

Monkey See, Monkey Do Otherwise: Interpolation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

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Abstract

A descendant of Chinese immigrant living in San Francisco, Wittman Ah Sing—the main character in *Tripmaster Monkey*, the personification of a simian figure Sun Wu-k'ung from the classic tale *The Journey to the West*—represents the idea of a “melting pot” gone burst. With two cultures (Chinese and American) bubbling in his veins, Wittman is chameleon-like in terms of projecting his image. Just like Sun Wu-k'ung, Wittman interposes, intervenes, and interjects a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse. This essay argues that Wittman fits into the category of what postcolonial theory calls ‘interpellated subject’ (Althusser, 1970). As such, Wittman, in his reactions, interpolates (Ashcroft, 2001) or writes back the various modes of hegemonic discourse, to counter its effects by transforming them. This essay thus tackles with the problematization of Wittman's hybridity, ranging from what this quality contributes to the narrative structure of the novel to the way it affects the complexity of how Wittman sees things. Throughout his journey in the West, Wittman only expects to see what he wants to see, the way he would like to see it. In addition, he sees things as metaphors, which is an indication of an effect of having two (or more) cultures and ideologies on each lens of his spectacles. As a result, unlike the monkey in children's mimic game *Monkey See Monkey Do*, Wittman the tripmaster monkey in this instance, suffers from an inability to mimic what he sees accordingly.

Keywords: hybridity, interpellated subject, interpolation, *Tripmaster Monkey*

Abstrak

Sebagai keturunan imigran Cina yang tinggal di San Francisco, Wittman Ah Sing—karakter utama dalam *Tripmaster Monkey*, yang merupakan personifikasi dari figur kera Sun Wu-k'ung dari kisah klasik *The Journey to the West*—merekpresentasi gagasan “kuali tempat bahan-bahan bercampur” yang meledak. Dengan dua budaya (Cina dan Amerika) mengalir dalam darahnya, Wittman serupa bunglon dalam hal memproyeksikan citranya. Layaknya Sun Wu-k'ung, Wittman menghalangi, menyela, dan menginterupsi serangkaian taktik kontra diskursif ke dalam diskursus dominan. Tulisan ini berargumentasi bahwa Wittman cocok dalam kategoeri yang dalam teori poskolonial disebut dengan “subjek yang diinterpelasi” (Althusser, 1970). Dengan demikian, Wittman, dalam reaksi-reaksinya, menginterpolasi (Ashcroft, 2001) atau menulis balik berbagai mode diskursus hegemonik, untuk melawan balik efek-efeknya dengan mentransformasinya. Tulisan ini, oleh karenanya, membahas problematisasi hibriditas Wittman, yang mencakup tentang kontribusi apa sajakah yang

diberikan oleh kualitas-kualitas yang disebutkan di atas terhadap struktur naratif novel, dan cara kontribusi tersebut memengaruhi kompleksitas cara Wittman melihat segala sesuatunya. Sepanjang perjalanannya di Barat, Wittman hanya berharap melihat apa yang ingin dilihatnya, dengan cara yang diinginkannya. Selain itu, ia melihat segala hal sebagai metafora, yang mengindikasikan dampak dari memiliki dua (atau lebih) budaya dan ideologi di masing-masing lensa kacamatanya. Hasilnya, berbeda dari sosok monyet dalam permainan anak Monkey See Monkey Do yang intinya meniru gerakan yang ada di hadapannya, Wittman dalam hal ini, tidak mampu memikirkan apa yang dilihatnya secara benar.

Kata kunci: hibriditas, interpolasi, subjek yang diinterpelasi, *Tripmaster Monkey*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wittman Ah Sing, the main character in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, who is the personification of a simian figure Sun Wu-k'ung from the famous tale *The Journey to the West*¹ (Grice, 2006), is portrayed wearing a special spectacles "that blurred everything, thus finding metaphors everywhere" (Kingston, 1990: 44). Wittman's spectacle consists of two different lenses, implied by the origins of Wittman's full name. As the name suggests, Wittman is alluded to the American poet Whitman (Calhoun, 2013), and as such, he is a representation of something American. Like Whitman the great poet who "play[ed] and shape[d] the American language,"² Wittman the passionate playwright asserts the freedom and wildness of language in his journey, his play in-the-making, which, in Kingston's view, is so American. Wittman's last name, Ah Sing, is a representation of what the history of racism and exclusion of the Chinese in America know as Norman Asing, a naturalized U.S. citizen and adamant spokesman who, as early as 1855, wrote to Governor Bigler of California, claiming his identity as an American.³ Wittman's sight, in this sense, is

