opens with acrobats who give way to Chang and Eng, Siamese twins portrayed by Lance and the Yale Younger Poet, whom Wittman meet in the basement of the toy store. They perform a sketch where they propose marriage to Millie and Christine, the Carolina Black Joined Twins, and dance with Edith and

Winnifred Eaton, also known as Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna, notable early 20th century Asian American writers. Chang and Eng conscientiously object to being drafted in the Civil War.

Following various vaudeville acts is a version of *The Water Margin*, a Chinese tale that features a battle of 108 warriors who rescue innocent captive villagers. Then several performances occur at once, including one scene that tells of the founding of tongs and another vignette that enacts Rudyard Kiplin's *American Notes*. All performances end when a fire breaks out.

After the fire is brought under control, Wittman enters the stage to perform his monologue. The monologue represents the culmination of Wittman's inclusive philosophy towards the community. It manages to bring together the diverse Chinese American community as well as situate that community within a larger multicultural context. He criticizes the reviews that expect his play to include stereotypes promoted by the dominant culture. He talks about the role of Chinese Americans in a racial paradigm defined only in terms of black and white. Wittman addresses issues particularly cogent to Chinese Americans, such as operations to achieve Western eyes, roles for Asians in films, the assumption that all Asians are foreigners and ways in which Chinese Americans can combat stereotypes and define themselves. He ends by sharing his experiences as a married man. In the midst of gratitude from the audience, Wittman realizes his commitment to the community and to peace, and for this development, Kwan Yin expresses a gesture of endearment.

Kingston uses Wittman and Kwan Yin to create a composite trickster to capture the complexity of the Chinese American experience. She juxtapositions both genders and

includes both a contemporary and a historical perspective. Kingston interrogates popular notions about Chinese American identity and articulates a distinct yet complex Chinese American cultural heritage. In order to understand this synergy, we must investigate the personalities of each trickster.

Wittman

Wittman is a trickster whose persona resonates with the influences of several cultures. As a playwright, Tripmaster and unemployed person, he consistently maintains a commitment to the Chinese American community. But Wittman's chauvinistic tendencies, rabid individualism and his grounding in the 1960s represent shortcomings of his tricksterism.

Early in the novel, Wittman, "the present day USA incarnation of the King of the Monkeys," exhibits characteristics of the mythic Chinese trickster, the Monkey King, just as Ulysses and his childhood friends seek to emulate the Monkey's behavior in Chin's novel.⁷ Both Wittman and the Monkey King share the ability to transform their appearances, and by extension, their identities. The Monkey King often insists on changing his title, and actually does change his identity through his famous seventy-two transformations.⁸ Wittman also transforms into different identities. Kwan Yin describes Wittman's penchant for change in his choice of wardrobe before going to work:

He put on the suit that he had bought for five bucks at the Salvation Army—the Brooks Brothers three-piece navy-blue pinstripe of some dead businessman. Wittman's suited body and hairy head didn't go together. Nor did the green shirt and greener tie (with orange-and-silver covered wagons and rows of Daniel Boones with rifles) match each other or the suit. The Wembly label on the tie said, "Wear With Brown Suit," which Wittman defied. He pulled on his Wellingtons and stomped out onto the street. His appearance was an affront to anybody who looked at him, he hoped. Bee-e-en! The monkey, using one of his

⁷ Some critics have suggested that Wittman resembles Frank Chin himself. Kingston acknowledges that in writing about herself, she may end up writing about Chin because they are both from Oakland and they were both writers at Berkeley.

⁸ The contradictory natures of nature (essences of earth and heaven) bring the Monkey King into being.. Furthermore, Whalen Lai notes that the morphing ability of the Monkey King is the result of contradictory forces as well ("From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King," *Asian Folklore Studies* 53, no.1 (1994): 36).

seventy-two transformations, was now changed into a working stiff on his way to his paying job. (44)⁹

Different pieces of clothing imply different identities. The suit is the uniform of the businessman, while the tie, with its wagons and rifles, suggests a cowboy. Wittman's long, uncut hair would allow him to pass as a hippie or bohemian. Wittman could enact any of these identities simply through his wardrobe.

Wittman's link with the theater also underscores his transformational talents.

Wittman grows up backstage, an environment where people take on a variety of roles and mask their true identities. He describes his vaudeville childhood to Nanci: "I was born backstage in vaudeville. Yeah, I really was. No kidding. They kept me in an actual theatrical trunk—wallpaper lining, greasepaint and mothball smells, paste smell. . . .

Wittman really does have show business in his blood. He wasn't lying to impress Nanci. He was taking credit for the circumstances of his birth" (13). Growing up in vaudeville gives Wittman the experience of taking on a variety of personas. It is no coincidence that he portrays a monkey onstage, further linking him to the Monkey King.

These transformational powers translate into a multifaceted persona, another trait shared by Wittman and the Monkey King. The Monkey King has a complex personality. On one hand, he has a freewheeling spirit, so diametrically opposed to the order of heaven that Whalen Lai concludes that "his island's celebration of natural anarchy was bound to clash with Confucian order and upset the hierarchy of Name and Rank in the court of the Jade Emperor."¹⁰ On the other hand, he internalizes self-control by the end

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, references to the novel by Maxine Hong Kingston are quoted from *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

¹⁰ Lai, 43.

of his journey to India to retrieve scripture with Tripitaka, a monk. Initially fitted with a headband to control his antics, Monkey no longer requires it by the novel's end. Jing Wang asserts that when the Monkey King achieves enlightenment, the headband's "controlling function has been internalized—hence, its disappearance as an exterior ruling force."¹¹ So, the Monkey King embodies both a wild and a more restrained aspect to his personality.

Wittman also exhibits a complex persona by incorporating several cultural influences into his psyche. He possesses an American aspect to his personality. His name immediately brings to mind the American poet Walt Whitman. They share a common vocation as poets. Both promote an all-inclusive poetry aimed at establishing a commonality among peoples. In the following passage, Whitman clearly privileges a diverse community using grass as a metaphor:

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I
Receive them the same.

(Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself")

Whitman uses the image of grass to link people who may be separated by race, class and geography. He sees them as a unit, not as disparate elements. Whitman also places himself in the midst of this community rather than adopting the aloof position of a disinterested observer.

¹¹ Jing Wang, *The Story of the Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism in the Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and Journey to the West* (Durham: Duke Up, 1992), 241.

Like Whitman, Wittman sees himself as a poetic champion of the common people. James T. Tanner observes that “Wittman Ah Sing is, like Walt Whitman, a cataloguer, a dramatizer, ‘of great inclusions and reconciliations and lists and categories.’”¹² While on a bus, Kwan Yin describes Wittman’s relationship to his fellow passengers: “Here we are, Walt Wittman’s ‘classless society’ of ‘everyone who could read or be read to.’ Will one of these listening passengers please write to the Board of Supes and suggest that there always be a reader on this route? Wittman has begun a someday tradition that may lead to a job as a reader riding the railroads throughout the West” (9). Like Whitman, Wittman goes among the people. He parallels Whitman’s relationship to the community by including every member of the ‘classless society’ in his audience.

