

USABLE PASTS: POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSNATIONAL MEMORY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *TRIPMASTER MONKEY: A FAKE BOOK* AND TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

by

NICOLE SMITH

(Under the Direction of VALERIE BABB)

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine the transgressive impact that transnational memory has on multicultural literature in the post-September 11th era. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* both authors utilize nonlinear temporality to explore the depths of cultural memory and history that extend far beyond America's geographical borders. Drawing connections respectively to the African American and Chinese American diasporas, Morrison and Kingston simultaneously challenge hegemonic constructions of American history while also creating communities that possess the potential to heal each cultural group's history of exclusion.

INDEX WORDS: Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, *Song of Solomon*, multiculturalism, transnationalism, memory, postmemory, Afrocentricism, diaspora, Flying Africans, Chinese opera, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, performance

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NICOLE SMITH

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NICOLE SMITH

Major Professor: Valerie Babb

Committee: Timothy Powell
Kam-ming Wong

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2005

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Canon Building” and “National Defense”: Teaching and Analyzing Transnational
Novels in the post-September 11 Era of Nationalism

The American canon has historically been a site of contest and ongoing struggle over definitions of national identity. In the 1880s Fireside Poets, Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes were canonized in order to differentiate postcolonial America from its British forefather. Then, in the post-World War I and II eras, critics sought to define American literature on its own terms in seminal critical studies, like Leslie Fielder’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry, Understanding Fiction*, R.W.B. Lewis’s *American Literature – The Makers and the Making*, and Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*. Years later in the 1980s and 90s, the canon wars became overtly public as various racial, gender, and sexual groups demanded equal representation in the forging of a national canon. On academic campuses across the country, this multiplicity of voices challenged the canon makers hegemonic preference for white male authors. Opening up the Western tradition to what John E. Becker calls a “new campaign of slash and burn,” these activists pried open the stingy canon and demanded inclusion of diverse cultural voices that they insisted have always been present.

The *Health Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Paul Lauter, surfaced in 1990; the first of its kind, the *Health* was multiculturally oriented and reflected America’s long, if often unacknowledged multiethnic history.¹ In his important study *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. marks this moment as crucial to canon formation because, as he believes, a “well-marked anthology functions in the academy to

create a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it” (31).² Resisting narrow racialized and gendered paradigms, which once governed a predominantly Westernized canon, Academics, like Gates, aggressively revised American literature, history, memory, and identity.

Cultural traditionalists, like Lynne V. Cheney, Allan Bloom, William Bennett, and E.D. Hirsch, fumed. What, they argued, would happen to Milton, Homer, Shakespeare, and the other great writers of Western civilization? Desperate to redeem and resurrect tradition, these critics fought to “save” America from what they believed was the ideological onslaught of multiculturalism’s radical divisiveness. Cheney, then head of the National Endowment of the Humanities, accused this emerging group of multicultural and feminist academics of creating “oversimple versions of the American past that focus on the negative” (26) and eschewing the “truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all” (14). Seeking to downplay horrific atrocities, like slavery, Japanese internment, Native American genocide, and other events, Cheney endorses a celebratory and willfully naïve depiction of American history. She obfuscates the realities of an often violent and exclusionary national narrative with the possibilities or promises of America’s founding documents. Those who endorse multiculturalism then function as threats to the stability of truth and national unity.

Today, in the post-September 11 era, the debate rages on. The tragic terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 left the country irrevocably changed and divided. This division is embodied in the split between the supposedly liberal academy and conservative politicians and pundits. The post-September 11th climate, in which as President Bush remarks “either you are with us, or you are the terrorists,” necessitates a

seemingly ingenuous choice between good or evil, right or wrong, patriot or traitor (242). This binaural thinking resulted in an upsurge of potent yet shallow hyper-nationalism. Suddenly, America becomes all that is good, and our historical slate of racism and sexism is wiped clean. Michael H. Hunt describes America's political climate:

The new patriotic consensus expressed itself in a wide variety of ways familiar from previous national trials. The consensus was rapidly evident in proliferating flags on cars, storefronts, and office doors and in heated language on radio talk shows and in official pronouncements. In the name of 'civilization' the innocuously named American Council of Trustees and Alumni decried too-free speech, moral relativism, and national self-loathing supposedly evident in critical academic reactions to the 'war on terrorism [. . .] public debate sputtered and died; dissenters fell to the margins of political respectability. (12)

Therefore, similar to the powerful transgressiveness of academia during the canon wars of the 80s and 90s, the grounds of America's college campuses have become one of, as Hunt suggests, the only relatively protected spaces for dissent. Or, rather this safety seemed possible, until recent ultra-conservative voices gained prestige on college campuses, and incidents like the Ward Churchill case show that even tenured voices of protest, particularly those in ethnic studies departments, are not safe. In "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America And What Can Be Done About It," a provocateurial manifesto produced by *American Council of Trustees and Alumni* (ACTA), academics are accused of anti-patriotism and moral relativism; furthermore, they are out-of-touch with what ACTA believes is mainstream America's full support of

the war in Iraq. Known for their “explicit condemnations of America” (1) and their utilization of September 11th as an “occasion to find fault with America,” (4) academics epitomize un-Americanness.

Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston protest rather than cower from the backlash against the academy by utilizing the power of their canonical voices. In a 2004 interview, Morrison remarks

Do I have a feeling of America going backwards? Sure. And I can’t tell you how frightening it is – to see battles we thought we had already won [. . .] we’re fighting to vote again. We’re fighting to protest. This is a major crisis. (15)

She echoes her frustration in other interviews and public forums, such as *Vanity Fair*, in which Morrison published “The Dead of September 11,” a commemorative opportunity for her to “speak directly to the dead – the September dead” (1). Just as Morrison engages the deleterious effects of slavery’s trauma, she similarly reaches out to the victims of September 11. However, she does so tentatively, as she promises to

not say a word until I could set aside all I know or believe about nations, wars, leaders, the governed and ungovernable; all I suspect about armor and entrails. First I would freshen my tongue, abandon sentences crafted to know evil [. . .] to speak to you, the dead of September, I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera. (1)

Avoiding the “craft” of political rhetoric and the “false intimacy” of a leader who poses for the world, Morrison suggests, in a manner reminiscent of those authors writing after

the Holocaust, a new approach to writing that reflects the trauma of September 11; it must be a new, sincere sort of sentence enlivened by the absence of political posturing and rooted in the pasts of those dead.

Like Morrison, Kingston concerns herself with cultural exigencies surrounding September 11. Aside from reacting, along with other writers in a book entitled *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, Kingston published a new novel, *Fifth Book of Peace*, that stems in part from her country-wide speaking tour immediately after the attacks. In the novel's epilogue, which specifically addresses September 11 and the war in Iraq, Kingston calls for peace. In what she calls a "Metta Meditation," Kingston asks Americans to remember that "America is a historically special country. We are a nation made up of people from every nation on the earth," and so "in war, we suffer a special American pain. Whomever we shoot, whomever we bomb, we are shooting and bombing relatives, brothers, sisters, cousins." Taking a similar pacifist approach, Morrison asks us to remember that those who died on September 11 are "children born of ancestors born in every continent on the planet" (1). This transnational and inclusive definition of American identity implies that Americans see themselves connected globally to citizens of other nations, even those nations that we engage with in war and to those within America's borders who have international roots, like Kingston and Morrison. Joanne Meyerowitz agrees that "if we have learned anything from events of September 11, we should have learned, once again, that we cannot understand American history by dwelling solely on the US" (3). Meyerowitz, Kingston, and Morrison propose a potentially restorative conception of diasporic identity that begins in the United States but spreads, web-like, to other countries all over the globe. Unfortunately, however, Betty Jean Craige

in her introduction to *To Mend the World: Women Reflect on 9/11*, claims that “when our country is attacked, national loyalty almost obliterates the sense of global citizenship” (13). The fervent patriotism and the constant fear of attack facilitated a national crisis in which xenophobia reigned, and the national mindset narrowed.

How does this national climate then translate to the literary academy and the teaching of multicultural literature? The paranoia and banal patriotism of the post-September 11 era suggest the regression of multicultural literature and the carefully crafted and fought for sense of a more accurate reading of America’s past and its national memory. No longer is the lack of minority students in college classrooms a dire issue. Instead, according to conservative David Horowitz, the “tragic” oppression of mostly white conservative voices on American campuses is the new signifier of missing diversity. He bemoans the treatment of open conservative students as “second class citizens” (Horowitz 1). Ignoring the continued necessity for affirmative action or minority recruitment, Horowitz focuses on the beleaguered, white conservatives. In a similar vein, Stanley Fish ridicules a “professor who, in the name of ‘openness’, requires her students to subscribe to the tenets of tolerance and multiculturalism” (1). Fish terms this pedagogical approach a “laps[e] in individual judgment” (1). Many critics, like Fish and Horowitz, question the necessity of teaching multicultural literature and the history that accompanies it and call for a return to a canon that reflects America’s superiority and its roots in Western civilization.

The worst effect of September 11 is the country’s willingness to disremember its own, often murky past. In the post-September 11 era America has learned a new paradigm for remembering, one characterized by convenient forgetting, that further

troubles the position of multicultural literature in American classrooms. This disinclination for accurate memory represents, as Louis Gates prophetically feared, the “return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable. Who would return us to that medieval never-never land?” (35). The capacity of the post-September 11 generation to erase a problematic past in order to fit a nationalist narrative that paints America as innately good and innocent potentially compromises a student’s ability to approach America’s sometimes shameful though real past. Richard Stamelman believes that events predating and postdating September 11 “will occupy that unstable space *between* memory and history, that ground zero where the ‘truth’ of history is perpetually forgotten and the ‘illusion’ of memory perpetually remembered” (19). A sense of memory predicated upon “illusion” rather than reality supplants history.

This cultural amnesia subverts much of the activist work that multiculturalists have done and masks the necessity for future work. How will readers who do not seriously remember our country’s history of racism approach Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*? In what ways will a student’s self-identification with nationalistic rhetoric affect his/her ability to imagine the effects of racism against Chinese Americans and African Americans? If, as Eric Froner argues, the canon itself is an “ideological construction, whose specific content has changed over time to accommodate changing pedagogical, ideological, and political needs,” then will canon formation gradually give way or stand strong against the resulting pseudo-patriotism of post-September 11 America (44)? Finally, how does one

teach and write about transnational novels, like *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* and *Song of Solomon*, during a time of intense nationalism?