¹ The story of the *Hsi-yu chi* (*The Journey to the West*) is loosely based on the famous pilgrimage of a monk named Hsüan-tsang (596-664)—one of the best-known and most revered Buddhist monks, also known as Tripitaka—who went to India from China in Buddhist scriptures quest. (Another source writes that Tripitaka, whose pilgrimage to India is the subject of the story, is a real person, better known to history as Hsüan Tsang. He lived in the 7th century A.D. and there are full contemporary accounts of his journey.) His journey was part of the wider movement of seeking the dharma in the West which spanned nearly five centuries. This hundred-chapter narrative is a journey through mythic and fantastic regions as the palace of Mahābrahmā Devarāja, the Long Pit and the Great Serpent Range, the Nine Dragon Pool, the kingdoms of Kuei-tzu Mu, Women, Po-lo, and Utpala Flowers, and the Pool of Wang-mu (Queen of the West) before his arrival in India. On the way to India, the monk met the heroic Sun Wu-k'ung, a simian figure disguised as a white-robed scholar, who accompanied him on the pilgrimage. Throughout the tale he is presented as both a past delinquent and a guardian who will deliver Hsüan-tsang from his preordained afflictions during the pilgrimage. (Wu, Ch'eng-en, translated by Anthony C. Yu, 1977: 1-8 and Arthur Waley, 1943: 7).

² Kingston's statement in an interview with Fishkin (1991: 784).

³ See Wang, 1995: 102.

conflated by the two cultural identities, causing him to act chameleon-like in terms of projecting his image. What Wittman the Monkey King sees is then projected through his actions.

Due to the similarity of nature between this and what a different monkey does in one of Jamaica's renowned idioms, at this point, I see a possibility of juxtaposing Wittman's action with the way the monkey in children's mimic game *Monkey See Monkey Do*⁴ sees things and imitates the things it sees. The difference between the two monkeys is obvious; Wittman wears a special eye glasses, the monkey does not. Hence, Wittman does not act according to what is exemplified in front of him, whereas the monkey does. The idea underlying the monkey's mimicry is to illustrate that the monkey is trying to create *his* version of the action he sees. This is basically how human instinctively develops his way of acting and reacting. But this is not the case in Wittman. His action is a projection of distorted image caused by the duality of his cultural identity. The duality of Wittman's identity is apparent since Wittman presents himself a long-haired Berkeley Beatnik Chinese majoring in English who reads Western classics. This goes to show that in his interactions Wittman refuses to be seen as having Chinese stereotype because he cannot see himself simply as Chinese.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

In this essay, the discussion on the effect of Wittman's hybrid quality is conducted by referring to Althusser's (1970) proposition on interpellated subject. Along with this, the discussion also refers to Ashcroft (2001) in terms of looking at Wittman's actions as series of interpolation. Hall's (1994) concept of cultural identity helps in looking at Wittman as having cultural duality. On narrative level, the discussion refers mainly to Deleuze and Guattari (1999) in terms of the way Wittman's complexity affects the way he perceives and reacts.

⁴ An idiom originated from Jamaica in the early 18th century which means that children will learn their behavior by copying what they see happening around them. Produced by Hit Entertainment, it has become a popular interactive children TV series on PBS and Playhouse Disney channel. This essay adopts the idiom used in the mimic game shown in the series, emphasising on its playfulness, as Wittman the Monkey King himself is playful.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Having an episodic structure (Lee, 2018), on structural level, Tripmaster Monkey displays Wittman's identity as constructed by the narrator. When the narrator informs "[s]ome things he couldn't tell what the fuck they were, so he'd go up to a bedevilment and have a look-see, not to miss out. Like Rimbaud, I practice having hallucinations" (Kingston: 44), immediately we can see there is a shift in focalization. The first sentence depicting the narrator's internal focalization on the main protagonist—despite the fact that it is in third-person narrative—in itself constructs the main protagonist's opinion, or a declaration in a way, that his wearing the special eyeglasses causes him to practice having hallucinations. In a sense, this shift from the subject "he" to "I" illustrates that Wittman's statement is a construct of that of the narrator's. This indicates that Wittman's identity is a construct of an exterior force, that is, the narrator's voice.

