Monkey Unbound?
Dambudzo Marechera, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Journey to the West

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Abstract
Journey to the West, a popular Chinese novel with its trickster Monkey as a central character, when partially adapted into the stories of The House of Hunger (1978) by the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera, assumes some peculiarly post-colonial qualities. Marechera incorporates episodes and figures from Journey to the West in such a way as to present the alienated and disintegrated psyche of a Zimbabwean intellectual during the period of white rule. The socio-historical conditions implicit in Marechera’s use of the Chinese text are made clearer by a comparison with the ways in which Maxine Hong Kingston, in her Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1989), uses the same text to articulate the bicultural voice of Chinese Americans. Finally, this comparison enables us to look anew at the problematic “development” of Monkey in Journey to the West itself, a development which is evocative of the “civilizing” of the wild.

Keywords
Journey to the West, Dambudzo Marechera, The House of Hunger, Maxine Hong Kingston, Tripmaster Monkey, alienation, the postcolonial
Introduction

“I’ve got you, you piss-spirit of a monkey,” roared the Buddha at him. “You never left the palm of my hand.” “You’re wrong there,” the Great Sage replied. “I went to the farthest point of Heaven, where I saw five flesh-pink pillars topped by dark vapors. I left my mark there: do you dare come and see it with me?” “There’s no need to go. Just look down.” The Great Sage looked down with his fire eyes with golden pupils to see the words “The Great Sage Equaling Heaven Was here” written on the middle of finger of the Buddha’s right hand. The stink of monkey-piss rose from the fold at the bottom of the finger. “What a thing to happen,” exclaimed the Great Sage in astonishment. “I wrote this on one of the pillars supporting the sky, so how can it be on his finger now? He must have used divination to know what I was going to do. I don’t believe it. I refuse to believe it! I’ll go there and come back again.”

The dear Great Sage hurriedly braced himself to jump, but the Buddha turned his hand over and pushed the Monkey King out through the Western Gate of Heaven. He turned his five fingers into a mountain chain belonging to the elements Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth, renamed them the Five Elements Mountain, and gently held him down. (Journey to the West 1: 122)

Journey to the West, a popular sixteenth-century Chinese novel in which the Monk Sanzang, accompanied by three semi-divine disciples, takes a long journey from China to the Western Heaven in search of Buddhist scriptures, has been read widely in East Asian countries. Its present popularity in the region can be seen not only in the wide distribution of the novel itself but also in its frequent reproduction in the form of dramas, children’s stories, cartoons and puppet shows. Its allusions or adaptations are often seen in the works of contemporary Chinese writers and writers of Chinese descent as part of their rich cultural heritage.1

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1 One example of the use of Journey to the West in contemporary Chinese literature is Lee Feng’s (李馮) short story titled “Another Voice” (另一種聲音 Ling Yi Zhong Sheng Yin, 1993). Examples of the use of Journey to the West among the works of contemporary English language writers of Chinese descent are The Monkey King (1978) by Timothy Mo, who comes from an Anglo-Chinese background, and Monkey King (1997) by Patricia Chao from the U.S.
The story was originally based on an account of a real journey from Tang China to India undertaken in the seventh century by the courageous Buddhist monk Sanzang. In the following thousand years, through its adaptations in performances and in storytelling on the streets, it has developed into a fantastical adventure story in which imaginary figures abound, and which has little resemblance to the original text. One of the major changes is that while Sanzang is reduced to the status of a rather helpless and fearful figure who can barely manage the journey by himself, it is his three fictional disciples, particularly the hero/rebel/semi-divine trickster Monkey, who comes to play the major role. In fact, the novel is almost completely structured around Monkey, with the first seven chapters devoted to his birth and his outrageous rebellion against Heaven. Monkey is hatched from a stone egg and acquires from a Taoist master extraordinary magical powers, which include the ability to transform himself into seventy-two multiple shapes, to pluck hairs from his body and change them into whatever form he wishes, to fly thirty-six thousand miles on a magical cloud, and to defeat almost any deity or monster with his Golden Rod. When the Jade Emperor in Heaven attempts to subdue Monkey in punishment for the havoc he has caused, he challenges all the authorities in Heaven and disturbs them endlessly until finally the Lord Buddha imprisons him under the Five Elements Mountain for five hundred years. Even after Monkey is released by Sanzang and accompanies the monk on his “journey to the West” as his first and most loyal and courageous disciple, the major attraction of the story resides not in how Sanzang overcomes the ordeals of the journey, but in how Monkey, with his intelligence and magical powers, rescues his master from the ambushes of devils. The irony is that Monkey, despite his loyalty and devotion, is sometimes mistakenly thought by Sanzang to be uncontrollable (and in fact Monkey does indeed remain uncontrollable to a certain extent). As a result, Monkey is frequently tormented by a spell, which allows Sanzang to discipline him by causing a golden band to tighten around his head. The situation becomes comically complicated when Pig, the second disciple, who tends to pursue his desires rather than his mission, and whose traits are far more ordinary than those of Monkey, willfully encourages this misunderstanding between Sanzang and Monkey. When they finally reach the West and are given the scriptures, however, Monkey is rewarded with high office as the Victorious Fighting Buddha and the golden band disappears from his head.