In addition to this American aspect of Wittman’s psyche, Chinese cultural influences also bear on his personality. Jennie Wang notes that Wittman’s surname, Ah Sing, could link him to “a China man, Norman Asing, a naturalized US citizen, who, as early as 1855, served as a spokesman of his people . . . protesting against racism and the exclusion of the Chinese in America.”¹³ Wittman’s surname links him with a Chinese immigrant who manifested a certain degree of cultural pride. Wittman demonstrates his awareness of the cultural implications of his name when he explains to Nanci: “I’m one of the American Ah Sings. . . . In that Ah, you can hear we had an ancestor who left a country where the language has sounds that don’t mean anything—la and ma and wa—like music” (307). The vocative is a marker of Chinese heritage, brought over from the

¹² James T. Tanner, “Whitman’s Presence in *Tripmaster Monkey*,” *MELUS* 20, no.4 (1995): 63.

¹³ Wang, 102.

country of his ancestors. By retaining it, Wittman keeps a Chinese cultural trace in his psyche as well as in his name.

Wittman blends these American and Chinese cultural traces in his psyche.

Wittman also confirms himself as an established Chinese American, not a Chinese immigrant. Following a long meditation in which he speaks in the voice of Joang Fu, a Chinese poet, Kwan Yin describes Wittman's uneasiness with the masquerade:

"[Wittman] had been tripping out on the wrong side of the street. The wrong side of the world. What had he 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" (41). Kwan Yin reaffirms the Chinese American aspect of Wittman's character. He considers himself a native, not a recent immigrant, rejecting what Elaine Kim describes as "the attitude that Asians in America are all unassimilable foreigners."¹⁴ But he also designates himself as a descendant of Chinese immigrants rather than European immigrants of the *Mayflower*. With this Chinese American aspect of his psyche, Wittman negotiates between American and Chinese influences.

Through the various roles he embodies, Wittman maintains a commitment to those around him. As a playwright, he promotes a more realistic image of Chinese Americans in the mainstream society that also bolsters the Chinese American community itself. Wittman explains his reasons for putting on his play to the manager of the local Chinese community center: "I like to make a play with Gwan Goong. A Chinese play. . .

¹⁴ Elaine Kim "Chinatown Cowboys and Warrior Women: Searching for a New Self-Image," *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982), 176-177.

. Uncle, we bad. Chinaman freaks. Illegal aliens. Outlaws. Outcasts of America. But we make our place—this one community house for benevolent living. We make theater, we make community” (255, 261). Wittman’s brand of theater seeks to re-establish bonds between members of the Chinese American community and preserve their cultural heritage through a play based on Chinese literature. He uses his vocation as a playwright to create a world where Chinese Americans are accepted rather than shunned and excluded.

Wittman’s other activities are also motivated by a commitment to the Chinese community. Even in the unemployment line, he believes it is his duty to help Mrs. Chew, an old Chinese lady, explain to the office that she is available for work. Wittman also demonstrates his concern for others by acting as a Tripmaster. In an interview with Neila Seshachari, Kingston defines the role of a Tripmaster this way: “People could be on acid, and there’s a tripmaster who suggests trips for them and who guides them and keeps them from flipping out.”¹⁵ Once again, Wittman demonstrates his responsibility for those around him.

While Wittman does help others on several occasions, several aspects of his personality limit the effectiveness of his tricksterism. His pronounced individualism sometimes acts as an obstacle to connecting with others. It parallels the extreme individuality of Chin’s Ulysses, for just as Ulysses is wary of groups, Wittman never joins a group he has not formed. For example, when he goes to a management training meeting, Kwan Yin describes Wittman standing apart from the other Chinese Americans

¹⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston, “Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston,” interview by Neila C. Seshachari, in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 204.

present and making fun of them. Wittman values his distinctiveness, and does not want to be included in a uniform group of people. By remaining aloof, Wittman limits his effectiveness as a trickster because he sometimes does not engage the very community he purports to serve. Kingston says she envisions Wittman as an alienated character who can envision integration in the abstract, but who “also has to work on integrating himself.”¹⁶

In addition to strong individuality, Wittman also has chauvinistic tendencies, thinking that women are not entitled to the same connection to culture as men.¹⁷ Kwan Yin informs the reader of Wittman’s internal reaction when Nanci admits she does not know much about him: “No, she wouldn’t. She was no China Man the way he was China Man. A good-looking chick like her floats above it all. . . . Nanci Lee and her highborn kin, rich Chinese-Americans of Orange County, where the most Chinese thing they do is throw the headdress ball”(12). Wittman links Nanci’s alleged alienation from Chinese culture to her gender by implying that she is an assimilated woman who does not understand Chinese culture like a true China Man like himself. In addition, several of the female roles in his play designate women solely as objects beauty for men. When he

¹⁶ Maxine Hong Kingston, “Writing the Other: A conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston,” interview by Marilyn Chin in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 89.

¹⁷ Critics such as Jeanne Rosier Smith suggest that Wittman’s sexism leads to racism, another limited mode of thinking (64). Regarding his relationship with his white wife, Taña de Weese, Kingston admits that “Wittman’s been brainwashed to appreciate that type. So they have a relationship, but look how distant it is. It’s not great, passionate love” (“Kingston at the University,” interview by Paul Skenazy, in *Conversations With Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998], 145). However, I do not think there is enough evidence to substantiate this claim. Wittman makes some prejudicial statements, but does not have the power required to exhibit racism.

attends Lance's party, Wittman judges the women based on whether or not they approach his romantic ideal.

Instead of bridging the gap between men and women and creating a sense of community, Wittman's condescending attitude toward women erects boundaries between the sexes in his imagination. As a result, his ability to reconcile their perspectives is diminished. If Wittman thinks of women as inferior and subservient, then he is not likely to think it worth his time to consider their perspective, which makes up half of the Chinese American community he is committed to preserving. In this way, Wittman mirrors Wideman's Reuben, who also fails to validate the perception of women.

In addition to chauvinism, Wittman's contextualization within the 1960s also mitigates his effectiveness as a trickster. While most individuals bear the marks of the time period in which they live, the 1960s was a particularly tumultuous time where the emphasis was on the now. The prevailing theme of the decade was change, and a divergence from what went before, as Howard Zinn explains: "It was not just a women's movement, a prisoner's movement, an Indian movement. There was general revolt against oppressive, artificial, previously unquestioned ways of living."¹⁸ Kingston notes that the 1960s reflected an emphasis on experimentation and the present, which implies a disinterestedness in the past. Wittman embodies a spirit mostly concerned with the present. He feels history has little relevance for him. Kingston notes that Wittman "is so

¹⁸ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 526.

busy making up the present, which he has to build, that he has no time for continuity from the past.”¹⁹

Several of these character flaws exist right on to the end of the novel and suggest that, in some significant ways, Wittman is an unfinished character. While Wittman puts on a play that celebrates community, Kingston observes that “there was a huge paradox in the ending, where he joins his community by delivering a monologue,” thus reinforcing his individualistic stance.²⁰ Kingston suggests that Wittman still has some growing to do: “He will use an artistic form, create a communal ritual. But that’s not enough. The war is still going on in Vietnam, the civil rights marches are still going on, he has not solved the world’s problems by putting on one show! There’s gotta be another one and another one. This is why I wrote the show and then I wrote the speech, coming afterwards, because he’s saying he’s not satisfied yet. There’s more work to be done.”²¹ Wittman is also still of his moment, of the present, even though he has become a pacifist by novel’s end. Rather than a calculated end, the novel’s open-ended conclusion demonstrates not only how far Wittman has come, but also how far he has to go.