Yet, what is problematic in this example is that since Wittman's voice is textually not displayed in direct sentence (commonly hinted by the use of quotation marks), and thus not creating a demarcation between third-person and first-person narrative voice, it leads to a suggestion that the two are actually conflating. If this is so, we might have to say that the third-person's voice simultaneously constructs and conflates with the first-person's. In other words, it is apart from as well as a part of. At the moment Wittman says "Like Rimbaud, I practice having hallucinations," Wittman is actually in the process of trying to make sense of what is happening, what is it that he is experiencing as "overtured" by the narrator (Manggong, 2017). What is illustrated here is a concept that identity is a social construct, and as such, the exterior factor outside the individual takes part in building the individual's Self. This corresponds to the conception that the construction of identity exists dependent of the strictures of history, culture, and ideology.

Throughout his journey in the West, Wittman is doing what the omniscient narrator calls 'a Malte Laurids Brigge walk.' When the narrative of the first chapter begins its plot, when taking a walk in the park, the narrator reports that Wittman has been walking in the park, hardly seeing what is in it. Realizing this, Wittman decides that "He ought to let it come in, ... He would let it all come in" (Kingston: 4). *He sees all because he allows it all to come in.* In some occasions, Wittman only expects to see what he wants to see, the way he would like to see it. The Chinese family, F.O.Bs (Fresh Off the Boats), in their F.O.B fashions (highwaters and puddlecuffs) with their F.O.B mothballs perfume, that Wittman sees taking "a cheap outing on their day offu," and "[d]idn't know how to walk together.

Spitting [sunflower] seeds” (Kingston: 5) is, in Wittman’s eyes, an “uncool” sight. Wittman resents the stereotypical Chinese immigrants, and his resentment prevents him from seeing the Chinese family as merely a family, taking a stroll.

A few pages later, after seeing a series of “uncool” and unpleasant scenes, he decides that “It was time, ... to stop letting it all come in” (Kingston: 7). At least that is how Wittman convinces himself, because the entire novel is about what Wittman sees and critiques. It seems like the Chinese immigrants family does not fit Wittman’s definition of “cool” because they are unlike him; a tall, long-haired Berkeley Beatnik majoring in English who reads Western classics—Shakespeare, Swift, Defoe, Tolstoy, Woolf, Joyce, Rilke, Beckett, Whitman, Melville, Thoreau, Fitzgerald, Ginsberg, and Kerouac, just to name a few—“dressed in Hamlet’s night colors”. Clearly, Wittman is an epitome of everything Western and thus puts him on the other side of everything Eastern, which is, in this particular sense, Chinese. The contrast, consequently, illustrates irony.

Wittman’s prejudices towards the Chinese family in particular and the Chinese immigrants in general are surfaced through omniscient third-person narrator’s voice. In one of her interviews, Kingston herself has suggested that the “omniscient narrator in the *Tripmaster Monkey* is a Chinese American woman; she’s Kwan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy) and she’s me” (Schueller, 2003: 18). In addition, Kingston also mentioned that “Wittman is working against a narrator who is trying to create him from outside” (Jannette: 146). Suppose the narrator is Kingston a.k.a Kwan Yin, and like the Goddess who gives guidance to Monkey King in his journey to the West, the narrator in Wittman’s journey in the West is omnisciently present within and without Wittman’s voice to show the irony of the narrative as a result of Wittman’s prejudiced perception.