I believe, as Toni Morrison does, that “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature,” and so both novels, written by two authors who have molded the direction of American literature in the late twentieth century, possess the powerful ability to change narrow conceptions of Americanness and reshape American memory (*Playing* 39). Kingston roots *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* in the traditions of Chinese classics and Chinese American history while Morrison locates *Song of Solomon’s* origins in the African-derived memories of the Flying Africans and the trauma of slavery. In each novel, the intersection between transnational histories and memories and nationalist identities suggest an enlarged sense of community that simultaneously challenges the dominant ideologies of the nation-state and fosters the healing possibilities that occur alongside of communities whose various pasts function as a foundation for the present. Most importantly, however, Morrison and Kingston command remembrance and a performance of the past that are grounded in the deep history and memories of the Asian and African American diaspora.

The depth of memory associated with the diasporic temporality of Milkman Dead’s Flying Africans and Wittman Ah Sing’s family performers of Chinese classics aids in the creation of a community rooted in ancestral ties. Kingston believes that “the ancestors connect us tribally and globally and guide our evolution” (“Novel” 203). Morrison too proclaims that “if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost [. . .] 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 historical connections” (“Rooted” 344).

Communities linked to ancestors necessarily engage and privilege the past. An appreciation of ancestors also signifies a global approach to American identity that eases America's current isolationism. Prominent in each novel are Wittman Ah Sing and Milkman Dead's explosive confrontations with America's respective history of Chinese American exclusion and African American slavery.

In order to heal the divide and pain caused by these historical events and memories, Kingston and Morrison establish ancestral memory as the foundation for their communities. Community constantly shifts to reflect its inhabitants' histories, memories, and predilections. Unlike imposed canonical imperialisms and crafted formulas of nationhood, communities possess the potential of self-definition on a smaller, more intimate scale, one that better reflects the realities and everyday lives of its people.

In *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Wittman declares that "community is not built one-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and recreate it" (306). Wittman's community solidifies with a conglomerative performance of revised Chinese classics, like *Journey to the West*, *Water on the Verge*, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and includes a diverse group of members who "come from eras and places to unite together on the same stage" (138). Each performer possesses a "deep-roots" sense of memory that becomes enmeshed in the community's self-constructed narrative (141). Modeled upon *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*'s brotherhood of unrelated heroes Liu Pei, Chang Fei, and Gwan Goong, Wittman's chosen community unites with an awareness of Chinese diasporic memory and American history. From within its own specific locality, the community redefines America.

Similarly, in *Song of Solomon* Milkman Dead transforms his alienation from his present African American community and his past African ancestral community. His initial journey South to find gold leads him instead to a more fruitful discovery of his ancestral lineage. The realization that “[his] great-granddaddy could fly” opens up to Milkman a nonlinear sense of time that encapsulates his family’s African and African American memories and histories (Morrison *SOS* 328). Just as Kingston’s community is born from Chinese American memory, so is Milkman’s newly created community one based on the experience of the diaspora. Milkman’s ability to re-member himself into his family’s history as the present-day Flying African allows him membership in a community of ancestors who guide him towards revelation and an understanding of African American identity free of capitalistic, anti-community tendencies.

Morrison and Kingston thus offer two similar models for community-building. Their collective interest in the role of ancestors and transnational memory, which traverses the geographical space of America’s borders, emphasizes the monumental influence of a more global, historically accurate understanding of America’s multiple pasts and present. Embedded in each book is a sense of memory that winds back to China and Africa and in fact, predates America.

Transnational or diasporic critics, such as Lisa Lowe, Paul Gilroy, Wai Chee Dimock, John Carlos Rowe, and Paul Giles, question the applicability or rather the usefulness of the term “America.” The January 2003 *PMLA* issue “America, the Idea, The Literature” reflects the recent cultural turn towards transnationalism, away from the nationalistic desire for self-identifying as American.³ The hyphenated African-American and Asian-American relegates diasporic identity to the status of adjective, thus

privileging American identity over one's global roots and insufficiently accounting for the histories and memories of the diaspora. Dimock believes that some historical events, like slavery and Chinese migration, "need large-scale analysis" (758) that she insists "cannot be contained within standard narratives of nationalism constructed by the dominant groups of our country's history makers" (759). The vast temporality and historicity associated with the Flying Africans story or the movement of a one thousand year old Chinese classic to American shores necessitates an understanding of what Dimock calls "deep time" (759).

Displacing the geographical borders of American literature disrupts the centrality of the "master narrative." Simply put, the "short life of the US" cannot contain the complexity and historical depth of the diaspora (Dimock 759). This transnationalist identity present in Morrison and Kingston's novels undercuts the fervent nationalism of the post-September 11 era and provides an alternative approach to history that necessarily problematizes the nation-state's false narrative of homogeneity and harmony. Paul Giles believes that this turn towards transnationalism "carries uncomfortable implications" for the traditionalists whose "most cherished ideas and beliefs have framed the construction of this field" (64). Remapping America's borders to include its global ties creates a constant criss-crossing across physical boundaries and contests any national identity that predicates itself upon the self-enclosed space of America. Transnationalism engages the myriad conflicts and struggles that define a cultural group's heterogeneous American experience; this global approach exposes that the "cradle of American literature" is "discord rather than Concord" (Giles 65). Redefining America through the lens of diasporic memory, transnationalist writers like Kingston and Morrison create an

oppositional framework that counters hegemonic constructions of Chinese and African American selfhood.

Though it is reasonable to associate Morrison and Kingston with transnationalism, both authors, Morrison less so than Kingston, invest themselves in national identity.

Unlike Kingston whose work is tied up in “claiming America” (Islas 25), Morrison often repudiates a singularly American identity. After interviewing Morrison, Paul Gilroy notes her “consistent refusal to identify herself as an American,” because, as she puts it,

my childhood efforts to join American were continually rebuffed. So I finally said, ‘you got it.’ America has always meant something other to me – them. I was not fully participant in it, and I have found more to share with Third World peoples in the diaspora. (Gilroy 180)

Memories of childhood exclusion based on Morrison’s race impel her distance from America. This distance is made literal in *Song of Solomon* as Milkman, who learns to fly because of his entrance into ancestral memory, leaves America and returns to his family’s earliest transatlantic home, Africa. Milkman’s created community, though rooted in his entanglement with the traumatic effects of American slavery, traverses national and temporal boundaries to include Africa and his deceased ancestors.

Kingston, on the other hand, positions Wittman firmly on American soil. She argues that “I am an American,” and this naming must be so

because the moment I let go of my hold to this country, there are people out there who will say, well go home them. Why don’t you go back where you came from? Which is not where I come from. I come to my Chinese roots very tentatively. (Chin 65)

The nation-state is thus problematic to Kingston but still has strategic value. She does not necessarily redeem the old idea of the nation but instead reinvents the boundaries of an American nation-state whose foundations begin in China. Wittman states that “the southern kingdom of Wu” in China is “where Americans come from” (Kingston 172). She teaches us how to re-member American history in such a way that expands its geographic roots to include the comprehensive history and memories of Chinese Americans. Inherent in this remapping of Americanness, Kingston proposes a rereading of American history and literature that has alienated Chinese Americans as eternal foreigners; she demands American identity for these long estranged citizens.

Furthermore, the inclusion of three different Chinese classics in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* suggests a redrawing of the American canon. Though seemingly radical, Kingston sees these texts as a natural reflection of America’s literary roots; and so, if Kingston and her novels, as Bill Moyers points out, are taught more on campuses than any other living author, then the American canon should mirror her Chinese literary ancestors, in much the same way that students read Shakespeare and Milton as progenitors of British heritage. Kingston therefore might agree with David Li Leiwei that “claiming America affirms the United States as an Asian American geopolitical space so that Asian Americans can secure the rights and obligations of citizenship in the nation-state” (185). The complete rejection of national identity potentially weakens one’s ability to reshape or even challenge the nation. However, Kingston would likely disagree with Leiwei’s assessment that “Asian Americans’ ties to Asia seriously retard the development of Asian American subjectivity” (185). Kingston’s balance between her Chinese and American roots enriches rather than “retard[s]” her citizenship. To imagine America

more accurately, Kingston suggests that we need to know Chinese history. The “deep time” that pervades *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* implies that Americans should envision themselves as Chinese because their earliest roots lie in China. For Chinese Americans, China is part of their America and then, by extension, everyone else’s America. The connection between the two continents is Kingston’s foundation for claiming rather than distancing, as Morrison does, herself from America. Kingston thus departs from Morrison because ultimately Wittman is American, and thus he continues his ongoing battle to redefine from within a Chinese American identity that includes the Chinese diaspora.

Though Morrison and Kingston’s created communities differ in their degree of rootedness in American identity, both authors concern themselves centrally with American history and memory. Morrison’s project of highlighting the effects of slavery on late twentieth century black families and Kingston’s rant about America’s history of othering Chinese Americans counters Cheney’s celebratory construction of American history. A sense of nonlinear temporality that involves a journey far back in time, along diasporic routes, revises any traditional or conservative approaches to history that position America’s origins in 1776. Before America’s founding, its future citizen’s ancestors lived, and their lives testify to the profound depth of American history and memory. Beginning with these ancestors and tracing their lives to present-day America allows for a comprehensive view of history that does not ignore the exclusion that many of these groups faced as they negotiated either a forced or chosen American identity.

It is imperative that American literature and its canons allow room for an atmosphere of intersecting accords and discords. King-kok Cheung suggests that if

scholars and readers alike can “embrace tensions rather than perpetuate divisions,” then a more complex and heterogeneous understanding of what we call “America” is possible (246). This can be accomplished by placing *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* and *Song of Solomon* and their historical contexts in conversation with our contemporary cultural questions about American identity post-September 11. Kingston and Morrison’s differing approaches to American identity, memory, and history provide a multiplicity of counter-hegemonic strategies that elucidate a more global understanding of America’s current sociopolitical moment.