A number of questions are raised by this story. Does Monkey’s conversion mean that his rebellion has been utterly suppressed, and thus that he has been enslaved? Or does it represent a rite of passage towards his later, greatly enhanced spiritual state as a Buddha? Or does he remain a rebel? The fact that the converted
Monkey remains high-spirited and dauntless without any trace of slavishness makes these questions difficult to answer. Still, it is important to note that the comical and subversive presence of Monkey as trickster serves to offset and ridicule the dominant hegemony. As a signifier for those that have no recourse but trickery, Monkey serves the all-important purpose of defiance and laughter in the face of an infinitely superior power.²

This destabilizing element of Monkey is the very issue to be explored in the writings under discussion in this paper: the short stories in The House of Hunger (1978)³ by Dambudzo Marechera (1955-1987), the subversive Zimbabwean writer of Shona origin, and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1989) by Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), the California-born Chinese American writer with a strong feminist and pacifist outlook. I argue that Marechera incorporates episodes and figures from Journey to the West in such a way as to present the alienated and disintegrated psyche of a Zimbabwean intellectual during the period of white rule. The socio-historical conditions implicit in Marechera’s use of the Chinese Monkey are made clearer by a comparison with the ways in which Maxine Hong Kingston uses the same text to articulate the bicultural voice of Chinese Americans in Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. Finally, I contend that this comparison enables us to look anew at the problematic “development” of the figure of Monkey in Journey to the West.

The Colonized Trickster Monkey

Dambudzo Marechera, one of the “lost generation” Zimbabwean writers, is famed for his iconoclastic writing which bares the oppressive mechanism inherent in colonialism and African nationalism alike as wielders of power attempting to impose a “unified” identity on their subjects. His definition of himself as a writer

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify my arguments.
³ Although The House of Hunger won the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979 and is well known in the history of African literatures in English, a brief explanation of its structure and content may be helpful. It was written while Marechera was in exile in Britain, and it consists of a novella “House of Hunger” and nine short stories (out of which three stories titled “Burning in the Rain,” “Black Skin What Mask” and “The Writer’s Grain” are discussed in this paper). In “House of Hunger” and some of the short stories, Marechera portrays his “home,” Southern Rhodesia under the white colonial regime (which at independence became Zimbabwe in 1980), as the place being inflicted by violence, human degradation, and deracination to the point of mental disintegration. Some of the other stories in the collection reflect his state of exile in Britain. The novella and these stories are characterized by their fragmented structure and the conflation of different literary genres, thus blurring the boundaries between reality and dream.
rather than an “African” writer articulates his intense postcolonial drive, which echoes that of the sacrilegeously rebellious Monkey:

I think I am the doppelganger whom, until I appeared, African literature had not yet met. And in this sense I would question anyone calling me an African writer. Either you are a writer or you are not. If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you. In other words, the direct international experience of every single living entity is, for me, the inspiration to write. But at the same time, I am aware of my vulnerability—that I am only me—and of my mortality; and that’s why it seems to me always a waste of time to waste anybody’s life in regulations, in ordering them. . . . (Marechera, Interview 221)

Although there is no direct evidence that Marechera has read Journey to the West, his statement that he had read some Chinese literature (Marehera, Interview 133) suggests that he, as an avid reader, might have had a familiarity with the story of trickster Monkey. In fact, in “Burning in the Rain” and “The Writer’s Grain” in particular, we can discern some figures and episodes that are unmistakably drawn from Journey to the West. These figures and episodes are used in such a way as to present metaphorically the postcolonial “nervous condition” as Jean-Paul Sartre would have called it (Sartre 17)—or in the case of Marechera, to present his own extremely alienated and disintegrated psyche as a Zimbabwean triply marginalized by his communities. In this context it is important to note that The House of Hunger, Marechera’s first book, was written at a time when he had been expelled from his own country during the period of white rule, but also was alienated from the Zimbabwean community in Britain. Moreover, it was during this period when Marechera was expelled from Oxford University, where he was affiliated on scholarship. This state of being in exile is, as Elleke Boehmer observes, what often turns a Third World elite into the “vocal interrogator of nationalist doctrine” (145).