Wittman is a trickster whose metamorphic abilities allow him to incorporate American, Chinese and Chinese American cultural influences into his psyche. But his masculine bravado and the 1960s setting in which he finds himself limit his effectiveness

¹⁹ Paula Rabinowitz, “Eccentric Memories: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston” in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin. Jackson (University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 70.

²⁰ Kingston, “University,” interview by Skenazy, 141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

as a trickster. Kwan Yin possesses a distinct feminine personality and a transhistorical perspective that complements these limitations of Wittman.

Kwan Yin

As narrator, Kwan Yin shapes the cultural production of the novel and functions as a guide for the reader and Wittman. She explains Wittman's actions and judges his behavior according to a consistent ethical standard. With a distinctly feminine personality, she also provides broad historical information to balance Wittman's culturally specific context. Yet, Kwan Yin's failure to alter the action of the novel and the potentially dominant nature of her femininity limits her effectiveness as a trickster.

Whereas other tricksters in this study have been named characters in novels, Kwan Yin is a trickster who functions as the unnamed narrator. But how do we know? Some critics have questioned her presence and importance to the novel. Amy Ling concludes: "[Kwan Yin and Wittman] are so much alike in voice and concerns that it is often difficult to tell them apart."²² While Kwan Yin is never named in the novel, I contend that careful examination of the narrative voice reveals a different perspective from Wittman's persona. Kingston herself has indicated in interviews that the narrator is a woman and has identified that feminine voice as Kwan Yin.²³ Wittman's thoughts can be distinguished from Kwan Yin's in most instances through a change of person and tone.

²² Sharon Suzuki-Martinez, "Trickster Strategies: Challenging American Identity, Community and Art in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*," in *Reviewing Asian America: Locating Diversity*, ed. by Wendy Ng, Soo-young Chin, James Moy and Gary Okihiro (Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 1995), 166.

²³ Maxine Hong Kingston, "A *Melus* Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston," by Marilyn Chin *MELUS* 16, no. 4: 59.

Kwan Yin's tricksterism is linked to her nature as a narrator. Unlike a first person narrator, she does not participate in the story's action and does not control other characters. But as an intrusive third person narrator, Kwan Yin influences the cultural discourse of the novel in a way that parallels the other literary tricksters in this study. Part of the unique nature of tricksters is their ability to critique cultures based on the comprehensive knowledge they gain by existing in the margins. Through her interruptions of the story to provide commentary, she reveals a trickster's understanding of the nature of cultural values and adjusts to the contours of a variety of cultures.

Kwan Yin demonstrates this trickster ability in a situation where Wittman finds himself in an unemployment office training session. In describing the teaching materials used in the session, she reveals that the employment advice characterizes the behavior of various people of color as negative:

“COME ALONE to the interview. DO NOT take friends or relatives with you.” An X through my people. Adios, mis amigos. There it is, up on the screen, and in the handbook too: “DO NOT take friends or relatives with you.” An American stands alone. Alienated, tribeless, individual. To be a successful American, leave your tribe, your caravan, your gang, your partner, your village cousins, your refugee family that you're making money for, leave them behind. Do not bring back-up. You're doing it wrong, letting your friends drop you off in a ratty car full of people who look like they live in the car. Out you come wearing the suit and the shoes, carrying the lunch your mamacita made. (246)

Kwan Yin questions the elimination of an ethnic support system. She reveals that taking 'back-up' does not fit American expectations of individuality. The support system Kwan Yin describes could be Latino, as evidenced by her use of Spanish and her description of images of cars full of Mexican immigrants. The community could also represent a group of Asian refugees who send wages to family overseas. With her comprehensive trickster

apprehension, Kwan Yin explains how such discourse debases the experiences of both Latinos and Asians in the United States.

Kwan Yin also embodies a complex trickster personality. She exists simultaneously inside and outside the text, which allows her to exploit her position on the borders. On one hand, Kwan Yin is privy to information beyond the scope of the novel. She has a historical vision and makes sweeping connections that bear on the action of the text. On the other hand, she is intimately familiar with and interested in the motives and actions of characters in the novel. To exist in these two realms requires a complex personality held by most tricksters. Suzuki-Martinez argues that Kwan Yin “is simultaneously general and specific, historical and immortal, limited and unlimited in scope and knowledge.”²⁴ Kwan Yin’s complexity mirrors the narrator in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, which almost defies characterization but functions in significant ways for the reader as well as other characters in the novel. Veronique Lesoinne suggests that “this frank self-reflection of the narrative voice does not correspond to conventional expectations about the role of a traditional (omniscient) narrator.”²⁵ Like Morrison’s narrator, Kwan Yin challenges our notions about the role of the narrator and retains a certain sense of ambiguity and familiarity when it comes to her presence in the novel.

While Kwan Yin’s multifaceted presence allows her to engage in activities commonly ascribed to tricksters, she also is also greatly defined by her consistent ethical stance from which she dispenses sympathy and mercy. In this way, Kingston’s Kwan

²⁴ Suzuki-Martinez, 166.

²⁵ Veronique Lesoinne, “Answer Jazz’s Call: Experiencing Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” *MELUS* 22, no. 3 (1997): Expanded Academic, ASAP, Infotrac.

Yin bears a striking similarity to her mythic Chinese namesake. The mythic Kwan Yin is a key figure in the 16th century novel *Monkey*, written by Wu Ch'eng'en and based on the Monkey folktale. She manifests the ethical principles of the Neo-Confucian period of Chinese philosophy, which state that ethics involves inquiry into human conduct from a principled point of view that is always characterized as good. The mythical Kwan Yin functions according to Neo-Confucianist ethics when she shows kindness and tempers her wisdom with mercy. In the *Monkey* legend, only Kwan Yin is concerned enough about Monkey to release him when other deities prefer to keep him imprisoned forever underneath Buddha's hand. She sends guardians with Monkey on his quest for Indian scripture so that he does not fall into too much trouble. As the unchangeable force of good in Ch'eng'en's novel, she guides Monkey through his quest for enlightenment. Likewise, Kingston's Kwan Yin consistently represents the ethical center of the novel because she guides Wittman in the right direction. For example, in Wittman's daydream, she reveals her ethics when she wants Wittman to avoid racist reading material while reading on the bus, lest he be complicit in purveying intolerant notions. She knows the effect stereotypes have had on the treatment of Asian Americans, and refers to Bret Harte's 1870 poem, "The Heathen Chinee," where he not only coins the phrase, but also depicts the Chinese as deceptive, dishonest and a threat to white America.²⁶ This stereotype was used to describe the Chinese for decades and justify discriminatory treatment. Kwan Yin adheres to a consistent moral stance by guiding Wittman away from such literature.

²⁶ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 105.

Kwan Yin's persona is further complemented by a linear perspective of history. In contrast to Wittman's grounding in the 1960s, Kingston says that Kwan Yin possesses "a memory that goes back to China."²⁷ Kwan Yin sees events as causal, occurring in a definite pattern. Keith Jenkins describes history as a series of events, where the events that come before cause the events that come after them. These events come together to form a narrative that describes progress from one state to another. This linear view of history contrasts with looking at history as a series of unrelated incidents that just happen to occur.²⁸

When Kwan Yin provides detailed historical background on sources Wittman uses for his play, she demonstrates her linear historical perspective. She links ancient Chinese literature, the 60s figure of Mao and the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius. She suggests that *The Water Verge*, a work of Chinese literature, and *De Rerum Natura*, a philosophical work on the state of the human race in relation to nature, provided instrumental strategies for Mao, playing a large part in the success of his military maneuvers. She also implies that history will repeat itself if Wittman uses these ideas for his war scenes, for he will internalize a tolerance for war strategy. Kwan Yin can only draw links over such large expanses of time if she operates on the assumption that historical events affect one another.