I propose a dialectic between global transnationalism and localized nationalism, reflected in the productive tension between Morrison’s more diasporic African American community and Kingston’s distinctly American community. From this opposition, a critical paradigm emerges that is based on a community’s alternative circularity of transamerican histories and memories and the specific social realities of American membership. The transnationalness of both novels protest and engage national narratives frozen in time that inevitably deny memory of America’s transgressions. Milkman Dead and Wittman Ah Sing are world changers who open up the deep wells of diasporic memory to enliven and challenge America.

¹ I discuss multiculturalism and use that term in this essay because I believe it must be claimed. In an ideal world or at least a more historically accurate one, there would be no need to teach something called “multiculturalism” because an honest depiction of American literature would reflect these authors; then there would be no need for a distinctly labeled multiethnic canon. “America” itself has always been multicultural. However, America’s current climate, predominated by the post-September 11 era, encourages forgetting, particularly those historical events that reflect a darker side of American history, and therefore the constructed category of “multicultural” remains.

² See also a recent *MELUS* journal entitled *Pedagogy, Canon, Context: Toward a Redefinition of Ethnic American Literary Studies* (2004) that addresses more contemporary needs for anthologies and multiethnic criticism.

³ See also King-kok Cheung’s “Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies” and Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. The 2003 date of the *PMLA* issue occurs almost ten years after the publication of foundational works, such as Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* (1996).

CHAPTER TWO:

“Where Americans Come From:” Relocating and Remembering American History and the Canon in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Tripmaster Monkey: A Fake Book*

The early Chinese empire was divided into three warring kingdoms, Wei, Shu Han, and Wu; it was not until A.D. 280 that the bloody era of the Three Kingdoms came to an end, and tentative peace was restored. Historian Charles Hucker is careful to point out that although China was united, “its unity was fragile” (134). Historically, China’s past proved relevant hundreds of years later to generations of Chinese Americans seeking to establish their own cautious peace with an America that has been the scene of a bitter and often violent history of Chinese American exclusion. Claiming an American identity while preserving diasporic ties to Chinese culture has thus been a struggle. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: A Fake Book*, Wittman Ah Sing ponders this tenuous fragility of union as he asks perhaps the most important thematic question in Kingston’s novel; he wonders, “how *do* you reconcile unity and identity?” (Kingston *TM* 134). Seeking a resolution to this quandary, Wittman reaches far back into his Chinese cultural memory from his present American location and stages a reproduction of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of the most famous canonical Chinese texts.¹

The performance of a canonical Chinese play on an American stage in Chinatown recreates America’s national consciousness as the performers re-member a Chinese American history that, while celebrating inclusion and affirming Chinese American identity, also exposes and challenges the inequalities and disparities of the American nation.² Kingston’s novel further suggests a temporal and geographic redrawing of

American cultural and historical boundaries in such a way that the American canon, stretching across the Chinese diaspora, enlarges to include Lo Kuan-chung's *Three Kingdoms*; the placement of *The Three Kingdoms* within a novel of Maxine Hong Kingston, the most canonized Asian American writer, reconfigures America's understanding of its own roots.

A reenvisioned canon, such as the one Maxine Hong Kingston suggests through Wittman's performance, does not, as transnationalist critic Lisa Lowe implies, present a "national fiction of a democratic nation-state without sorrow or suffering" or create an image of an "undivided, assimilated" Asian American subject whose international identity has been subsumed by the national culture (47-48). Maxine Hong Kingston imagines alternative concepts of national identity and a national canon that do not perpetuate Lowe's skepticism about an American identity that she fears inevitably includes homogenous uniformity and continued exclusion. Kingston gives the canon and Asian Americans a new, inclusive voice of powerful protest firmly situated on American soil. Rather than crafting as Lowe suggests an "alternative cultural site [. . .] distancing Asian Americans . . . from the terrain of national culture," Kingston rewrites American history and the canon to include Chinese diasporic memory as a deserved part of American identity (146).

One of Kingston's primary concerns in *Tripmaster Monkey: A Fake Book* is to remember a sense of American identity and history inclusive to Chinese Americans. The symbol in the novel that is central to her project is that of Wittman's "Gold Mountain trunk" (Kingston *TM* 29).³ This trunk holds the history of Wittman's family, a history that begins in the Pearl River Delta of China, "where Americans come from," and ends

on the stages of San Francisco, California (Kingston *TM* 37). Radically situating America's early roots in China, Kingston creates an American identity extending well beyond its geographic borders. Kingston implies that all Americans, not just those who are Chinese American, see their Chinese heritage. Wittman's grandfather's trunk displaces the rhetoric of assimilation and locates America in China, thus redefining and broadening definitions of what it means to be American.

The trunk is a repository of Chinese American memory. The "alternative history" that Lowe believes has not yet emerged resides within the trunk and Kingston's novel (104). The trunk contains the possibilities for transforming America's historical narrative of itself and allows Chinese Americans no longer to view themselves as the "foreigners-within" (Lowe 6). Kingston writes Chinese history into American history. Wittman reveals that his "great-great-grandfather came to America with that trunk," the very same vaudeville trunk that Wittman remembers sitting in as a child during his parents' performances (Kingston *TM* 37, 29). This trunk marks Wittman's family as one of many Chinese immigrants who came to America during the nineteenth century, but it also delineates his family history from other Chinese Americans. Avoiding the essentialized notion that all Chinese immigrants were "sojourners" who never hoped to view themselves as American, Kingston creates Wittman's family as performers.⁴ His family "did not come here for the gold streets. [They] came to play" (Kingston *TM* 249-50). Kingston thus establishes for Wittman a legacy of performance and Chinese *American* theatre that began in the 1850s.

On Sansome Street in San Francisco, the earliest documented Chinese opera performance took place at the American Theatre on October 20, 1852. The playbill for

Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company's opening night included a famous scene from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This performance marked the first instance of the "Chinese theatre in diaspora," a historic moment signifying the entrance of Chinese theatre and literature into American history (Lei 289). Wittman remembers that "every matinee or evening for a hundred years, somewhere in America, some acting company was performing "The Oath in the Peach Orchard," an episode in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Kingston *TM* 141). Three great Chinese heroes, Liu Pei, Chang Fei, and Gwan Goong pledge a "ritual of friendship" in which "one's cause is the others' cause" even though the men are strangers of separate ancestry (Kingston *TM* 141). They form a brotherhood in order to support the Emperor and China's unity.

The performance of Chinese classics, like *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, would have been especially familiar and soothing to a Chinese audience of immigrant workers separated from their homeland (Lei 294). In particular, "Oath in the Peach Orchard" would have been important to the mostly male audience members who, though virtual strangers to each other, learned to form new alliances and communities no longer bounded by familial ties in order to secure survival in America. Wittman tells of the Chinese immigrants who "came in from the fields and paid a spec of gold for admission to *The Three Kingdoms*. And lowly brakemen came from railroad yard, and laundry guys, and migrant farm hands, and cooks from out of basement kitchens of restaurants" (Kingston *TM* 145). The theatre, operating as the focal point for the Chinese communities, functioned as a safe haven from racial prejudice that existed against Chinese immigrants. At the 1878 California Constitutional Convention John F. Miller cautions against Chinese inclusion:

Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people, it would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race, and the result of that amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth.(qtd in Takaki *DM* 205)

Miller's comments foreshadowed action by the national government. Four years later, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese migration, effectively closed American borders to all Chinese, and prohibited naturalized citizenship to those already residing in America. Amy Ling points out that this act made the Chinese the "only nationality designated by name to be excluded from this country" (77). This act along with others established a legacy of Chinese American exclusion, delineating Chinese Americans as perpetual "alien noncitizens"(Lowe 8). Chinese immigrants thus needed the theatre's microcosmic space for themselves to enact freely their diasporic culture, shoring themselves up against the storm of anti-Chinese racism.

Aside from fostering a much-needed transnational connection to China, the first performance of *Three Kingdoms* in America also established permanent ties to American identity. Unlike most traveling troupes that intended to perform simply and then return back to their homeland, the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company, in a fashion similar to Wittman's great-great grandfather, arrived with the "intention of staying in this foreign country, and even bought their own theatre building" (Lei 290). The theater became the center of a community in-the-making, a place for the "outcasts of America" to fashion their own American identity out of Chinese traditions (Kingston *TM* 261). From this initial performative moment, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* took on a dual

purpose; not only did the performers claim a place for themselves in American society, but also they maintained connections to China that would help heal the diasporic divide.

The tradition of Chinese theater, as Wittman relates, gradually “died” because Chinese Americans, over a hundred years later, found themselves in predicaments similar to those of the original Chinese immigrants (Kingston *TM* 141). Assimilation into American society has threatened to bury the tradition of Chinese theater. Torn between American and Chinese identities, Wittman Ah Sing appears as a liminal soul, wandering the streets of San Francisco. He describes himself as a “chameleon, ripping through the gears of camouflage trying to match the whizzing environment” (Kingston *TM* 109). He seems to fit in nowhere and fears that he, like other Americans, is “alone. Alienated, tribeless, individual” (Kingston *TM* 146). In an interview with Bill Moyers, Kingston admits that Wittman is “very alienated, very individual,” so he is a “real American with no families, no communities.” Lowe would likely suggest that Wittman’s condition resembles that of many Asian Americans. She posits that a

national memory haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States and the descendent of generations here before. (Lowe 5-6)

Anti-Asian discrimination laws, written into the body of American history, have not been erased from but instead have been inscribed via memory onto the national consciousness. After all, it was not until 1944 that the Exclusion Acts were repealed, and Chinese immigrants, some of whom had been in America for seven generations, were finally

given American citizenship.⁵ The scars of this sort of rejection haunt Wittman who protests the stereotype that Chinese and other Asian Americans are “inherently unknowable” and somehow perpetually un-American (Kingston *TM* 310). Because of the history of being continually othered, Chinese Americans are, according to Kingston, in a state of “constant diaspora,” a criss-crossing between the customs, legends, and languages of a country of their origin and the country of their birth (Seshchari 209). As a result of diasporic ties and America’s legacy of Chinese alienation, the “fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes the past” complicates the full integration of Asian Americans into the fabric of national identity (Lowe 29).