One should perhaps bear in mind that discourses centered on the figure of a monkey carry a strong colonial significance for African writers. Among the European images of African people as their “Other,” one of the most debasing is the one which, influenced by a popular understanding of Darwinism, stresses their biological “Otherness” by reducing them to a race with an “inferior” or “ape-like” status. This is the image, which the so-called “first generation” African writers like Achebe or Ngugi tried to subvert through their more positively “authentic” and
African-centered representations in their realist or socialist narratives. It is clear that writers like Achebe and Ngugi want to articulate their strong objection to colonialism and to participate in the construction of an African “national” identity.

Marechera is also keenly aware of the painfully deracinat ing effect of this “ape” image of Africans. For example, in his novella “House of Hunger” in *The House of Hunger*, an African priest, whose success in his career is satirically presented as being bound up with his thorough internalization of colonial discourse, torments the protagonist with his belief that Africans “had nothing but the ape-grin in [their] brains” before “the white man came” with “industry and progress” (35). Similarly, in another short story “Black Skin What Mask,” Marechera astutely presents the totally “colonized” state of a young exiled Zimbabwean student at Oxford, who, in his desperate attempt to be other than the “monkeys” of racist discourse (94), tries to obliterate his own identity as a black man by wearing an expensive suit, frequently scrubbing his skin, and incessantly chasing white women, until finally he is driven to slashing his wrists.

Marechera’s response to such mental colonization, however, is radically different from that of either Achebe or Ngugi. Being one of the “lost generation” Zimbabwean writers who were deeply skeptical of nationalist and realist modes of expression, Marechera uses, with some inspiration from *Journey to the West*, the very concept of the monkey to question the authority of a unified “identity,” whether of the self or of the “nation,” as constructed and imposed upon by imperialism and nationalism, and to articulate his subversively destabilized and destabilizing postcolonial “monkey” selves. What enables Marechera to revise the colonial discourse of the “monkey” is the inherent postcoloniality within the tragic aspect of the trickster monkey. While it is widely known that Monkey is a trickster figure with a comical and transgressive power, it is important to note that his rebellion against the authority in Heaven is suppressed in *Journey to the West*. Indeed, the commonality of the subversive element in Marechera’s refiguration of “monkey” and that of Monkey in *Journey to the West* lies in not so much the sub-human and semi-divine challenge to the dominant hegemony as his subsequent state of being defeated. It is a state, which paradoxically articulates the contradiction of dominance and the necessity to share both divinity and humanity within a monkey. This element strongly evokes Homi Bhabha’s concepts of “mimicry” (and “mockery”) and “hybridity.”

Both concepts, by disclosing the ambivalence within colonial discourse, deconstruct the narratives of colonial power and dominant culture.

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4 Please see “Of Mimicry” (86) and “Signs” (112).
Among the three short stories of Marechera mentioned so far, “Burning in the Rain” is the only one in which we find the actual image of an ape, and here this image is given an extremely subversive figuration. The story begins with the protagonist’s gaze undermining the authority of human body: Looking at himself in the mirror he recognizes that “there is a certain ridiculousness about the human body which he [can] not accept in himself” (83). It is his willingness to “mock the body in the mirror, mock it obliquely like a child who fears adult retaliation” (83; emphasis added) that elicits the image of an ape in the mirror as his “Other” self who threatens to take him over. To describe this ape in the mirror in a Jungian fashion as simply being “his shadow, his instinctual, inferior, ‘monstrous’ side” (Perocchio 211) would constrict our understanding of the ensuing process of “going ape” which articulates what Bhabha would define as the strong postcolonial tendency to parody, mimic and subvert order (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry” 86). After his encounter with the ape, a grotesquely displaced image of himself, in the mirror, the protagonist wakes up in the morning covered with soot and with a red bag full of obscene Christmas cards; in other occasions, he wakes to find his face painted with whitewash and a European wig on his head, or to find his room in complete disorder and smeared with human feces. More importantly, the transformation does not have a simple closure in the form of the elimination either of the ape or of himself, or even the fusion of the two. When the protagonist’s girlfriend smashes a bottle onto the mirror to eliminate the ape, the mirror “simply shiver[s] into a thousand minute lenses glinting into her being” (87), thus presenting “identity” as something of a schizophrenic construction that is continually refracted and fragmented into multiple “selves,” undermining the supposed notion of an “authentic” or “unified” self.