Wittman’s reaction shows that he refuses to be in the same position as interpellated subject; a subject of interpellation of Chinese stereotype. Althusser (1971) proposes a theory that ideology transforms individuals into subjects by an operation called *interpellation*, which is a term describing the process of how an individual is addressed by ideology. The illustration Althusser uses is of a policeman who shouts “Hey, you there!” The person answering that call would most likely be the right person addressed. Althusser further argues that when that individual realizes that the call is for him/her, he/she becomes a subject relative to the ideology of law and crime. In this milieu, in *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman refuses to be subjugated by the ideology of Chinese stereotypes. In other words, Wittman refuses to be a subject relative to the ideology of Chinese stereotypes. As such, in his

reactions, Wittman *interpolates* or writes back this mode of hegemonic discourse, to counter its effects by transforming it. In postcolonial theory,

“[i]nterpolation counters Althusser’s proposition of the interpellation of the subject, by naming the process by which colonized subjects may resist the forces designed to shape them as ‘other’. Interpolation describes the access such ‘interpellated’ subjects have to a counter-discursive agency. This strategy involves the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity” (Ashcroft, 2001: 47).

Wittman interpolates the Chinese stereotype label addressed to him namely by disguising himself as Japanese. What is interesting about this is that by doing so, Wittman presents himself as neither Chinese nor American. Despite the fact that intellectually Wittman is more American than Chinese, based on his physical features, Wittman does not fit the category of a white American.

Like Monkey King, Wittman is appetitive and changing. Unlike the monk, the monkey can change into different forms and can see through the various guises taken on by devils. Wittman’s change or transformation is eluded at a point where Wittman, in a way, “transforms” himself to be Japanese by speaking in broken English (“I not Chinese. I Japanese boy”) avoiding to be recognized as Chinese by a girl he happens to share a seat with at the bus. The moment the girl gets on the bus and looks for available seats, Wittman instantly knows that she would be sitting next to him. Obviously this is because Wittman is, in his own words, her “fellow ethnick”. Ethnicity, as one critic proposes, provides a powerful indictment of the idea of an essential, abstract biological self beyond language and society. It can work as a way of retaining the concept of identity.⁵ Wittman’s physical characteristics shout out he is Oriental. Judging merely from his physical features, the Chinese girl can relate to Wittman’s Chinese ethnicity. In a way, she can identify herself in him, thus making it possible for her to be able to have not just a stranger sitting next to her, but most importantly a companionship that helps her make the time fly throughout the ride.

⁵ See Schueller, 2003: 12.

As the girl bores Wittman with her chat, Wittman begins to see her as a boar. After a split second of a blink, the girl transforms into a creature with “bluish dagger tusks”, “little shining eyes”, and “straight black bristly eyelashes”; a blue boar. Compared to what happens earlier, at this point, it is the girl (not Wittman) who goes through a transformation, at least in Wittman’s eyes. He makes it clear to himself that he is not hallucinating as the image he sees is lasting and the details are very sharp. The transformed girl, in this case, represents the pig who happens to be that other company other than the monkey who accompanies the monk in his journey to the West. At some points in the narration, Wittman is clearly not hallucinating. The transformation he sees may be triggered by other objects present nearby.

On the first Chapter in the novel—as Wittman is faced with beautiful dancer/actress Nanci Lee, one of his friends from school who is also of Chinese descent—in terms of her physicality when she was talking to a couple of dark-skinned French men, Wittman begins to observe that there seems to be certain features that does not categorise her as Chinese: “There was something Black about her too, come to think of it; it was in the fullness of the mouth, and a wildness in her clothes, and something about her dry hair” (Kingston, 1990: 22). The full mouth, the wild clothes, the dry hair, all listed here as opposite to what is supposedly Chinese thin lips, moderate clothes, and moisturised hair. Wittman starts to question Nanci’s ethnicity the point he begins to notice certain resemblance she has with that of the French guys. In other words, Wittman’s view of Nanci at this point is influenced by the French men’s presence. In a way, Nanci in this sense is, in Wittman’s eyes, transformed. This transformation consequently fuels Wittman’s prejudiced perception towards Nanci.

Walking elegantly in her high heels, Nanci tries to transform from her Chinese features which hinder her from being cast non-Chinese role in a movie. In an audition, she is expected to look and talk oriental. The way she dresses and talks does not fit her oriental physical characteristics; there seems to be nothing right in her: “You don’t sound right. You don’t sound the way you look. You don’t look the way you talk. Too distracting” (Kingston: 24). Nanci dresses herself American and refuses to talk “ching-chong chinaman”, a phrase which Wittman translates into refusing “to read a grotesque whose bucktooth mouth can’t make intelligent American sounds”. To Wittman, it is as if this language does not belong to his kind. In cynicism, he adds: “Well, the ugly is ugly no matter whose beautiful mouth it comes out of. She shouldn’t wreck her mouth, and her voice, and her face, and her soul by repeating scurrilities” (Kingston: 23). This reflects Wittman’s standpoint—that it matters for one to resist being transformed into what he/she is not. The irony resulting from this

statement is that Wittman himself is actually consistently trying to present himself as everything but Chinese.