Even Wittman’s name suggests his identity crisis. His first name connects Wittman to Walt Whitman, “the most American of American poets,” who was “no stander above men and women or / apart from them” (Cliff 11). Wittman’s first name suggests a romantic conception of a democratic and equal America. The America evident in Walt Whitman’s poem is one that Wittman believes possible, but as a result of his Chinese heritage, he has trouble locating. The other half of his name, Ah Sing, links Wittman to a more realistic view of American democracy that exposes anti-Chinese opinion. According to Daphne Lei, Bret Harte and Mark Twain created character Ah Sin for the stage. In their play, they portray Ah Sin as a ‘heathen chinee’ servant [. . .] the ‘slant-eyed son of the yellow jaunders,’ a ‘moral cancer’ and an ‘unsolvable political problem” (Lei 293).⁶ Harte and Twain’s dramatic presentation characterize the tradition of racism and stereotyping indicative of California’s literary world in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Wittman’s name signifies a divided self hoping to attain the utopian possibilities of inclusion without ignoring the realities of racist exclusion.

In order to escape marginality and create community, Wittman decides to put on a play that is a history of the Chinese in America and a montage of various Chinese classics, in particular *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The play is Kingston's attempt to heal the chaotic alienation that has stemmed from over a century of systematic discrimination by the United States government. Kingston views Wittman's created Chinese American theater as a way to "solve the world's problems" on a smaller, more communal level (Chin 61). An interracial group of people from the San Francisco community unite to reenact the play; Tana De Weese, Wittman's white wife, Wittman's parents, Japanese American Lance Kamiyama and his cadre of kung-fu heroes, a Yale Younger poet, Judy Louis, Nanci Lee, and many others come together to "make theater" and "make community" (Kingston *TM* 261). The idea that Wittman and his friends will "make" their own community is an important act of self-conception and agency. Wittman carefully points out he is "casting blind. That means the actors can be any race [. . .] I'm including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place" (Kingston *TM* 52). The appearance of Chinese and non-Chinese actors playing Chinese roles opens up Chinese American history for the entire community not only to learn about but also to own for themselves.

Wittman's play is not a performance, as many postmodernist critics, like Debra Shostak, A. Noelle Williams, and Patricia P. Chu, have argued, about the instability of cultural identity. Influenced by Linda Hutcheon and Judith Butler, these critics see what Butler characterizes as the "inherent instability" of identity and, in Shostak's words, the eventual "dissolution of self" as the causes for Wittman's transformation throughout the play (25, 254).⁷ This play is less about "dissolution" and more about the creating or

building of an identity, not just for Wittman but also for his entire community. Wittman's stage appears as a space of inclusion and multiplicity, but only because it is based so much on Kingston's version of Chinese history and memory. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, cultural identity is based on performance but also on an amalgamation of lived history within the United States and memory that extends diasporically across the two continents. Before Wittman relates to Tana an important talk-story, he warns her that it will "turn [her] into a Chinese" (Kingston *TM* 172). Because of the profound history and time that lie beneath each one, the stories in Wittman's play possess the power to transform the listener.

It is the depth of cultural memory performed on the stage that creates a newly rejuvenated community. Because Wittman asks the community to become Chinese simply by listening to his stories, he suggests that Americans can see themselves as Chinese without the Chinese blood ties, similar to the way that the three warriors saw themselves as blood brothers without actually being so. If the majority of Americans can bring Chinese cultural memory into their communities, they then possess the ability to remake themselves and their Americanness by this inclusion. This is not a version of "playing" (Deloria) Chinese that can be quickly dissolved or as Butler suggests "relinquished according to the purposes at hand" (16).⁸ The community pledges its commitment to define itself as a multiplicity of American selves, which thus include Chinese culture, literature, and history.

One of the most important scenes in Wittman's play is the retelling of "The Oath in the Peach Orchard," in which three unrelated men bond together to form the most loyal of friendships (Luo 9).⁹ Like Chang Fei, Gwan Goong, and Liu Pei, the actors are asking

of themselves and the community who witness the play to consider nonblood ties as important, familial bonds. Wittman urges the audience to think of themselves as a “chosen family” (Kingston *TM* 144). The various racial backgrounds of the performers reflect the “chosen” community’s diversity and inclusiveness; Japanese American Lance Kamiyama plays Liu Pei, Caucasian American Charley Bogard Shaw performs Chang Fei, and finally Wittman is Gwan Goong. Communal membership is then a constant performance of adopting and becoming. Lance’s offer to the audience that “our stories are your stories” indicates the exchange of cultural histories and memories inherent in the forming of a modern American community (Kingston *TM* 125). In this nontraditional definition of family, strangers from various religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds affirm community.¹⁰

Wittman’s created community however is not, as Lowe fears, one in which uniformity and facile resolution usurp individuality and difference. Wittman, sick of the stereotyping, claims that the Chinese are “exotic as shit” (Kingston *TM* 308). Since he feels that the majority of Americans “got us in a bag,” his play is a vehicle for “punching our way out of” the essentialism that has been imposed on Chinese Americans (Kingston *TM* 308). Even though there was great bloodshed and many years of constant warring, the three brother-warriors failed to obtain a lasting reunified China. The hundred years of battle highlighted in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* parallels the struggle for equality that Chinese Americans have endured for more than a hundred years in America.

Wittman points out that the Chinese stories he tells in the play have “no end, sons and ghosts continu[e] to fight in the ongoing wars” for cultural legitimacy and inclusion (Kingston *TM* 236). Since the stories themselves have no “end,” Wittman indicates that

the resistance to cultural erasure is an “ongoing” process. As Wittman negotiates his bicultural identity, he is himself a contradiction. Though Wittman is a pacifist, he views himself as part of a long line of Chinese warriors who are the “grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior” and will not “let them take the fight out of our spirit and our language” (Kingston *TM* 319). Wittman becomes the warrior representative of his ancestors who continues to wage a war against the exclusion of Chinese Americans from America’s cultural landscape.

Regardless of these statements about his Chinese connections, critics, like Derek Parker Royal, continue to read Wittman as a character who “does not use his Chinese roots as a point of departure because, in the strictest sense, he has no Chinese roots” (146). Royal’s reading attempts to complicate essentialist notions of ethnic identities, but he fails to recognize that the guiding force of Kingston’s novel is in fact Wittman’s “Chinese roots.” Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee, in her review of *Tripmaster Monkey*, claims that Wittman “the artist has been formed by the West, not the East” (280). She highlights Wittman’s references to American pop culture and Western films and literature, but never explains or barely mentions the Chinese talk-stories, classics, and myths that she believes have “bloomed” Kingston’s novel (280). Royal and Mukherjee misread *Tripmaster’s Monkey* and take a narrow approach to Kingston’s bicultural identity. Kingston appears to think of cultural identity in a manner similar to Stuart Hall:

Cultural identity [. . .] belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. (112)

Wittman's play intertwines and entangles his Chinese and American histories. Although the past "continues to speak to us," Wittman has the freedom to "construct through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" a unique definition of himself that includes diasporic ties to Chinese literature and history (Hall 113). Though he continually defines himself as an American, Wittman seeks a bicultural definition of his Americanness, which is inseparable from his Chinese roots. Wittman's community is not achieved without recognition of America's history with its Chinese peoples and of the continuing battle for self-definition within America.

The community that Wittman forms during the performance of his play symbolizes the vision Kingston has for the American nation. In a recent interview, Kingston claims that Chinese Americans are "not outsiders, we belong here, this is our country, this is our history, and we are a part of America. We are a part of American history. If it weren't for us, America would be a different place" (Islas 25). Wittman echoes Kingston's idea when he states that

we mustn't call ourselves 'Chinese' among those who are ready to send us back to where they think we came from. But 'Chinese-American' takes too long. Nobody says or hears past the first part. And 'Chinese-American' is inaccurate – as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out – 'Chinese American.' 'American,' the noun, and 'Chinese,' the adjective. (Kingston *TM* 327)

This sort of nationalistic thinking that relegates Chinese to a secondary adjective status is exactly what Lisa Lowe protests. Rather than seeing as Kingston does the international Chinese roots within the America national identity, Lowe sees the "national-within-the-international" (30). Chinese Americans, by remaining antagonistic to or suspicious of any

forms of national inclusion, form a diasporic space outside the bounds of the hegemonic discourses that have throughout American history exiled Chinese Americans. Through “disidentification” Lowe believes that Chinese Americans create for themselves a privileged, creative subjectivity that is a “counterhistory” to America’s national and official history (127). Otherwise, Lowe fears that the desire to achieve national recognition as American initiates a separation from Asian roots or as King-kok Cheung states a “cultural amnesia regarding the country of ancestral origin” (Lowe 6). Lowe’s transnational theories indicate a shift in Asian American studies from “identity politics – with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity” to “heterogeneity and diaspora” (Cheung 1). However, Cheung observes the limitations of diasporic ties. She sees that the “growing recognition of the crossover between Asia and Asian American . . . permits a more fluid sense of identity [. . .] Asian American literary studies must also keep alive the impetus to claim America” (9).

Departing from Lowe, Kingston identifies herself as an American. She must self-define as American in order to prevent the loss of her political and social voice in her local and national government. Furthermore, as Wittman articulates, America is his; it is a “land which I belong to and which belongs to me [. . .] I am deeply, indigenously here” (Kingston *TM* 327).

Yet, Kingston does not sacrifice her diasporic ties, as evidenced by the appearance of so many Chinese classics in *Tripmaster Monkey*. In particular, the inclusion of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* solidifies Maxine Hong Kingston’s connection to her Chinese cultural identity. Kingston structures much of *Tripmaster Monkey* in a style similar to that of *Three Kingdoms*. The role of the storyteller, the

fluctuation between disorder and order, and the emphasis on Chinese national unity are translated into Kingston's American novel.