Kingston links Kwan Yin's sense of history with femininity and gives women the responsibility of making sense of the past through storytelling. During an interview,

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ Keith Jenkins, introduction to *The Postmodern History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.

Kingston states: “I wrote characters so that the women have memories and the men don’t have memories. They don’t remember anything.”²⁹ Leilani Nishime adds that Chinese American history can be viewed as a private affair and as such falls within the purview of women.³⁰ So, Kwan Yin’s transhistorical sweep complements her feminine persona.

As the ethical center of the novel, Kwan Yin’s role is to help Wittman. On one hand, she chastises Wittman through her commentary. Kingston states that Kwan Yin gives Wittman “a lot of hardships and problems he has to deal with, such as, what are you going to do with your life after you have your degree in English? How are you going to apply what you have learned? How are you going to bring what you have learned back to your people?”³¹ Sometimes, Kwan Yin is stern towards Wittman. According to Kingston, “[Kwan Yin] is actually pushing Wittman Ah Sing around, telling him to shut up.”³² When Wittman ‘discovers’ the Yale Younger Poet working in the basement of the toy store, Kwan Yin chastises Wittman not to waste his own poetic gifts and become a recluse: “There’s a poet’s career, get your ass in gear. First, do a reading in North Beach, non-invitational, get to your feet at The Coffee Gallery or Nepenthe or The Forum, make ass. Find the open mikes, and sing. Stand in doorways of auditoriums where known poets are on platform, and hand-deliver dittos of your own outcast poetry; Richard Brautigan did that. And Bob Kaufman on megaphone in front of the St. Francis

²⁹ This train of thought can also be seen in her commentary in *The Woman Warrior*, where storytelling is the purview of women, while men are noted for their silence. Also, in *China Men*, some Chinese fathers refuse to speak of their lives before immigrating to the United States.

³⁰ Leilani Nishime, “Engendering Genre: Gender and Nationalism in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*,” *MELUS* 20, no. 1(1995): 77.

³¹ Kingston, interview by Chin, 59-60.

³² *Ibid.*, 59.

Hotel” (51). Kwan Yin uses abrasive language to motivate Wittman to fulfill his potential as a poet. Warning him not to pursue fame, she urges him to work outside the mainstream by doing free performances and interacting with the person on the street. Kwan Yin’s actions demonstrate that although she may treat Wittman harshly, she does it for his own benefit.

At other times, Kwan Yin acts sympathetic towards Wittman. When Wittman is reciting his monologue at the end of his play, Kwan Yin says: “We’re going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart’s content. Let him get it all out, and we hear what he has to say direct” (306). Kwan Yin urges the reader to hear Wittman’s diatribe. By doing so, she helps to create a receptive audience for Wittman’s words. Kingston states that her Kwan Yin “is very merciful. I mean, nobody is going to get killed or hurt. She keeps giving people wonderful opportunities.”³³ In this way, Kwan Yin provides a supportive environment for Wittman’s creative expression.

However, there are aspects of Kwan Yin’s persona that limit her effectiveness as a trickster. By setting Kwan Yin up as the force of good in the novel and giving her a feminine point of view, Kingston runs the risk of saying that women are better than men, (Kwan Yin is ‘better’ than Wittman) because they are women, that they are infallible, and that men should be like women. In this way, Kwan Yin’s femininity runs the risk of being as dominant as Wittman’s masculinity. She could represent the kind of femininity described by Leslie Rabine as the “unequivocal positive answer to women’s

³³ Kingston, interview by Chin, 59.

oppression.”³⁴ This would be a matriarchy where men are depicted as inferior, and prevent Kwan Yin from bridging the gap between the genders.

Kwan Yin may contribute to the cultural discourse of the novel, but she does not impact its action. She does not control the action of the characters, so her ability to directly affect change is severely limited. She suggests courses of actions for Wittman, but he does not always follow them. The ramifications of her commentary depend on the antics of Wittman.

Clearly, Kwan Yin is a different trickster compared to Wittman. She transcends the 1960s with her transhistorical vision. Her feminine perspective complements Wittman’s masculinized view, yet her disembodied presence in the text limits her effectiveness as a trickster. Apart, both tricksters have limits, but together, Kwan Yin and Wittman form a composite trickster and comprehensively address cultural discourses that impact Chinese Americans.

The Composite Trickster and Cultural Discourses

As a composite trickster, Kwan Yin and Wittman come together to resolve their individual shortcomings. Together, they target issues central to the Chinese American community and promote alternatives where Chinese Americans take agency. They address the relationship between Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans and advocate community as a means to ease tensions between the two groups. They also acknowledge the similarities between the experiences of African American and Chinese Americans in the United States, but also critique the omission of Chinese Americans

³⁴ Leslie Rabine, “No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Vèvè Clarke, Ruth-Ellen Joeres and Madelon Sprengnether (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993) 154.

from the black/white racial paradigm. Finally, Wittman and Kwan Yin target American society for the criminal images of Chinese American culture and counter with historically accurate accounts.

Wittman and Kwan Yin each address the inadequacies of the other. Kwan Yin's femininity balances Wittman's expressions of sexism. When Wittman dismisses Nanci's childhood experiences as too unimportant to warrant his attention, Kwan Yin criticizes Wittman for placing his dreams ahead of Nanci's just because they have a feminine perspective. Suzuki-Martinez agrees that Kwan Yin and Wittman create "a balance of power between male and female and other categories as well. . . Only through male and female collaboration can the work of deconstructing the racism of American culture begin."³⁵

Wittman's contextualization by the 1960s complements Kwan Yin's transhistorical perspective. Without Wittman, Kwan Yin's suggestions would sound like pronouncements on high with no context. Whereas Kwan Yin cannot participate in the action of the story, she can guide Wittman, who can alter the action of the novel. Together, they engage American, Chinese American and other cultural discourses and articulate alternatives that centralize the experience of Chinese Americans. Much of the cultural critique of American discourses occurs within the context of Wittman's play. This performance is a hodgepodge of acts that range from parodies of Cheng and Eng to revisions of Chinese folk tales recounting legendary battles, gods and goddesses. Within

³⁵ Suzuki-Martinez, 167.

this context, Wittman and Kwan Yin critique the cultural influences facing Chinese Americans.

Within this context, Wittman and Kwan Yin challenge the apathy of Chinese Americans. Wittman asserts that Chinese Americans fail to correct erroneous characterizations. During his monologue, Wittman chastises his fellow Chinese Americans for allowing others to mistake them for Japanese Americans: “‘Are you *Chinese* or *Japanese*?’ That’s a straightman’s line, asking for it. Where’s our knockout comeback putdown punchline? Who *are* we? . . . We’re so out of it. It’s our fault they call us gook and chinky chinaman” (326). Wittman explains that when Chinese Americans do not correct erroneous characterizations, they tacitly agree with the stereotype and give credence to the notion that Chinese Americans are non-confrontational.