To Wittman's perceptive eyes, America changes people. It turns people, like himself, complicated. His mind shouts out: "Give [these black French] a few more weeks among the Americans; we'll show them how far *très joli* manners get them, and how much respect with *Saturday Review* tucked under the arm. They'll tighten up their act. Turn complicated" (Kingston: 22). If paid close attention to, we can see from the statement that Wittman puts himself as part of the Americans (*'we'll show them how far très joli manners get them'*). Clearly here Wittman is thus American, and this is what he constantly convinces himself to be. In a positive way, as a Chinese descent with American upbringing, turning complicated enables Wittman to be empathetic to both end of the spectrum, that is, everything Chinese and everything American. In a negative way, being such can shape Wittman to be apathetic to everything Chinese and everything American. Wittman is never presented as sympathetic to either one. His tone is consistently that of cynical criticism. Turning complicated, Wittman evolves to be a hybrid individual.

Since Wittman's main objective is to give breath once more to Chinese theatre in San Francisco, his journey is thus that of an artist-in-the-making.⁶ In other words, Wittman's play-in-the-making is the representation of his tale of artist-in-the-making. As play-in-the-making, the novel ends with Wittman staging a play for his Chinese American audience and using the theater as a public forum, and in doing so, Wittman is pathologizing Chinese as exotic. From beginning to end, Wittman attempts to rid himself off any trace of exoticism marked by his Chinese features. He marries a white girl and presents himself as Berkeley Beatnik. The beatniks, as well as the underground, bands and gangs in America, in Deleuze and Guattari's term, is the route of the American rhizome (1999: 19). According to Deleuze and Guattari, in terms of literature, in the quest for national identity and/or for a European ancestry or genealogy, America is a special case. Deleuze and Guattari asserts that:

"The conception of [American] book is different. *Leaves of Grass*. And directions in America are different: the search for arborescence and the return to the Old World occur in the East. ... America reversed the directions: it puts

⁶ An analysis pointed out by Maini (2000). *Tripmaster Monkey* can also be perceived as a re-viewing of the traditional *Kunstlerroman*, a novel about the growth and maturation of an artist.

its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East” (1999: 19).

Wittman, in this sense is the epitome of an Orient put in the West, both metaphorically and literally. In Wittman’s case, by being associated (by Kingston/narrator) with anything America (or non-Chinese in general), *his* earth comes full circle. This makes sense, for instance, in a way that Wittman’s acts are articulated through Kingston’s rewriting of the classic texts of white American authors. The name Wittman itself, which—as I mentioned earlier—is taken from the great poet Walt Whitman, clearly translates this concept. Wittman, in this sense, can be considered “the latter-day incarnation of the poet of democracy and diversity” (Smith, 1996: 73).

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the diversity within Wittman is put in a dialogic space wherein one cultural identity intensely appropriates the other. In a way, the maneuver causes the “melting pot” to burst. Wittman’s spectacle is the central stance in this essay’s discussion because it triggers the variation of alterations (both in its literal and metaphorical senses), seen and exhibited by Wittman. Wittman exhibits alteration by turning Japanese. He sees the girl in bus turning into a boar and he sees Nanci Lee looking like Black. Nanci Lee turns herself American. Wittman the Monkey King sees distorted images, and this causes him to do the things he sees differently. Since Wittman’s sight is altered by the spectacles, he fails to see things as they are, consequently causing him to react as if he is writing back the dominant discourse forced upon him via the narrator. This instigates him to be elaborative and imaginative, playful in a way, in reacting to what is put before his eyes. Wittman’s Chinese and American cultural identities, constantly causes him to cross cultural and ideological boundaries. He considers himself American while at the same time strongly criticizes that American sounds are ugly. Above all that, he tries to enliven Chinese theatre. Overall, Wittman interposes, intervenes and interjects what he sees, resulting to his version of interpolation.

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