Similarly, in Journey to the West, Monkey, after being subdued and converted, still poses a threat to the established order with his multifaceted carnivalesque energies. These energies are best manifested in how the Monkey’s militant and magic powers, without which the journey of the high-minded yet helpless Sanzang would not be possible, bring about comic violence and a profane disorder to the joy of audience. It thus undermines the spiritual authority of Sanzang and causes the “temporary suspension of all hierarchical distinction,” as Mikhail Bakhtin would call it (15). As a result, Monkey is given a Band-tightening spell to be disciplined into order, unity and predictability.

The fragmentation of self in Marechera’s story is further expanded to convey ominously the possibility of the subversion and disembodiment of the nation itself, as founded on both imperial authority and African nationalism; at the end of the
story the rain suddenly “sound(s) like the microscopic commotion of six million little people fleeing a national catastrophe” (87). This ending implies, according to Elleke Boehmer, that the “national wholeness has in many postcolonial contexts turned out to be little more than a dream or a folly; and national identity is rarely anything but partial and split” (Boehmer 134).

In the second and third sections of “The Writer’s Grain,” we find characters and episodes, which are recognizably drawn from Journey to the West, and they are conflated with numerous other myths and literary genres in a satirical or, to borrow Marechera’s own word for his preferred aesthetics, “menippean” fashion (Marechera, “African” 364). The second section of “The Writer’s Grain” portrays a Kafkaesque world in which a boy with amnesia called Andrew is methodically instructed by a warthog, which has a “purely educative purpose” (124), to live on human flesh and to swallow mentally the darkness of human history from the time of the Roman empire to the post-independence atrocities of Uganda, all of which are visually displayed on the screen in the schoolroom. The horror of the story lies not only in how the warthog systematically “educates” Andrew, but also in how Andrew, with his childlike innocence and his total lack of understanding of any connection between himself and the horrific scenes shown in front of him, obediently follows the warthog’s instruction. He appears to follow the order and to be “civilized” until his sudden understanding of the effect of the “education” causes him to have an attack of apoplexy.

One of the most telling scenes in the story is when the warthog feeds Andrew with salad plants that crudely resemble the human body. This is a parody of an episode in Journey to the West, in which Sanzang refuses to eat a magical “manfruit” offered at a Taoist master’s house, believing it to be a real human body; later the greedy Pig, like the warthog, frames Monkey to steal and eat some “manfruit,” a transgression which greatly complicates their journey afterwards. The way in which Marechera revises this episode clearly conveys the darkness of his vision: While Sanzang refuses to eat the “manfruit,” Andrew, whose innocence

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5 Marechera’s following favorable reference to Neil McEwan’s use of Bakhtin’s idea of the menippean in discussing Wole Soyinka’s novel as “the menippean” novel (Marechera, “African” 364) strangely coincides with Marechera’s own style of writing:

The world of such novels, says McEwan, is complex, unstable, comic, satirical, fantastic, poetical and committed to the pursuit of truth. The hero can travel anywhere in this world and beyond. Fantasy and symbolism are combined with low-life naturalism. . . . Genres are mixed. Stories, speeches, dramatic sketches, poetry and parody exist side by side (“African” 363-64).
somewhat resembles that of Sanzang, eats the human salad offered by the warthog. Andrew’s naïve trust in the warthog is also evocative of Sanzang’s general blindness in favoring Pig over Monkey, despite Pig’s greed and thoughtlessness. This revision, including the reversal of the role of master and disciple and the parody of colonial education, emphasizes how hopelessly both colonizers and colonized are conditioned not to associate themselves with any responsibility for the atrocities of colonialism, a failure of imagination and critical intelligence which leads to their perpetuating the system.