As an alternative, Wittman urges Chinese Americans to define themselves through claiming their Chinese cultural heritage:

Don’t you hate it when they ask, ‘How about saying something in Chinese?’ . . . They want to watch you turn strange and foreign. . . . They depict us with an inability to say ‘I.’ They’re taking the ‘I’ away from us. ‘Me’—that’s the fucked over, the fuckee. ‘I’—that’s the mean-ass motherfucker first person pronoun of the active voice, and they don’t want us to have it. . . . We are the grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior,. Don’t let them take the fight out of our spirit and language. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I-warrior win the West and the Earth and the universe. (318-319)

Wittman wants Chinese Americans to use language to assert a culturally defined identity. Richard Fung asserts that Chinese Americans can re-appropriate language to “perform the important tasks of correcting histories, voicing common but seldom represented

experiences [and] engaging audiences used to being spoken about but never addressed.”³⁶

Rather than allowing English to place them in a prison-house of passive stereotypes, Wittman urges Chinese Americans to use the language to embrace their Chinese cultural inheritance and name themselves in the manner that is most accurate to their experience. In this manner, they would be ‘grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior,’ the Chinese god of war and literature, for they would use words to do ideological battle.

While Wittman urges Chinese Americans to define themselves, Kwan Yin recommends that they assert a diverse image of themselves. Too often, Chinese Americans acquiesce to the notion that they all look alike. Kwan Yin dispels the notion that Chinese Americans are all the same when Wittman notices a group of Chinese Americans at a management trainee workshop:

Do they say they can't tell us apart because we all have brown eyes and we all have black hair? . . . Those four heads were each a different black. Kettle black. Cannonball black. Bowling-ball black. Licorice. Licorice curls. Patent-leather black. Leotard black. Black sapphire. Black opal. . . There are probably more of us with brown hair than black hair. Easy to think up words for browns. Chestnut, and more. We'll make up many, many names for dark. (59-60)

Kwan Yin argues that Chinese Americans should promote a self-image that highlights the differences among the members of the group. The different shades of hair color symbolize differences among Chinese Americans. This diversification would combat trite characterizations that lump all Asian American groups together. It would also allow Chinese Americans to appreciate the diversity within themselves.

In addition to Chinese American collusion in perpetuation of cultural stereotypes, Wittman and Kwan Yin also address significant cultural phenomena that involve Chinese

³⁶ Richard Fung, “Seeing Yellow: Asian Identities in Film and Video,” in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juang (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 165.

Americans and other Asian American groups, such as Japanese Americans. Wittman admonishes Japanese Americans for mimicking dominant society's maltreatment of Chinese Americans in an effort to assimilate into American society. During the argument between Wittman and Lance at the party, Wittman cites childhood examples of Lance's acquiescence to American models of behavior:

You don't remember meeting me in grammar school? I remember you. You were taidomo no taisho—leader of the kids. No. No. Try wait. General. General of the kids. You got to be taidomo no taisho in the camp. You led your army out of the camps and into the schoolyard, and beat the shit out of me. . . . Once taidomo no taisho, general of the kids, and now the one who throws the parties, attended by all kinds. Working for the government. Asking what else your country can do for you. Your G.S. number. Your business friends. Your Victorian house and your sofas. And your wife. And your life. (116, 118-119).

More than just a jealous rant, Wittman challenges Lance's exploitation of him in an effort to attain popularity. He uses Japanese language to show that Lance is motivated, not just by childhood pride, but by a sense of preservation of a Japanese-American self. Wittman also suggests that Lance continues to seek the approval of American society by continuing to exploit others in the quest for success by having the "right" friends and having the "right" profession.

The tension that Wittman describes between Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans is historical. Historical antagonism, where conflict between the two groups arise from various invasions and conquests between the two countries, accounts for some of the tension, but much of it derives from the experience of both groups upon their arrival in the United States. Yen Le Espiritu recalls that Japanese immigrants differentiated themselves from Chinese immigrants in the late 19th century in order to

gain favor in American society.³⁷ Such tensions certainly affected the potential bonds between Chinese and Japanese Americans. The Japanese appear to have parroted American society ideas about the worth and humanity of Chinese Americans. They also were not above using available means to promote themselves in American society at the expense of Chinese Americans.³⁸

Wittman promotes alternatives that seek to centralize the idea of community and alleviate tensions between Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. At the end of the argument, Wittman concludes: “Lance had bragged about his two hundred closest friends. Who, now that I’m grown, is my best friend? Yeah, it’s better not to have best friends anymore—the time has come for community” (120). Wittman believes it is better to have a sense of community rather than the tension between ethnic groups. While he does not specifically mention peace between Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, the fact that Wittman buries the hatchet with Lance, his Japanese American nemesis, implies that Wittman promotes reconciliation between the two groups.

Kwan Yin also advocates community. She describes Wittman’s play as an exercise in communalism: “He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice and recreate it. His community surrounding him, then we’re going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart’s content” (306). The members of the audience, from a variety of backgrounds, ‘own’ the play by their presence at the

³⁷ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 21-22.

³⁸ Japanese American’s embrace of American definitions of success is tied to their quest for assimilation. Following the Japanese American internment, some sought to gain acceptance by embodying a non-

performances and their participation in the play itself. In addition, Kwan Yin's inclusion of other people and other cultures implies, once again, a sense of community between Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans.

Wittman and Kwan Yin target other ethnic groups with their cultural discourse. They engage African American culture and its impact on Chinese Americans. Wittman admires blacks' indictment of American society for failing to confer humanity on people of color. He refers to the short essay, "Stranger in the Village," where James Baldwin argues that "the black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being."³⁹ The exclusion of blacks from white society parallels the exclusion of Chinese Americans. Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American activist, cites suffering as the point of commonality between Chinese Americans and blacks: "By suffering I mean the racism in this country; that all people of color in this country have had many similar experiences. . . . It happens to all third-world people, only they give it a different name."⁴⁰ Wittman appreciates the African American discourse on dehumanization.

However, Wittman also expresses his distress over the absence of Chinese Americans in the black/white racial paradigm: "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 duking it out, someday Blacks and

threatening image of the successful American. See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977).

³⁹ James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (1953; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1674.

⁴⁰ Yuri Kochiyama, "The Impact of Malcolm X on Asian-American Politics and Activism," in *Blacks, Latinos and Asians in Urban America: Status and Prospects for Politics and Activism*, ed. James Jennings (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 135.

whites will shake hands over my head. I'm the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked" (307-308). Wittman cautions that viewing race relations in terms of only blacks and whites forces Chinese Americans to choose a side. Neither side reflects their experience. Like African Americans, they are racial minorities who encounter discrimination based on misconceptions related to physical attributes and culture, but they also can take advantage of more benefits in a mainstream society if they choose to assimilate.

Wittman advocates a more inclusive racial paradigm. When explaining his play to the Yale Younger poet, he relates a racially diverse image: "I'm going to start a theater company. I'm naming it The Pear Garden Players of America. . . . I'm including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place. My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes and we also integrate theater and parties" (52). Wittman wants to include all races in his play. He reflects Kingston's recollections of race relations in the 1960s: "There were lots of Asians in the Rainbow Coalition. I thought that was great. I thought they were so big to have done that."⁴¹ Wittman believes it is his responsibility not only to insert Chinese Americans into the general racial discussion, but also to advocate more complex considerations race relations in general.