Even though Wittman occupies many roles in the play as director, producer, playwright and actor, his most important role is that of the storyteller. In order to become a part of this tradition, he adapts many of the methods associated with Chinese talk-story. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* does however have a tentative connection to Chinese storytellers. Of the many Chinese classic novels, *The Three Kingdoms* is unique in its desire to "retell official history" (Hsia 11). The author of *The Three Kingdoms*, Luo Guanzhong intended his novel to be a "conscious departure from the tradition of the storytellers rather than in imitation of them" (Hsia 39). He was seeking a version of the popular tale that was as close as possible to the historical rather than folkloric events, which often strayed from official accounts. His task was difficult in part because for many years, the story of *The Three Kingdoms* circulated throughout China with the help of storytellers. Luo's's novel is truly the "end-product of centuries of storytelling" (Ming 281). These storytellers used promptbooks only as the starting points to "amplify and elaborate" the bare bones of the story (Hsia 8). As a result, storytellers were also especially well known for their "inventiveness and ingenuity in adding new episodes to traditional stories" (Hayward 68). These revisionists functioned as important members of the community who, while skewing the government's dominant historical constructs, handed down great tales that would both teach and entertain the townspeople.

As a storyteller, Wittman functions in a manner similar to that of his Chinese forefathers. Like the storytellers who read from the promptbooks, the script for Wittman's play that takes place over many nights is only one page. He is the "stand-up

tragic” who “wing[s] it” throughout the entire performance (Kingston *TM* 309, 317). Perched on the stage in “classic talk-story pose,” Wittman performs his “one-man show” that is a diatribe against Chinese American stereotypes, because as he admits, “a Chinese-minded audience likes the moral of the story told in so many words” (Kingston *TM* 305, 306). Angry at America’s historical construction of the Chinese as foreigners or “strangers from a different shore,” (Takaki) Wittman seeks to improvise this characterization during his performance. He alters the perceptions of those who view “American” as “interchangeabl[e] with white” as he redefines what an American looks like (Kingston *TM* 329). Wittman “declare[s]” his “teeth, eyes, nose, profile – perfect [. . .] it’s an American face” (Kingston *TM* 314). Positioning his Chinese appearance as distinctly American dislodges whiteness as the American norm. His storytelling task, as Kingston suggests, is to “bring chaos to the established order” of American hegemony (Chin 61). He disregards a host of entrenched misconceptions about Chinese Americans – “they think they know us [. . .] because they eat in Chinese restaurants,” “we’re not inscrutable at all [. . .] they willfully do not learn us,” the penis is “deficient in orientals,” and all “Chinese look so alike” (Kingston 305-330). His long and furious lecture is an assault on the monolithic, homogenous view that Americans have about Chinese Americans. Wittman teaches his community historical accuracy by dismembering former stereotypes and uncovering the willful misunderstanding of Chinese Americans that has persisted for over one hundred and thirty years.

Seeing the play as a vehicle for dismantling a narrow perception of Chinese Americans is, however, only half of Wittman’s mission. His growth as a storyteller lies in his ability to cycle between chaos and order, critique and creation. Wittman’s

announcement of his marriage and his pacifist status balance out the warrior inside of him. Finally, by the end of Wittman's lecture, he realizes that what he ultimately needs is an identity that does not preclude unity. If the achievement of cultural identity is by nature a chaotic struggle, then Wittman sees that this struggle should be a constant and accepted part of forming unity. The never-ending war for cultural recognition should be balanced by the transformative healing process of creating an inclusive sense of community. For Wittman, the ultimate goal is the "defining of a community" that is an often conflicting combination of Chinese and American cultures, histories, and memories (Kingston *TM* 306). Wittman's ability to see himself as American should not prevent him from protesting the exclusion and alienation of Chinese in American history and memory.

Creating a heterogeneous and evolving community is a part of the cultural knowledge Wittman gains from knowing Chinese classics. According to Moss Roberts, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* chronicles

one epoch-marking dynasty cycle: the fall of the Han dynasty, the subsequent division of its empire into three kingdoms – Wei, Wu, and Shu in A.D. 220, and the reunification of the realm in A.D. 280 under a new ruling house, the Jin." (410)

The novel itself thus moves in cycles between disorder and eventual order and begins and ends with the line "the empire long united, must divide, and long divided, must unite" (Luo 405). This succession outlines Wittman's approach to his cultural identity. Aware of the painful divide that many Chinese Americans have had from America, Wittman doggedly posits the overall necessity of national and communal unity. Warring against America will only take Wittman so far. He realizes that the three brothers from the Peach

Orchard Oath “lost” and many of their tactics of war are “used today, even by governments with nuclear-powered weapons” (Kingston 340). As Roberts points out, *The Three Kingdoms* “ends with a beginning, leaving the reader with a sense of optimism” (443). This optimism is short-lived because as Roberts states, the “Jin reunification of A.D. 280 was nothing to boast about. The dynasty enjoyed twenty years of relative stability” (440). Although Wittman’s play and Kingston’s novel end with the community’s “relative stability,” the Vietnam War looms. The cycle of disorder will soon begin with Wittman’s resistance to the draft. Once again, Wittman, who is a “deep” pacifist, will test his allegiance to America (Kingston 279).¹¹

The continual cycling between disunity and unity that is at the heart of *Tripmaster Monkey* can be read as an important lesson for multiculturalists. Identifying oneself with his/her diasporic culture should not permit membership to the national culture but should instead strengthen America. As critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim believes “the self that escapes assimilation [. . .] renews American culture (18-19). It is the heterogeneity of diasporic identity that helps Kingston more completely define the San Francisco community of *Tripmaster Monkey* and America. Kingston sees that

every country has had its diaspora and everybody is going everywhere, and so in order to write a story about any city, any American city [. . .] you have to be able to write characters from every cultural background. A story of a city is also the story of all the people on the entire planet. (Seshachari 195)

The multicultural community created by Kingston includes the story of the Chinese diaspora as a defining feature of American culture. This inclusive multiculturalism is not,

as Lowe claims, “central to the maintenance of a consensus that permits the present hegemony” nor does it “level the important difference and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism”(86). Wittman’s community works together not to transcend completely the nation’s problems but to complicate and engage them.

The America that Wittman foresees is not an idealistic, romanticized nation free of racism. Many readers, as Kingston admits to Bill Moyers, have not liked Wittman, in part because of his sexism and long, moralizing lectures. In creating Wittman, Kingston anticipated this negative reaction. She reveals that he is “responding to racism. This is why he’s not likeable. He means to be offensive” as he refuses to “pla[y] into the hands of an America that wants to emasculate him” (Moyers II). His tirade at the novel’s end reflects the community’s first steps towards a more accurate depiction of America. Wittman’s didactic lecture, an onslaught of “anger and sorrow”(Kingston 317), incites the audience who “became madder than [him]” (Kingston 314). Their collective anger is productive however because it refuses silence, particularly for Wittman, a Chinese American and supposed “model minority.” Though the “white people were probably getting uncomfortable” and some walked out, Wittman forges ahead (Kingston 312). Amidst the rage and shame the audience and performers experience, the “community was blessing him” by the close of his speech (Kingston 340). Kingston sees the opportunity of healing to come from the community’s open acknowledgement of the country’s history of racism. Multiculturalism is not a move towards easy reconciliation but is the production of contradictions that inevitably exist within America’s peoples and its history.

Furthermore, it is the acceptance of the diaspora within America's borders that saves multiculturalism from pluralism. Americans are not all the same, and this novel suggests that we can know this by examining the deep bank of memory and history that starts with the nation's heterogeneous citizenry and goes beyond its national borders. The friendship between the three warriors of *The Three Kingdoms* was, as Wittman points out, "one thousand six hundred and twenty-nine years old" when the first Chinese immigrants set foot on American soil (Kingston 141). Each ethnic group in America possesses a similar sense of "deep time" and likely a history of discrimination within America's borders that multiculturalists should seek to uncover (Dimock 759). In order to truly know America, Kingston suggests that we must then begin with China's history and culture.

One way to gain this knowledge is to expand the American canon. Kingston, the first Asian American to be canonized and one of the most widely taught American writers, evokes throughout *The Tripmaster Monkey* an alternative concept of the American canon. If the reader accepts this novel replete with Chinese classics as an American novel, then he/she could consider these same Chinese classics as part of the American canon. On a recent trip to China, Kingston encountered a Chinese scholar who placed her in the canon of Chinese literature:

They consider me one of them [. . .] They see me as one who was put in a very privileged position and continued writing on 'roots' and they feel that I saved some of their roots for them. They teach my work in China [. . .] I have my roots in Chinese writing. I think that's good, that's very nice, to have roots spread all over the world.(Fishkin 166).

The inclusion of *The Tripmaster Monkey* necessitates the growth of America's roots in Chinese soil. This criss-crossing of the diaspora in which Chinese literature is part of American history and American literature is also part of Chinese history is an incredibly inclusive worldview. Accepting Chinese classics into the American canon is a way for Americans to see themselves in such a way that more accurately reflects the cultural identity of their country and resists a homogenous definition of American literature.

Although this sort of inclusion appears as a natural progression that reflects our country's history, many educators and canon builders across the United States would be resistant. Critics, such as Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, and Lynn Cheney, view a multicultural canon based on diasporic roots as a threat to America's unity and patriotism.¹² This sort of xenophobic position ignores the multiple histories of various ethnicities in America and perhaps exacerbates the "reality of racial tension" in America (Takaki *DM* 4). America's willingness to diversify itself and its canon functions as an initial step towards healing our country's multiple divides. Kingston asks us to "follow anybody into a strange other world. He or she will lead the way to another part of the story we're all inside of" (Kingston 103).

¹ *Tripmaster Monkey* is a montage of various writers, canonical traditions, and historical time periods. Kingston's novel is truly multicultural; in it, she mentions James Joyce, Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jack Kerouac, and many other writers. These writers are woven into the American historical backdrop of the sixties in Berkeley, the Beatniks, African American jazz influences, and the Vietnam War. She also draws extensively upon Chinese classics, such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *the Journey to the West*. In *Tripmaster Monkey* the importance of the Chinese texts rivals or rather occupies an equal plane of literary tradition as the Western writers. I will focus on Kingston's use of Chinese storytelling and performance traditions, and in particular, my argument will center upon *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. By taking this approach, I realize the enormity of information and analysis that I leave out.

² My use of "re-member" or "rememory" stems from Toni Morrison's concept of memory in her novel, *Beloved*. She imagines remembering as a painful yet necessary act that allows unspoken or unheard memories to surface.