The third section of “The Writer’s Grain,” named “Protista,” conveys an overwhelming sense of alienation and deprivation on political, personal and cultural levels. The protagonist’s painful state of exile and his unquenched spiritual thirst are powerfully symbolized by a prevailing image of a drought-stricken landscape. His personal relationship is haunted by an image of death: His wife-secretary Maria fails to come back to him from a hunting trip. She however “returns” in the nightmarish form of a white skeleton. Even the supposedly empowering African nationalist discourse based on the opposition between traditional Shona culture, seen as being “wholesome,” and deracinating “white” colonial culture is undermined by the ominous “white” manfish, which, according to Grant Lilford, is Marechera’s interpretation of a benign water spirit “njuzu” in Shona mythology (Lilford 290). In “Protista” this mythological being appears as a curse placed on the hero by a neighbor and ultimately takes him over.

An episode appears at the beginning of the section in the form of the father’s tale about the “resilience of human roots” only furthers the omnipresent sense of defeat and alienation:

[A] youth rebelling against the things of his father had one morning fled from home and had traveled to the utmost of the earth where he was so happy that he wrote on their wall the words “I have been here” and signed his new name after the words; the years rolled by with delight until he tired of them and thought to return home and tell his father about them. But when he neared home his father, who was looking out for him, met him and said “All this time you thought you were actually away from me, you have been right here in my palm.” And the father opened his clenched hand and showed the son what was written in this hand. The words—and the very same signature—of the son were clearly written in the father’s open palm: “I have been here.” The son was so stunned and angry that he there and then slew
his father and hung himself on a barren fig-tree which stood in the garden. (128)

This episode is clearly drawn from the climactic scene of Monkey’s defeat in *Journey to the West*, in which the Lord Buddha, who, in his attempt to demonstrate that Monkey is not as clever as he assumed, agrees that if Monkey could exit his hand in a single somersault, the Buddha would guarantee that Monkey would be given the Heavenly Palace by the Jade Emperor. Monkey cockily accepts the wager and flies on his cloud, but is ultimately proven the fool: although he thinks he has been able to reach the ends of the earth, “five flesh-pink pillars” (*Journey* 1: 122), where he writes the graffito “Great Sage Equaling Heaven Was Here” (*Journey* 1: 122) on the middle pillar and urinates on it, he is unable to escape the all encompassing span of the Buddha’s palm which was in fact the “five flesh-pink pillars” in disguise.

The ending of the father’s tale is highly suggestive of the dismal outcome of the postcolonial subject’s attempt to extricate himself from his own colonized state, as the defeat of Monkey in *Journey to the West* signifies. Yet Marechera, through the repetitive occurrence of the same dream, also suggests the danger of falling into the position of being both the victim and the victimizer of the system. In his dreams

[a]t times the father would become Maria the huntress; the son would be myself; and the fig-tree would become the tree just outside my own hut. But sometimes the son would become Maria and I would be the father whose clenched hand contained everything that Maria was. (128-29)

Indeed, one of the prominent characteristics of “Protista” is Marechera’s profuse use of dreams as a space to allow the transformation of the characters. Some of these transformations are not unlike those of Monkey, but there is a significant difference between them. While *Journey to the West* provides a fantastical space where Monkey uses transformation as a means to outwit his enemies, the dreams of “Protista” constitute a postcolonial space where the characters go through half-imposed transformations (including the disturbing interchangeability of the protagonist, Maria, and his father mentioned above) which nervously articulate the unstable and unfixed nature of postcolonial “hybrid” identities. It is important to conclude at this juncture that this hybridity does not open a space for a possible resistance as Bhabha would have defined (“Sign” 112),
but manifests no more than what David Buuck calls the “colonized self . . . as both victim and perpetrator of violence and meaning, chaos and order, civility and resistance,” demonstrating “the kind of ambivalence at the center of the colonial encounter” (Buuck 124). This “colonized self” is what characterizes the condition of the “colonized” (trickster) monkey in Marechera’s work.

The Tripmaster Monkey

In comparison with Marechera’s rather selective use of the Chinese novel with an emphasis on the tragic “defeat” of the monkey figure, Maxine Hong Kingston in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, is far more daring in her use of the same text to present the ambivalently bicultural voice of Chinese Americans. Kingston clearly defines Monkey in *Journey to the West* as an “underdog,” a rebel whose task is “to bring chaos to established order” (Kingston, “Writing” 90), and she incarnates Monkey, the trickster, as Wittman Ah Sing, a high-spirited and rebellious young Chinese American Beatnik in the 1960s, an era which she regards as being full of the “spirit of the monkey” (Kingston, “Talking” 78).6