Probably the most influential cultural impact addressed by Wittman and Kwan Yin comes from American society. It inscribes negative Chinese American images such as Chinese American criminality into the popular imagination. In a scene from his play

⁴¹ Kingston, interview by Marilyn Chin, 61.

where Chinese Americans clash with police, Wittman depicts this persistent American idea:

Inside a grocery store, some bad Caucasians plant dope among the mayjng and the black-bean sauce, then call the cops. A lynch mob raids the store, where the grocers both work and live. They jerk the chinamen through the streets by their long hair. Ropes hang from lampposts and fire escapes. Nooses are lowered over heads. The accusations and sentence are read: To be hung by the neck until he dies for dealing opium, which debauches whites girls for the slave trade. The kung fu gang leaps to the rescue. Everybody dukes it out. . . . The police break up the riot, and arrest the grocers for assaulting officers. (298)

Wittman characterizes violent stereotypes as a basic misrepresentation of Chinese Americans. By having ‘bad Caucasians’ plant narcotics, call the cops and blame the Chinese, Wittman reveals the true culprit of erroneous images. American society uses law, order and justice to promote a lawless image that makes Chinese Americans the perpetrators.

To refute these claims, Kwan Yin articulates the history of the founding of Asian organizations, or tongs. Kwan Yin later sets the record straight for the reader: “So Chinese Americans founded the Joang Wah for the purpose of filing legal complaints with the City of New York against lynchings, illegal arrests, opium, slavery and grocery store licensing. A tong is not a crime syndicate and not a burial society. It is an organization of community, for which Chinese Americans have genius” (298). In Kwan Yin’s recollection, the tong reprises its historical role as a community service organization. Chinese Americans used tongs to attain justice rather than commit crime.

Long thought to be hotbeds of criminal activities, tongs were originally community organizations designed to build cohesion and stability within the Chinese American community. Elders in the Chinese American community created tongs to emulate Chinese family organizations by providing services to immigrants who were

shunned by American society. And while such groups did eventually engage in criminal activity, Ko-Lin Chin asserts that burglary, victimization of the poor and drug trafficking were not sanctioned because they deviated from the mandate that such organizations serve the community. Members were specifically proscribed against harming the police for fear of retaliation.⁴² It is important to note, as Kwan Yin does, that these organizations originally were not criminal, as the popular image describes. Thus, Kwan Yin's articulation of the history of tongs provides an alternative to the criminal stereotype promoted by American society.

Wittman and Kwan Yin cover much ground in the variety of cultural discourses they target. They challenge assumptions of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, African Americans and white American society. Not only do they perform cultural critique, but they offer alternative cultural narratives.

Kingston's Racial Strategy

Through her composite trickster figure, Maxine Hong Kingston challenges the traditional racial paradigm by positing a strategy that validates both Chinese American male and female perspectives. In doing so, she reveals the influence of African American writers who articulate ethnic culture that contains a comprehensive view of gender. Kingston also advocates a multicultural communalism that centralizes Chinese American community within the context of a variety of cultural influences. By actively addressing the relationship between Chinese Americans and other cultural entities, Kingston promotes a comprehensive Chinese American racial strategy.

⁴² Ko-lin Chin, *Chinese Subculture and Criminality: Non-Traditional Crime Groups in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 126.

One significant aspect of Kingston's racial strategy reflects her desire to construct a Chinese American culture that welcomes both genders, as evidenced by her construction of a composite trickster figure made up of a male and female character. She believes Chinese American men and women can emulate the trickster's adaptive ability to interact with one another and prevent the disintegration of Chinese American community through out-marriage and tensions between the genders.⁴³ In an interview, Kingston asserts: "I think to be a good feminist means that first you realize who you are yourself as a woman and, when you become a strong woman, then you face the Other. Whatever that Other is, whether it's men, the rest of the world, people of other races—whatever to you, in your psyche, the Other is. . . . So to me it's profoundly feminist to write about men, to be able to create men characters, and to understand what I previously could not understand."⁴⁴

Kingston's approach to racial strategy mirrors that of black writers. Kingston's gender-inclusive Chinese American culture recalls Alice Walker's conception of womanism, which takes into account both black women and men in a consideration of African American culture. Kingston also mirrors black writers by adapting their focus on complete accounts of the past to the Chinese American experience. Kingston consciously pairs a trickster grounded in the present with a trickster with an overarching historical memory to achieve a balanced view of the past. In *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor depicts a

⁴³ Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky and colleagues have identified a trend of out-marriage among Asian Americans dating back to at least 1977, when 50% of Chinese Americans married outside their ethnic group ("Ethnic Identity of Asians in the United States," in *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*, ed. Joseph G. Ponterotto et al [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996], 128).

⁴⁴ Kingston, "Maxine Hong Kingston," interview by Donna Perry, in *Conversations With Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. by Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 175.

family narrative that acknowledges the pleasant and painful experiences of all family members, black and white, male and female. She implies that such a comprehensive history is necessary to preserve the future of the family. Kingston sees similar reconciliation in Toni Morrison's work with the past and ancestors.⁴⁵ She feels that Chinese Americans and African Americans share an interest in history because it affects their present situation. That history must be as correct and complete as possible, including as many perspectives as possible.⁴⁶

In addition to her gender-equitable Chinese culture, Kingston also promotes a multicultural communalism, whereby Chinese American culture is situated within the context of several different cultural arenas. Throughout the novel, both Wittman and Kwan Yin seek to make sense of Chinese and American culture within the context of other cultures.⁴⁷ Paul Skenazy observes that Kingston depicts America in the novel not just "as a place that includes Chinese legends and particularly the Monkey King saga, but as a territory where Rilke's language meets Barbie dolls and B film plots."⁴⁸ In an interview with Neila Seshachari, Kingston notes that Chinese American partake of the cultural heritage of other ethnic groups: "You know when Alex Haley wrote *Roots*—and I think *Roots* came out the same year as *The Woman Warrior*—when I got that book and

⁴⁵ See Kingston, interview by Skenazy, 148.

⁴⁶ Such attempts at reconstructing a comprehensive past also results in a common reaction by ethnic male writers. See Kingston, interview by Perry, 183.

⁴⁷ Kingston acknowledges this matrix of influences in her consideration of the nature of Chinese American community: "I don't want to become an American by wiping out all my Chineseness. Nor do I want to stay Chinese and never participate in the wonderful American world that's out there. So instead of destroying part of myself or denying some reality, to me there has got to be a way to have it all and to do it all. And I'm still at that place of thinking of it as paradoxes. I now see that there can be an amalgam, that the next stage is—what do they call it in music? Fusion" (interview by Skenazy, 156).

⁴⁸ Kingston, interview by Skenazy, 107.

read it, I felt, yes, those are my roots; they're not just his roots, they're not just Black people's roots, those are my roots."⁴⁹ Kingston wants Chinese American culture to serve as a site of the reconciliation of American and Chinese cultural influences in a way that retains the differences of each culture.

While Kingston sets her novel within the milieu of the 1960s, the racial strategy she devises is equally applicable today because some of the same conditions exist for Chinese Americans. Kingston not only partakes of the language of possibility of the 1960s, but of the spirit of change and reform.⁵⁰ During the 1960s, Chinese Americans and other Asian groups were used against other politically active groups of color. Sucheng Chan explains that the "model minority" stereotype was used to downplay the grievances of blacks and Chicanos.⁵¹ These proponents sought to create tension between Asian Americans and other groups of color at a time when so many sought group solidarity, cooperation and social change for people of color. While tensions between groups certainly did exist, they did not prevent cooperative efforts to attain rights for all people of color.⁵²

⁴⁹ Kingston, interview by Seshachari, 206.