³ In 1848 gold was discovered in California. Not only Americans but also Chinese immigrants rushed to California, which they called 'The Gold Mountain' to search for gold.

⁴ Wittman states that the Chinese will be "sojourners no more" (Kingston *TM* 327). Ronald Takaki in *Strangers from a Different Shore* sees the "view of Asian immigrants as 'sojourners' and European immigrants as 'settlers' is both a mistaken notion and a widely held myth" (10).

⁵ See Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*.

for more information on voting rights. The acts were only appealed because of World War II, and the need for white America to form a coalition with other Asian Americans to battle against the Japanese.

⁶ Quoted from Dave Williams *The Chinese Other, 1850-1925: An Anthology*.

⁷ For examples of other postmodern approaches to Kingston that exhibit skepticism about cultural identity see Patricia P Chu, “*Tripmaster Monkey*, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition,” and A. Noelle Williams, “Parody and Pacifist Transformations in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.”

⁸ See Vine Deloria’s *Playing Indian*. He criticizes America’s predilection for “playing Indian.” In other words, he examines the various ways that Americans have historically claimed Indian identity in a false manner that is in no way connected to the realities of Native American life.

⁹ This is the entirety of the oath: “We three, though of separate ancestry, join in brotherhood here, combining strength and purpose, to relieve the present crisis. We will perform our duty to the Emperor and protect the common folk of the land. We dare not hope to be together always but hereby vow to die the selfsame day. Let shining Heaven above and the fruitful land below bear witness to our resolve. May Heaven and man scourge whosoever fails this vow” (9).

¹⁰ Though I highlight only *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* all three of the classics in this novel create similar kinds of communities. The communities in the Chinese classics are created by diverse, unrelated, and often marginalized peoples working together to create unity and brotherhood. In *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Kingston draws from the

community in *Water Margin*. In that classic “the weird and the alienated make their own country . . . The one hundred and eight banditos, banished from everywhere else, build a community. Their thousands of stories, multiples of a hundred and eight, branch and weave, intersecting at the Water Verge” (Kingston *TM* 261). Similar to the friction that exists between the three disciples and their master in *Journey to the West*, the communities of *Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* are fraught with the tension that comes from communities not linked by blood. However, the success of these communities, like Wittman’s current neighborhood, meets the needs of the present and allows for broader coalition possibilities. United because of their outcast differences, these groups make community.

¹¹ In Kingston’s next novel *Fifth Book of Peace*, Wittman goes to Hawaii in order to dodge the draft.

¹² See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, E.D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, and Lynn Cheney, *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*.

CHAPTER THREE:

Unroll the Scroll of African Cosmological Time in America: Re-Membering the Flying
Africans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison characterizes America as a “land where the past is always erased [. . .] it's absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with the truth about the past” (Gilroy 179). As Morrison suggests, the country heavily invests itself in forgetting historical events, such as slavery, that it is most ashamed of or unwilling to acknowledge. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* resists the cultural erasure that accompanies purposeful forgetting. Milkman Dead, the male protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, undergoes a journey that is one of remembering not only his family's ancestral genealogy, but also a larger sense of African American memory, time, and history, deeply embedded in the African diaspora. Though Morrison locates Milkman's physical recovery in Shalimar, Virginia, she implies that his, like many black American families, deepest site of familial memory begins transnationally in Africa. In order to counter the profound loss and pain of slavery, Morrison gifts Milkman with a song about his ancestors, the Flying Africans, a group of African-born slaves who, when fed up with the sheer brutality of slavery, flew back to Africa.

In a recent interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison cautions against a purely mythical or metaphorical reading of the Flying Africans. She states that “[*Song of Solomon*] is about black people who could fly [. . .] flying was one of our gifts [. . .] Perhaps it was wishful thinking – escape, death and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean?” (122). She counsels readers to see the story of Milkman's family as

memory and history, not myth. I will draw on two different yet interconnected forms of memory, one informed by the cosmology of Kongo time and the second defined by the trauma of slavery's legacy, to show an African American experience shaped by the African diaspora. K.K. Fu-Kiau Bunseki and Robert Farris Thompson's work on Kongo time and Marianne Hirsch's essay on postmemory help fully define Milkman's circular journey and the larger sense of ancestral community he learns from the Flying Africans. Milkman's understanding of nonlinear time and postmemory, two often unexplored aspects of the novel in connection to the Flying African story, enable him to perceive a more accurate, fuller image of black history, in which the memorial voices of the past mediate Milkman's present growth.

When critics first approached flying as a central metaphor in *Song of Solomon*, many read flight and Milkman's journey universally, as a contribution to the monolithic quest paradigm, which is a product of Eurocentric, western thought. Two pieces of criticism by A. Leslie Harris and Dorothy H. Lee reflect this drive towards universalism. Harris declares that Morrison's greatest achievement in *Song of Solomon* is her ability via the use of myth to "mak[e] one black man's struggle for identity universal" (69). Harris sees Milkman following in the steps of other "true her[oes]," like Moses, Achilles, Beowulf, Aeneas, and Ulysses (70). Harris's examination focuses exclusively on Western cultural heroes and leaves out any possible ties to African American traditions. This sort of criticism relies heavily on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in order to define an archetypal myth applicable to all cultures. Although critic Dorothy H. Lee promises to ground her analysis in the "specifics of a black American experience," she operates, like Harris, on the same mythical configuration drawn from Campbell's

book (64). The “monomythic” structure of her analysis, which ultimately privileges a universal instead of a culturally specific milieu, subsumes the importance of the Flying African legend (Lee 65). Thus, rather than linking Milkman’s flight contextually to the Flying Africans story, Lee believes that his flight can “be duplicated by all who can abandon the frivolous weights that hold them down” (70). This broad reading overlooks the novel’s historical and racial signification, so that Milkman’s problems are everyone’s problems, and any specificity is elided. Perhaps this omission of African culture is a direct result of publication in the early 1980s, an important literary moment when the canon wars initially became fodder for public debate. In order to argue for inclusion, critics were impelled to prove that black characters, like Milkman, could stand aside the most canonical of Western heroes. More likely, however, is that this kind of criticism, whether intentional or not, only further serves the erasure of a distinct African American history and the reinforcement of a “Eurocentric stronghold” by glossing over the Flying Africans legend and its Afrocentric influences, which function as the heart of *Song of Solomon* (Morrison “Unspeak” 373).

As *Song of Solomon* criticism evolved, theorists, unlike Harris and Lee, began centering their analysis on the Flying African legend and its African roots. However, some critics misunderstand, perhaps willfully, the history that lies behind the story and instead choose to see flying as magical mysticism. The myth of the Flying Africans connotes a “magic realm” that includes “fabulous” flight, a woman without a navel, and ghosts (Lee 68, 64). Morrison is then grouped with other Latin American writers, like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as a magical realist. Morrison particularly takes offense to this critical approach:

“It’s outside most of the formal constricts of the novel but you’ve got to call it something. Just as long as they don’t call me a magical realist, as though I don’t have a culture to write out of. As though that culture has no intellect.’ (Gilroy 181)¹

Morrison makes a strong point. The power of African folklore cannot be simply relegated to a powerless past of insubstantiality. The textual categorization of objects and actions as magic stems from constructs of Western rationality masquerading as normativity.² Anything outside that realm of constructed rationality becomes magical and thus apolitical and ahistorical. The magic realist label, usually attached to writers with roots in developing nations, lessens the strength of Morrison’s African transatlantic history and its culture. As a result of transforming Morrison into a magical realist or a writer concerned with purely universal themes, references to African culture are subsumed by the intangible world of fantasy or “monomyth.”

Instead, a better reading of *Song of Solomon* foregrounds the Flying Africans story not as unbelievable magic but as a historical product of African American culture and memory with its roots in the black diaspora. The importance of the community, griot, ancestors, spirits, and the flying Africans legend are all functions of African cosmology present in *Song of Solomon*.³ Therese E. Higgins, author of *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, argues that these “ingredients that are so brilliantly blended in her novels originated in the African American’s Africa. They may have been altered somewhat by the experience of slavery in America, but the basic underlying material is pure African” (4). The story of the Flying Africans therefore is not just myth but is part of the cultural fabric that makes up a

larger sense of African American memory and history. In an interview with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson, Morrison confirms this inclusion when she remembers the flying Africans story as

something that I have literally heard. Now I did check on certain things about people who fly by reading those old slave narratives. It was fascinating because everybody else had heard of those or saw, or knew somebody that saw it. Nobody said ‘I never heard of that,’ you know [. . .] So it was already there after the fact. I was willing to go ahead with it as a motivating thing for *Song of Solomon* [. . .] But I don’t study folklore – they are family stories and neighborhood stories and community stories. (173)⁴

By figuring this story’s roots in her own community’s memories, Morrison establishes the Flying Africans as a component of a self-defined and continuously evolving African American history. Since the “presence and heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways,” black Americans have sought out alternative constructions of history, drawing on black cosmology that is heavily influenced by African traditions, in order to undertake “the job of recover[ing]” African American history as it was *actually* lived (Davis 225). Numerous critics cite *Drums and Shadows*, a 1930s collection of stories and traditions from the island people off the coastal shores of Georgia and South Carolina, as one of Morrison’s primary sources for Flying Africans story, yet rarely do they acknowledge Morrison’s own personal connection with the tale.⁵ Morrison takes her place, along with those whose stories were told by descendents of African born slaves in *Drums and Shadows*, as the teller of

memories that black Americans have handed down from one generation to the next. Like Uncle Jack, who “long as [he] can remember, [. . .] [he] been hearing about that,” the flying Africans story is a part of Morrison’s family history and transnational memory (*Drums* 108).

The necessary link between transnational memory and lived history is a sense of time that moves freely between the past and the present and erases the divide caused by the indelible trauma of slavery. This conception of nonlinear time bridges the gap between those of Milkman and Morrison’s generations and that of the African born slaves. After piecing together the various memories of his relatives and finally understanding the history behind the children’s song about Flying Africans, Milkman inserts himself into a larger community of ancestors who could fly. Unrestricted by Western understandings of time, Milkman’s newly created community consists of long-deceased spirits who guide and teach him how to connect with Pilate, the living link to his ancestors.