Wittman, like Monkey, is an alienated anti-hero who operates at the margins of society. His fellows in Chinatown exclude him, calling him “a saang-hsulo, a whisker-growing man, Beatnik” (11). He feels equally excluded by finding himself represented as an American “Other”: his ethnic image in mainstream popular culture is that of an effeminate Oriental or, as in the poem by Jack Kerouac, which is quoted in the novel, of a “twinkling little Chinese” (69). His attempt to apply his Berkeley liberal arts education and pacifism to a capitalist America dominated by a war economy financially marginalizes him. Nevertheless, Wittman, as an

6 Kingston’s particular use of the concept of the Chinese trickster in articulating the bicultural voice of the marginalized Chinese Americans can be better understood by comparing it to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s use of the concept of an African American trickster monkey called “the Signifying Monkey” in articulating “the double-voiced black tradition” (Gates xxv). The concept of the Signifying Monkey, according to Gates, in his *The Signifying Monkey*, has its origin in the West African trickster god, Esu-Elegbara, who plays a major role in mediating between gods and their people in the practice of divination among the Fon and Yoruba. Gates defines “Signifyin(g) (which involves various kinds of insinuating, insulting and boasting) as an African-American “trope of tropes” (21), rhetorical strategies that subvert the dominant meaning of language practices through the forms of linguistic play. The act of signifyin(g) is actively used not only in the African American oral tradition as the act of conical subversion, but also by some African American writers as their strategy, through repetition and revision of the original text, to resist and subvert the dominant discourse.
incarnation of the subversive Monkey, aggressively challenges and undermines any discourse that pigeonholes and marginalizes him as a racial, cultural, and social “Other.” He defiantly wears green, which is “his color to wear to war” (44), after being informed that green makes his “racial skin” (44) appear more yellow. Also, like the protean Monkey, he constantly fakes his ethnic and social identity in order to undermine the attempts of a Chinese American girl called Judy to stereotype him as a quiet Chinese American science major. He willfully courts dismissal from his job as a retail worker in the toy department of a department store by displaying a Barbie doll and a wind-up monkey joined in an obscene pose. He also insists that he be listed as a playwright rather than as a retail manager at the unemployment office.

His ultimate subversiveness blossoms in his drive as a poet or a story-teller. His stories often integrate and improvise on English literary traditions, Chinese classics, and elements of American popular culture (just as jazz musicians improvise on the melody and basic chord sequence of numerous standard tunes contained in the “fakebook”) to create a form which destabilizes the imposed hierarchical binary oppositions between fact/fiction, American/Chinese, history/myth, or written/oral, thus opening a literary space which allows him to sing a song of his hybrid, multifaceted “Chinese American” self. This drive ultimately leads to Wittman putting on a “Chinese American” drama, which not only involves the active conflation of Journey to the West, two fourteenth-century Chinese war novels (Outlaws of the Marsh and Three Kingdoms), and the issues of the Vietnam war in a carnivalesque manner, but also physically involves Wittman’s family and all his friends of various ethnic backgrounds—in other words, his entire “community”—as characters in his play. This strong sense of hybridity is encoded in his very name Wittman Ah Sing, which not only evokes Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” indicating Wittman’s desire to define himself in terms of the American literary tradition, but which also, according to Yan Gao, can mean “star,” “resurrection,” or “gorilla” in Chinese, thus echoing Wittman’s desire to “resurrect” the Chinese theatrical tradition in which Monkey (and Wittman) can be a star (Yan Gao 105).

However, despite this struggle to articulate his Chinese American identity and to establish his claim to America by integrating the various elements of his cultural and social background, Wittman’s voice remains somewhat problematic, and his endeavor is presented as being not without limitations. The problem lies in the fact that while he aggressively seeks to expose racist and cultural myths and to deconstruct white supremacy in American society, his claim to “Americanness” leads him to internalize the very value system, which marginalizes him. This explains his refusal to be associated with “Fresh Off the Boats” immigrant Chinese
whose culture he is supposed to share, and his instant attraction to blonde-haired Taña, who is a stereotype of the “white” beauty. Even more problematic is his aggressive reassertion of what he defines as the “traditional” Chinese concept of the male as an “I-warrior” (319), an identity which he feels has been historically emasculated or “de-balled” (317) in American white male mainstream culture. This masculinist orientation, however, “unconsciously perpetuates [the] patriarchal hierarchy” (Chang 21) which marginalizes women just as the hierarchy of the mainstream culture marginalizes Chinese Americans.