⁵⁰ Kingston asserts that "you can see [the Monkey King's] spirit in the Chicago Seven, who were like seven monkeys bringing chaos to the establishment. . . . I think of the monkey as an underdog—he doesn't have a lot of power, so he uses trickery. He has to think of new ways to change things" ("Talking with the Woman Warrior," by William Satake Blauvelt, in *Conversations With Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. by Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998], 78-79).

⁵¹ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretative History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 167.

⁵² On coalition building between Asian American activist groups and other ethnic groups, see William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 15-18.

In the 1990s, the “model minority” stereotype continues to be used to divide ethnic groups. The recent battle over affirmative action at the University of California at Berkeley demonstrates how the “model minority” thesis is still used to undermine cooperation between blacks and Asian Americans in the quest for social justice. A *National Review* article asserts as a fact that affirmative action discriminates against Asians and non-whites and fails to assist African Americans in improving their own lives.⁵³ Such articles encourage Asian Americans to think that they are being harmed by preferential treatment based on race because they are allegedly so successful on their own. They also create suspicion by blacks of the commitment of Asian Americans to the cause of equality. Yet, Kingston’s idea of multicultural communalism is manifested in cross-cultural efforts to continue equal opportunity for all people of color.⁵⁴

Kingston develops a racial strategy based on a gender-equitable Chinese American culture and a multicultural communalism as a means of bolstering the Chinese American community. This strategy mirrors some of the models employed by African American female writers. While Kingston sets her strategy within the 1960s in the novel, it still has salience for Chinese Americans today.

Maxine Hong Kingston uses her composite trickster figure to depict a complementary relationship between a male and female trickster figure. Instead of having an adversarial relationship, Wittman and Kwan Yin provide balance for each other and address key cultural discourses facing Chinese Americans. Through this

⁵³ “Once to Every Man,” *National Review*, 49, n. 11: 12, Expanded Academic ASAP, Infotrac.

⁵⁴ See *Espiritu*, 148-150.

complex figure, Kingston articulates a racial strategy based on a Chinese American culture that validates both male and female perspectives, as well as a multicultural communalism. In this way, Kingston provides an alternative to Frank Chin's racial strategy for Chinese Americans.

AFTERWARD

I love it whenever I find [something] like the African-American Monkey and Chinese Monkey—when I find out that they are both monkeys and they are both here in America, then I feel connected to African American people and again inspired that we are all one human race. I think it's so important for us to find figures like that, so that we can make our human connections.
--Maxine Hong Kingston

In the epigraph, Maxine Hong Kingston suggests that the mythic African American Monkey and the Chinese Monkey King both function as icons for human connections in general, and as connections between blacks and Chinese Americans. As we have seen, tricksters may foster associations between individuals, work to sever them or unwittingly do both. John Edgar Wideman, Gloria Naylor, Frank Chin and Kingston use this multifaceted character to make complex statements about how they view the interactions between people of color and the society that surrounds them. The preceding examination of the works of these authors illuminates significant ideas about trickster critical paradigms, racial strategies and patterns of influence between African American and Chinese American culture.

By focusing on the sensibilities and behavior of the tricksters in the novels, this study examines the complex nature of the literary trickster in the realist novel. The variety of motives behind trickster behavior demonstrates that it is difficult, if not impossible, to consign tricksters to a wholly positive or wholly negative characterization. The most well-intentioned tricksters, like Wideman's Reuben or Naylor's Mama Day, inadvertently cause chaos by having their plans go horribly awry. Kingston's Wittman

alternately helps and offends many that may cross his path. Some tricksters who are notorious for causing chaos do so as a response to complex cultural influences. For example, Wally's behavior is the result of encountering a variety of life-altering situations that undermine his masculinity and his humanity, causing him to be a defensive, aggressive adult.

Given the adaptable and multifaceted nature of the trickster, I argue that the authors use this character to articulate a variety of racial strategies. Given the similarities of the historical experiences of African Americans and Chinese Americans, it is no wonder that these authors share some strategies in challenging reductive images that have been perpetuated through the years. Wideman indicts mainstream society for pigeonholing black men into two diametrically opposite kinds of images, and Naylor challenges the view that women's communities are homogenous zones of harmony. Chin sets his sights on the emasculating effects of American culture of Chinese American men, while Kingston takes aim at the popular culture for trite images of Chinese Americans.

Also, the authors advocate choice and agency for people of color. All of the tricksters have the responsibility for defining themselves, even when they are put in impossible circumstances. Mama Day has her role as island protector thrust upon her, yet she finds a variety of ways in which to fulfill her commitment to the inhabitants of Willow Springs. Her duties range from medicine woman and midwife to exactor of vengeance. While Chin uses his tricksters as negative example, the novel begins with Ulysses, Diego Chang and Ben Han as "pure self-invention." Exploiting their positions in the margins, they are able to fulfill most of their ambitions. Rather than being forced to conform by having a job or participating in the draft, Wittman chooses if and where he

will work. Reuben responds to the needs of Homewood in a way that utilizes his talents at circumventing the law.

The authors all also advocate racial strategies that emphasize a comprehensive knowledge and reconciliation of radically different cultural spheres. Naylor promotes the reconciliation of diverse racial and gender perspectives as a survival strategy for blacks. Kingston uses her composite trickster figure to envision ways in which Chinese American men and women can overcome the tensions between them and come together in order to preserve their culture. Wideman encourages communication between black men consigned to the opposite ends of the binary by white culture. Even Chin supports the idea that Chinese Americans learn the difference between “the real and the fake” in order to competently live on society.

There are significant points of connection between the African American and Chinese American writers and their use of the trickster. Both Wideman and Chin share an emphasis on ethnic masculine agency. They create male tricksters who are determined to go their own way and use the societies around them to accomplish their goals. Reuben uses his role as a valet to mask his true intentions of gaining legal knowledge from the white fraternity, just as Ben Han uses the expectations of a racist society to make money off of their version of Chinese American culture. Both Ulysses and Wally exhibit an aggressive masculinity based on ethnicity to reject negative stereotypes.

Another instance of influence may be noted in the significance of the past in the racial strategies of Naylor and Kingston. Both utilize tricksters as conduits to the past, and both imply that comprehensive knowledge of the past is crucial for survival in the present. Naylor depicts a fragmented past that leaves the reader without the full story by

novel's end, but she also notes the benefits from restoring even parts of the past. Mama Day saves the family line by retrieving lost aspects of the family history. Kingston creates Kwan Yin, who has "a memory that goes back to China." She provides insight into the sources of Wittman's play, some of which are manuals of war, and reveals how they act as an obstacle to his pacifist transformation. At the end of Wittman's monologue within the novel, Wittman realizes the errors of his former ways by recognizing the impact of martial literature on his thinking, a development that would not have happened without Kwan Yin's guidance.