In order to reach his ancestors, Morrison necessarily complicates, in the novel’s first pages, Western notions of time that hold Milkman back. Within the first paragraph, Morrison introduces the exact moment of the novel’s conception as February 19, 1931 at 3:00 pm. Later in the first hundred pages, Morrison provides specific dates, 1945, 1953, 1960, and 1961, so that Milkman’s age is easily marked as the novel propels forward in time.⁶ Initially, these dates seem like the beginning of a linear time structure in the novel that is familiar to a Western reader; its trajectory appears to move forward from the present into the future in neatly sliced and predictable time periods.

However, Morrison undercuts this comfort by delineating this opening moment in the novel simultaneously as Robert Smith's death date and Milkman Dead's birthday. Morrison points out that "whether or not the little insurance agent's conviction that he could fly contributed to the place of [Ruth Dead's] delivery, it certainly contributed to its time" (Morrison *SOS* 5). The confusion that results from Smith's flight off the top of Mercy Hospital enables Ruth access into Mercy, where she delivers Milkman, the first African American birth in the hospital (Morrison *SOS* 9). The coexistence of birth and death suggests the circularity of human existence. By linking the time of Smith's possible death with Milkman's entrance into the world, Morrison introduces nonlinear time to the reader.⁷

Morrison's understanding of African or, as she terms, "Third World" cosmology informs this sense of nonwestern time. In her essay "Memory, Creation, and Writing," she reveals it is "[her] work to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West" (388). Morrison's task of integrating "Third World" epistemology necessarily includes a shift from Western constructs of linear time in order to more fully reflect "discredited" diasporic culture. In 1974 Morrison helped create *The Black Book*, a chronicle of African American history that consists of traditional historical sources, like photos, letters, posters and also nontraditional sources, such as memories, rumors, recipes, and stories. Her approach to ordering the chronology of the novel suggests the influence of African cosmology and is thus relevant to time in *Song of Solomon*. "A genuine Black history book," she reveals, "has no 'order,' no chapters [. . .] but it does have coherence and sinew. It can be read or browsed through from the back forwards or from the middle out, either way" (Morrison

“Behind” 89). This reading strategy produces a sense of time that blurs the distinction between the past and the present and rejects western modes of reading. The nonlinear chronology of *The Black Book* and *Song of Solomon* challenge conventional ways of history-making and place an Afrocentric approach to history at the center rather than the periphery of Morrison’s work.

The black cosmology that Morrison “writ[es] out of” stems from Kongo time, which as K.K. Fu-Kiau Bunseki suggests, “is a cyclical thing. It has no beginning and no end” (4).⁸ Bunseki conceives of time as a scroll. In order to understand and interpret the present, one must “roll and unroll the scroll of time” so that the “past goes and returns to us in the present time” (15). For *Song of Solomon*, Milkman must learn to “unroll the scroll of time” so that he can commune with his ancestors, like Pilate, her father, and finally, the Flying Africans. Only by the discovery that to “be in time is to be able to move freely back and forth on the scroll of time” is Milkman able to communicate with, revisit, and learn from his African and African American ancestors (Bunseki 15). Those living in the present freely draw upon and are enlivened by the past in a symbiotic manner. Bunseki’s understanding of time is also particularly relevant to Morrison’s project of memory. She believes that if her “work is to be functional to the group (to the village, as it were) then it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past [. . .] it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out” (“Memory” 389). Milkman’s ability to “live” a sense of time in which the Flying Africans’ story and his family’s past memories as “useful” to his present survival will mark his entrance into ancestral communities.

At the same time that Morrison introduces nonlinear time with Smith's leap and Milkman's birth, Pilate Dead, Milkman's aunt and his strongest possible connection to African progenitors, hums lines of the flying Africans song: "O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home" (Morrison *SOS* 6). Pilate's singing is the first appearance of the song in the novel. She prophetically tells Ruth that "a little bird'll be here" (Morrison *SOS* 9). Though the meaning of the song has not yet been revealed, Pilate characterizes Milkman as a "little bird" and links him with ancestors whose lives began in Africa. At an early age, Milkman expresses his fascination with "that single gift" of flying (Morrison *SOS* 9). However, he severs himself from the "gift" when he realizes that "only birds and airplanes could fly – he lost all interest in himself" (Morrison *SOS* 9). Milkman's initial reluctance to believe in the possibility of flight suggests his inability to conceive of a deeper sense of time and nonwestern notions of existence that Morrison suggests in the novel's opening pages. Pilate's song, which appears over and over again in the novel, signifies an ancestral connection that Milkman must learn through an understanding of nonlinear time.⁹ The song, a product of African cosmology, is a counternarrative to the marked time that Morrison introduces early in the novel, and Milkman's ability to see into the past, before February 18, 1931 at 3:00, functions as his greatest objective.

Milkman, following in the steps of his father, Macon Dead, does not like to look back on the past. Macon Dead refuses memory. As he grew older and rejected Pilate and their past lives, "little by little he remembered fewer and fewer of the details, until finally he had to imagine them, even fabricate them, guess what they must have been" (Morrison *SOS* 16). Macon cares very little for origins, so his loss of memories barely registers. He

disremembers his lineage. Moving with satisfaction into the future and further away from the past isolates him from Pilate, his family's southern history, and his own northern community. Holding the keys to all of the rented houses in the black neighborhood, Macon succeeds by owning others. Macon explains to Milkman that "money is freedom [. . .] the only real freedom there is" (Morrison *SOS* 163). Morrison embodies Macon's "drive for wealth" in his big Packard that he and his family ride in every Sunday (Morrison *SOS* 29). As the family slowly cruises the neighborhood streets, "there was never a sudden braking and backing up" to speak with friends in the community; they have none. Instead, Macon pushes the family forward and resists looking back. He passes this refusal to remember onto Milkman, who has always been "uneasy" about "riding backward" in the car (Morrison *SOS* 32). "Riding backward" is "like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going" (Morrison *SOS* 32). Milkman is afraid of the past. Disconnected from the entire community and all living relatives, the Dead family dreads the present, fears the past, and clings to the shallow, material possibilities of the future.

Hating the stagnancy of his current life and hoping for a better future, Milkman, heavily influenced by his father's sense of forward progression, begins searching for the stash of gold that Macon convinces him is at Pilate's house. This gold will allow him to "beat a path away from his parents' past" (180) and "be on [his] own" (Morrison *SOS* 181). Desiring individual movement, Milkman eagerly wishes to depart his northern hometown and leave the past behind; he longs, not "for the stationary things," but for the "boats, cars, airplanes" that will drive him further (Morrison *SOS* 179). Milkman, shaped into a superficial character by the corrosive individualism critic Catherine Carr Lee associates with the "American culture of competition, capitalism, and racism," alienates

himself from his community (44). Continuing in his father's footsteps, Milkman wants to create his own life, free from the constraints of his family, his community, and his race. When Guitar, Milkman's best friend, discusses the lynching of Emmitt Till, Milkman replies "fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble" (Morrison *SOS* 88). Furthermore, he believes that the "racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all" (Morrison *SOS* 107). Unable to sympathize with or even be moved by the bigotry that affects black Americans, Milkman appears shamelessly self-centered and blissfully ignorant of the racism that mars and in part defines African American history. Milkman may know where he wants to go, but he has no understanding of his origins.

Along with his father's influence, Milkman's growing selfishness and his solipsistic individualism prevent him from flying. When he and Guitar enter a community bar, Milkman sees three air force pilots with "beautiful hats and gorgeous leather jackets" (Morrison *SOS* 57). Milkman and Guitar are eager to shoot pool with these men of flight, but the owner orders Guitar to "get [Milkman] out of here" (Morrison *SOS* 57). Because Milkman is Macon Dead's son, he is rejected not only from the bar but also from possible connections to the flying heroes of the community. Later, Milkman feels a similar reverence when he encounters a white peacock and experiences "unrestrained joy for anything that can fly" (Morrison *SOS* 178); however, Guitar reveals the peacock's inability to fly because it has a "tail full of jewelry" (Morrison *SOS* 179). Grounded by external adornments, the peacock, like Milkman, cannot take flight. Guitar reveals to Milkman that "can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (Morrison *SOS* 179). Milkman mistakenly interprets Guitar's lesson. He sees flight as the greatest expression of individual freedom that can only be

obtained after he rids himself of communal and familial ties and financial burdens. Rather than giving up material desires, Milkman only further courts them. Entangled in the capitalist fantasy of individual ownership, he immediately “fantasiz[es] about what the gold could buy” that he believes is in Pilate’s house (Morrison *SOS* 179). He “wanted the money desperately” (Morrison *SOS* 180), and in order to get it, he will rob Pilate, Hagar, and Reba, even though “they’re [his] people” (Morrison *SOS* 181). His disavowal of familial ties and nonmaterial success keeps Milkman stranded on land.

His willingness to manipulate and steal from Pilate only further shows his disconnection from his African American ancestral community of Flying Africans. Pilate represents Milkman’s strongest possible ties to Africa. Even her house is reminiscent of Milkman’s diasporic family history:

There was this heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets [. . .] the ginger sugar blew [. . .] each thought it was the way freedom smelled [. . .] could have come straight from the marketplace in Accra. (Morrison *SOS* 185)

In addition to the distinct smell of “freedom,” Pilate physically proves Milkman’s African ancestry. Macon tells Milkman that “if you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans” (Morrison *SOS* 54). Macon, of course, relies on the most shallow of connections, skin color, to cast Pilate as African.