Wittman’s way of asserting Chinese American identity leads, therefore, to the danger of falling into the construction of a singular ethnic male discourse which merely replicates the oppressiveness of the dominant discourse. This tendency, however, is often playfully undermined by Kingston, who equates her role as an omniscient female narrator with that of Kuan Yin. Kuan Yin is the Goddess of Mercy who, according to Kingston’s understanding of (or her feminist improvisation on) Journey to the West, “takes a rock and throws it on top of the monkey for 500 years” (Kingston, “Writing” 88). Similarly, Kingston locates Wittman in a place where his masculine and sexist orientation is constantly mocked and deflected in his relationships with women. His strong aversion to Judy’s plainness and stereotypical ideas not only causes him, in his turn, to stereotype her viciously, but also makes him hallucinate about her as a “Pig Woman” (80). This episode comically demonstrates Wittman’s deep anxiety about Judy, a plain Chinese American girl, as leading him astray by her “sub-human” status on the fringes of “human” society, rather than enabling him to attain higher office in the same society. He sees her as Pig in Journey to the West, leading the party astray and therefore preventing Monkey from being rewarded with high office as the Victorious Fighting Buddha in the West. Wittman also becomes frustrated with his marriage to Taña due to his economic and emotional dependence on her and his resulting sense of impotence. Yet ironically the note he leaves on the stage announcing his separation from her is mistaken by his community for an announcement of his marriage to her, leading to the organization of a wedding banquet at the end of the story. Moreover, the whole sequence of events, either within or outside the theater, transforms him in the end from an “I-warrior,” whether it is contextualized in the Chinese heroic tradition or in the Vietnam War, to a pacifist:
He had made up his mind: he will not go to Viet Nam or to any war. He had staged the War of the Three Kingdoms as heroically as he could, which made him start to understand: the three brothers and Cho Cho were masters of war; they had worked out strategies and justifications for war so brilliantly that their policies and their tactics are used today, even by governments with nuclear-powered weapons. And they lost. The clanging and banging fooled us, but now we know—they lost. Studying the mightiest war epic of all time, Wittman changed—been!—into a pacifist. Dear American monkey, don’t be afraid. Here, let us tweak your ear, and kiss your other ear.

Incomplete and oblique as the ending is, just as in *Journey to the West* Kuan Yin intervenes and guides Monkey in the way of Buddhism, the female narrator’s intervention in Wittman’s “heroic” attempt to bring chaos to establishment values manages to indicate the possibility of destabilizing not only the hierarchical binary oppositions between American/Chinese, history/myth, fact/fiction and written/oral, but also that between male/female, thus ultimately opening up the possibility of articulating a more “hybrid” identity that is continually shifting and integrating numerous conflicting viewpoints. Its essence is crystallized in Wittman’s intermezzo, his version of the scene of Monkey’s defeat in his wager with the Lord Buddha. In the intermezzo, “Ah Monkey,” who with his “pen wet with ink” writes his graffito, “The Greatest Wisest Man wus here” (285), and urinates on the middle finger not of the Lord Buddha but of Tripitaka (Sanskrit word for “Sanzang”), is smashed by Tripitaka’s hand and “imprisoned for five hundred years” (286). Whether this “inauthentic” scene is due to Wittman’s misunderstanding of the classical text, or because he is improvising on it, placing Tripitaka, the supposedly “feminized” figure with little supernatural power, in the place of the mighty Lord Buddha makes the scene “like King Kong with Fay Wray in his hand, but vice versa” (286); and further, the fact that Wittman plays both Monkey and Tripitaka in the scene conveys his potential to move beyond the singular ethnic male discourse through his “defeat.”