Despite these similarities, there are notable differences in the racial strategies articulated by the authors. Among the African American writers, there are two divergent approaches to racial discourse. Wideman asserts the restoration of broken bonds between black men represents a viable means of responding to discrimination. He blames the forces that separate Reuben and his elusive twin brother, breaking bonds that could be sustaining between black men. He indicts the society that takes the promise in Wally and distorts it into anger and rage so that it is nearly impossible for Wally to have an emotionally sustaining relationship with anyone except Reuben. For Wideman, these forces are a bane to the African American community, and his racial strategy is constructed, in part, to address the effects of emasculation on the black man.

Naylor addresses some of the same issues as Wideman, but she does so from a distinctly feminine stance. Naylor uses Mama Day to suggest that gender reconciliation is key to the survival of the black community, both men and women. Mama Day only gains important knowledge to save Cocoa and the future of the Day family line by acknowledging the experiences of the white slavemaster Wade in conjunction with the

enslaved woman Sapphira, as well as the grief of her mother Ophelia and the emotional toll on her father, John-Paul. Also, she needs the help of George to supplement her own feminine power. It is George who refuses to acknowledge that he needs Mama Day. Naylor acknowledges that both men and women must participate in coming to terms with the trauma of black experience in order to ensure the survival of the black community.

There are also differences in the racial strategy of the Chinese American authors. Chin opts for an individual response to racial discrimination. Part of his stance derives from his belief that the representative Chinese American individual is an independent male who recognizes his martial Chinese cultural inheritance. Chin believes that the individual must use the expectations of the mainstream society to benefit himself, but reject efforts to water down Chinese American culture.

While Kingston wants to challenge the same set of stereotypes as Chin, she goes about it in a different fashion. She sees the community as the vehicle for change and preservation of the Chinese American community. Only when all Chinese Americans understand how they face the same experiences and reach out to other ethnic groups can reform be achieved. Kingston believes that ultimate preservation of the Chinese community depends on efforts by all, not just individuals acting to pursue individual aims.

In addition to the differences among the African American and Chinese American writers, there are differences between the African American and Chinese American authors. Both Wideman and Naylor seem to work within a traditional racial paradigm. They consider racial problems in terms of blacks and whites. This may be because of the significant role African Americans have played in shaping the racial discourse of the

country. William Wei concedes that “African Americans have received the most attention because of the widespread public awareness of their history of exploitation as slaves, their large proportion in the American population, and their long and visible struggle to achieve equality.”¹ So rather than extend his critique of the emasculation of black males to Asian males, who have suffered similar emasculation, Wideman concentrates on black men. Likewise, Naylor does not figure her contemplation of women’s communities within the context of all women of color.

Conversely, the Chinese American writers explore the relationship of Chinese Americans with other cultural groups as well as the ramifications of the absence of Asian Americans from the traditional racial paradigm. Chin examines various generations of Chinese Americans and the impact of the racial discourse of the 1930s, 1940s, 1960s and beyond, on them. He also explores the cultural impact of whites and blacks on Chinese Americans, demonstrating that, in some significant ways, their blues are not like everyone else’s. Similarly, Kingston explores the interaction of Chinese Americans with other Asian American groups such as Japanese Americans, whites and blacks against the tumultuous backdrop of the 1960s. In this way, these Chinese American writers explore race relations within a more multicultural setting.

While this study reveals much about the nature of tricksters, the ways in which authors use them, and the parallels between African American and Chinese American writers, there are further possibilities for this line of inquiry. For example, what is the influence of Asian American culture on African American writers? While little evidence of such an interaction can be seen the novels in this study, the publication of Ishmael

¹ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),4.

Reed's *Japanese by Spring* raises questions about how blacks apprehend the Japanese as fellow members in the American racial paradigm. In this novel, Reed follows the exploits of Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, who transforms himself from a Black Panther to a black neo-conservative in the hopes of attaining tenure at a predominately white college. Anticipating the increased influence of the Japanese in the global economy, he begins to take Japanese language lessons. This foresight pays off when the college is bought by Japanese businessmen and headed by none other than his Japanese language teacher. What follows is a meditation on the history of black-Japanese relations and the impact of that interaction on racial discourse.

I suspect that the historical and cultural experience of the Japanese produces a different interaction with African Americans than that noted between blacks and Chinese Americans. Reed concentrates on the Japanese, not Japanese Americans, suggesting a greater focus on the impact of nationalism on the relationship between blacks and the Japanese. There is a growing body of work on the complex relationship between African Americans and the Japanese. One strain focuses on the sympathies between the two groups, beginning with the Japanese defeat of the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Reginald Kearney attests that "the notion that the Japanese were champions of colored peoples remained in circulation among African Americans until World War II."²

² Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 52.

From this notion, others, like Ernest Allen and Brenda Plummer, explore the parallels between pan-Africanism and pan-Asianism.³

Others question the potential tensions underlying a cultural alliance between blacks and the Japanese. Robert Hill has compiled FBI records on the activities between Japanese activists and various African American organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the NAACP, which reveal a clear sense of apprehension at the thought of interaction between the two groups by the American government: "It has been clearly demonstrated that the Japanese government has endeavored to implant pro-Japanese ideas and attitudes in the minds of the colored people and to call attention to racial prejudices and restrictions to further their propaganda that this war is a race war for the purpose of creating disunity within this country to diminish or destroy its military strength."⁴ Arnold Shankman's discussion of African American ambivalence towards the Japanese in black newspapers represents further evidence of a less than harmonious relationship.⁵

Another line of inquiry relates to the relationship between groups under the Asian American umbrella. Kingston advocates a multiracial communalism that encourages interactions between Chinese American and other Asian American groups like Japanese Americans. I wonder if other Asian American literature uses the trickster to explore similar multicultural connections and develop similar racial strategies. For example, like

³ Ernest Allen, Jr. "Waiting for Tojo: The Pro-Japan Vigil of Black Missourians, 1932-1943," *Gateway Heritage* 16, no. 2 (1995): 38-55; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1996).

⁴ Robert Hill, comp and ed. *The FBI's RACON: Racial Conditions in America During World War II* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 507.

⁵ Arnold Shankman, "'Asiatic Ogre' or 'Desirable Citizen'? The Image of Japanese Americans in the Afro-American Press, 1867-1933" *Pacific Historical Review* 46, no.4 (1977): 567-587.

the Chinese and Japanese, Korean immigrants have experienced racial discrimination in the United States. They were prohibited from owning land and experienced similar labor competition with white workers. Yet unlike these Asian American groups, Koreans immigrants were also energized behind a Korean independence movement, implying that they retained significant ties to their homeland. As a result, they may have retained animosity towards Japanese Americans, descendants of their colonizers. Because Korean immigrants have settled into some of the most diverse cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, they have the opportunity to interact with several other ethnic groups, interactions that sometimes end in conflict. Tensions between Korean shopkeepers and African American customers have been the most publicized. Would an investigation into Korean American literature reveal a racial strategy more like that of other Asian American groups, African American groups, or a unique blend of the two? I speculate that it would be a melding of a variety of models.

This study in African American and Chinese American novels has explored trickster figures as models for racial strategies for authors who vary in their understandings about the racial climate in the United States. My research seeks to understand how contemporary African American writers use a character with ties to figures in myth and folklore to address the current experiences of blacks. It also explores not only the transformation of mythic tricksters into literary ones by Chinese Americans authors, but also the ways in which these writers adapt African American racial strategies and challenge the traditional racial paradigm by introducing the experiences of Chinese Americans. Through the efforts of these authors, the trickster seems to be a resilient

character whose use by authors, like its own transformational nature, continues to change and adapt.

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