This elusively feminist touch in Wittman’s “inauthentic” Chinese play can be discussed most insightfully with reference to Elliot H. Shapiro’s observation that Kingston wrote *Tripmaster Monkey* as a response to persistent attacks on her by Frank Chin, a Chinese American playwright. Chin reasserted “authentic” Chinese American history and masculinity, and denounced some Chinese American writers,
including Kingston, as “faking” “the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (Chin 3). Kingston’s identification of Kuan Yin or Sanzang with the Lord Buddha could easily become a target of Chin’s attack as an example of such “fakery.” In this respect, it is possible to read Kingston’s representation of Wittman, who, like Chin, goes to Berkeley in the 1960s, becomes a playwright, sets up his own theater company and aggressively asserts a Chinese American “I-warrior” identity, as a parody of (or an attack on) Chin. Yet this interpretation is too reductive since Kingston, with “her vision of community, and pacifism, and bridge-building,” seeks not to attack Chin but to propose “an alternative vision of Chinese-American identity and Chinese-American masculinity” (Shapiro 23). Wittman’s “fake” version of the climactic scene clearly belongs to the tradition of Chinese theater and story-telling on the streets, a tradition in which *Journey to the West*, as a result of constant adaptation and improvisation, never had a single “authentic” text but rather numerous “fake” ones, including “the most universally known” version supposedly written down by Wu Cheng’en. It is also worthwhile remembering that the text, which is supposed to be based on fact, is ninety-nine percent fiction (Ohta 7), that is, “fake,” and that the very existence of Monkey is included in this fakery. This leads to a definition of literature and history as hybrid and continually hybridizing, an alternative definition to Chin’s rather essentialist view of “authentic” history and literature. Similarly, Wittman, by playing the role of both “fake” character/masculinist Monkey/King Kong and “real” character/feminized and mighty Tripitaka/Fay Wray, creates for the audience as well as for himself a space in which there is more freedom and fluidity in the way in which they imagine their histories and identities in terms of ethnicity and gender. Wittman thus provides an alternative to the monolithic “Chinese American history and masculinity” argued for by Chin.

**Conclusion**

The ways in which Marechera and Kingston incorporate elements of *Journey to the West* into their respective texts reflect clear differences in their interpretations of the original episodes due to their different concerns and the different socio-political contexts in which they were writing. The irony in this comparison is that the Buddha’s teaching is a lesson born of compassion and benevolence, a teaching that emphasizes the infinite that Monkey cannot cognize, while the colonial enterprise is not one of teaching but one of ordering or structuring, and within that enterprise it is not necessary to teach Monkey as much as it is necessary to control
him. Nevertheless, there is a surprising amount of common ground in their interpretations of the Chinese text: They both understand Monkey as a metaphorically “colonized” subject, in a sense as a figure who resists the ruling power from the margins of the dominant discourse, with a high potential to destabilize the authenticity of the imposed concept of a stable and unified “national” or “ethnic” identity through his continually changing “hybrid” self.

This interpretation of Monkey also enables us to look anew at the “problematic” development of Monkey under the Buddha’s supervision in *Journey to the West* itself. The real subversiveness of the converted Monkey lies not so much in his remaining rebellious as in the ways in which the sheer presence of the earthy Monkey, who is supposedly spiritually inferior to Sanzang, undermines the authority of both Sanzang and of Buddhism itself. The fact that Monkey, with his wisdom and magic power, is far superior to Sanzang in understanding the true nature of events, in fighting against devils and in eliciting help from deities in Heaven, demonstrates the impracticality of Buddhist pacifism. Furthermore, Sanzang’s general tendency to depend on the Band-tightening spell rather than on his virtue in his attempts to control Monkey undermines the very philosophy he represents. In short, Monkey’s development is an enactment of the project of “civilizing the wild,” that process in which the gradual creation of a “civilized” or “hybridized” identity only serves to undermine the legitimacy of colonial power or the authority of a dominant culture.

This inherent postcoloniality of *Journey to the West* may be explained by the fact that much of the real development of the story took place in the context of storytelling and performances in theaters, teahouses and bars, and on the streets (Jenner 633-35). Such a form of development inevitably caused the production and adaptation of the narrative to be affected not only by the intentions of the authorities of the time who wished to control the masses through the story, but also by the voices of the masses who wished to see the marginalized hero overthrow the authorities. It also allowed various kinds of myth, tales from different regions and

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7 This contradiction of the dominant Buddhist discourse is even further highlighted when, at the end of the journey, Monkey points out to the Lord Buddha the corruption of the Western Heaven by accusing two *arhats* of giving Sanzang blank scriptures instead of the true scriptures because Sanzang has failed to bribe them.

8 It is worth noting in this context that the Communist government in China in the 1950s revised the plot of a stage production of *Journey to the West* on the basis of their interpretation of Monkey as a hero of the class struggle, a revolutionary who brings chaos to the feudal and capitalist establishment (Nakano 83).
countries, and the zeitgeist of the time to be incorporated into the text in a way that is only possible in the oral form of literature. The resulting richness and polyphonic nature of the novel will continue not only to capture the minds of readers as an extremely entertaining story but also to inspire anybody sensitive to their own marginality and their own multiple, conflicting voices to explore the possibility of bringing those voices to the surface. In that respect, needless to say, Marechera and Kingston are fine exemplars of the articulation of the disturbingly multifarious voices of the monkey (un)bound.

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