Her connection to African culture runs much deeper. Pilate possesses the ability to communicate with and accept the spirit of her ancestors, a necessary skill that Milkman does not learn until the novel’s end. When she sees her father’s spirit, Pilate

believes that he is “most helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know . . . it’s a good feelin to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on” (Morrison *SOS* 141). Her father, though dead, acts as a powerful and protective guide for Pilate. Margaret Creel Washington confirms that “inhabitants of the spiritual world were the guardians of life, appealed to in periods of crisis” (76). Pilate’s father frequently leads Macon and her to safety, even after his death. Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, Pilate and her girls are “not clock people” (Morrison *SOS* 182). Unlike the Dead family, they do not rely on a clock to navigate their lives, but instead they depend on their own perception of time. As a result of her strong bond with her father’s spirit, Pilate conceives of time differently from Macon and Milkman. Since the dead “stay with you anyway,” she constantly looks back on the past (Morrison *SOS* 208); the bag of her father’s bones that she unwittingly carries with her physically represents her awareness of circular time. Valerie Smith observes that “Pilate’s vision of time – indeed, of the world – is cyclical and expansive. Instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the forms of her songs, her stories, and her bag of bones” (37). Pilate embodies what Morrison calls “living history” (Davis 199). Channeling the relics and voices of the past, Pilate creates a useful means of communication between herself and the ancestral community. Her willingness to honor past ancestors while simultaneously living in the present characterizes an Afrocentric approach to time and community-building.

The fact that Milkman thinks the bag is filled with gold shows his inability to understand Pilate’s ontology. Though he only finds bones in the bag, Milkman, following Macon’s hints, decides that the gold lies further south in Pennsylvania. For Milkman, this search presents an opportunity to sever his final connections with his community and his

family. Still clinging to linear time, he makes sure to equip himself with a “gold Longines watch” (Morrison *SOS* 227). The journey of the watch mirrors Milkman’s personal growth throughout the novel. The more disconnected Milkman becomes from the watch and the sense of linear time that accompanies it, the better able he is to understand an African-influenced sense of time and uncover the memories and history of his family.

Though Milkman’s journey begins as a quest for gold, it eventually culminates in his transfiguration of his family’s history. Milkman’s movement South, as he draws closer to the American origins of the Flying Africans, initiates the first glimpses of his positive change.¹⁰ In Danville, Pennsylvania, he begins to shed his individuality through hearing the history of his family’s past. Milkman meets Reverend Cooper, an old friend of his father and grandfather. Unlike Milkman’s northern neighbors, Reverend Cooper embraces Milkman, who feels a “glow” as he listens to the minister relate fond memories of the Dead family (Morrison *SOS* 231). For the first time in Milkman’s life, he feels “links” to those from his family’s past (Morrison *SOS* 229). As a parade of men, all of whom knew and respected both Macon Deads, recollect proud moments, Milkman realizes that he “missed something in his life” (Morrison *SOS* 234). His lost and forgotten past begins to surface as Milkman hears more and more oral stories of Dead family history and finally sees in his past something to be proud of and to remember; he learns of his grandfather’s successful and envied farm, visits the house where Pilate and his father lived, discovers from Circe, the ageless woman who saved Pilate and Macon’s lives, his grandmother and grandfather’s names, and realizes that the bones from Pilate’s bag are actually his grandfather’s bones. Like a quilt, the pieces of Milkman’s past lie, waiting to be assembled.

The turning point in the novel comes when Milkman discovers a sense of time that helps him weave together his family's history and provides him access to the past. Leaving Circe's house to find the cave, Milkman peripatetically trudges through the deep woods. Circe tells him to look for a bridge and "cross it" (Morrison *SOS* 249). He never finds the bridge and instead must wade across the river, which is too deep, and he "went completely under" (Morrison *SOS* 249). It is tempting to read this scene as Milkman's baptism;¹¹ however, viewing Milkman's fall into the river as his submersion into Kongo time better reflects an Afrocentric reading of the text. Thus, Circe's reminder to Milkman that he is seeking a bridge to "cross" indicates that she pushes him towards a crossroads between the water and the land. His plunge into the water suggests the Kongo cosmogram's influence on Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

According to Bunseki, the Kongo cosmogram looks like a circle divided by two intersecting, cross-shaped lines. A horizontal stretch of water called the kalunga line balances the upper world of the living from the lower world of the ancestors (Bunseki 7). Each individual constantly circles between these worlds so that the ancestors, even though they have departed from the physical world, continue to influence and mold living beings. Therefore, in Kongo cosmology, "dying is not the end [. . .] we die in order to undergo change" (Bunseki 11). The continual cycling between the living and the dead, a process that Milkman initially begins when he meets Circe and Reverend Cooper, is complete when he falls into the water. He enters the water, the "crossroads" of the cosmogram, which functions as the "point of intersection between the ancestors and the living" (Thompson *Flash* 109). When Milkman submerges himself, he drops beneath the kalunga line and into the world of his ancestors. Morrison states that

Milkman has to experience the elements. He goes into the earth and later walks its surface. He twice enters water [. . .] he feels a part of it, and that is his coming of age, the beginning of his ability to connect with the past and perceive the world as alive.” (Leclair 125)

As Robert Farris Thompson reveals, a crossroads is a place where one goes to “get in touch with one’s ancestors” (“Kongo Influences” 154). In this moment, Milkman dies, shedding his individualistic ways, only to be reborn into African ancestry and African time. Furthermore, water, which Morrison believes has a “perfect memory,” washes Milkman in the history of his family’s past (Morrison “Site” 99); he is drenched in memory that presents the possibility of renewal.

As he emerges from the river, Milkman is changed. His fancy shoes and suit are ruined. He wants to place himself in time, but though his watch still ticks, the “face was splintered and the minute hand was bent” (Morrison *SOS* 250). His sense of linear time is falling apart. Continuing his journey further south to Shalimar, Virginia, Milkman moves further from his initial goals of money and winning and closer towards the African origins of his family’s past. His transformation however is not complete until he grasps the full meaning of the song about the Flying Africans. He first witnesses children “singing a kind of ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker game [. . .] boys and girls were standing in a circle,” and one boy stood with his “arms outstretched, turn[ing] like an airplane” (Morrison *SOS* 264). Milkman’s initial hearing returns him to the more immediate and painful past of his childhood when he was “never asked to play those circle games” (Morrison *SOS* 264). Because of his fancy clothes and the Dead family connection, his peers shunned him. The game’s circular shape and the song’s content

suggest the community's continuity and willingness to remember its own history. Since Milkman has yet to decipher the song's history, he remains an outsider to the circle.

It is not until after he hunts with the community's men, finally learns how to love a woman, and visits an old family member, Susan Byrd, that Milkman is able to interpret the song and fully return to the past; he abandons all that he once knew in order to enter into the community circle. In particular, Milkman's visit to Susan Byrd is his final step toward enlightenment and his conclusive break with linear time. Though Susan is reticent and initially misleading, Milkman pieces together enough of his own history to solve why Pilate's father always instructed her to "Sing, Sing" (Morrison *SOS* 147). Milkman learns that he and Susan Byrd are cousins through his grandmother Sing's side. While Pilate, who never knew her mother's name, heard her father's injunction, she could not have realized that he was saying his wife's name. This important piece of family knowledge allows Milkman the opportunity to give rather than steal from Pilate; he also links himself to Pilate as a new builder of family memories, adding onto what Pilate originally knew and gifting her with previously unknown knowledge. Milkman also further constructs his genealogy as he learns that his great-grandmother's name was Heddy. This renewed lineage allows him to "feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody" (Morrison *SOS* 293). This shared "pulse" that links Milkman to the South, Pilate, Africa, and his earlier ancestors echoes the circular shape of the Flying Africans song.

As Milkman discovers his new "pulse" of family history, he distances himself from his watch. At Susan Byrd's house, Grace Long, Susan's friend, asks to see

Milkman's watch; he takes it off, and this marks the watch's final appearance. After Milkman leaves Susan's house without his watch, he makes the crucial connection between his grandfather's ghost and Pilate's confusion about Sing. He begins to question himself

“Jesus! Here he was walking around in the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? he thought. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well?” (Morrison *SOS* 294)

Milkman's awareness of himself in linear time no longer makes sense. In order to piece together the truth of his family's history, he must engage a circular approach to memory and time. Milkman's willingness to consider the powerful influence of ghostly ancestors propels him back in time, far before the novel's surface setting of the twentieth century. Immediately after he makes this remark, Milkman “lifted his wrist to look at his watch and remembered that Grace had not given it back to him. ‘Damn,’ he murmured aloud. ‘I’m losing everything.’” (294). What Milkman finally loses are the prior trappings of his early life, including a sense of linear time, which he inherited from Macon, that repudiates memory. Inherent in the idea of memory is the ability to look back on the past. When Milkman loses his watch, the dominant symbol of linear time, he gains a new self, one that is open to the voices, memories, and histories of those family members who came long before him.

Therefore, as Milkman listens a second time to the children's song, he comprehends its full meaning. He triumphantly realizes that “these children were singing a story about his own people” (Morrison *SOS* 304). In the song's words, he recognizes key family member names, such as his grandfather Jake, his great-grandmother Hedy on

Sing's side, and his other great-grandparents Solomon and Ryna. Through his learned knowledge, Milkman assembles a family tree that begins with African born slaves who possess the power to fly and ends three generations later with himself. Jake, as Milkman later learns from a second visit to Susan, "was one of those flying African children" (Morrison *SOS* 321). Anticipating the stance of her future critics, Morrison initially paints Milkman as a skeptic. Viewing the flight as metaphorical, he asks Susan, "when you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?" and she answers, "No, I mean flew[. . .] he was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air" (Morrison *SOS* 323). By the end of their conversation, his disbelief transforms into acceptance. He believes that "my great-granddaddy could fly [. . .] he didn't need no airplane [. . .] He just took off; got fed up. *All the way up!* No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! [. . .] he went back to Africa" (Morrison *SOS* 328). It is Milkman's joyful belief that initiates him into what he terms the heroic "tribe" of Flying Africans (Morrison *SOS* 328). Milkman's sense of time unrolls, like Bunseki's image of the scroll, so that the past and the present become indistinguishable cohorts. Finally, he gains entry into a tribal circle of ancestral memory and history that stretches transnationally across the Atlantic to Africa. After having memorized the song, Milkman demands cultural participation and inclusion. The children's game that he was once an outsider to is now "[his] game" (Morrison *SOS* 327). Like Uncle Jack, Solomon, Ryna, Jake, and Pilate, Milkman takes his place, alongside Morrison, as another generation of Flying Africans.

Morrison however does not allow the novel to end on this euphoric note. She engages the traumatic memories of slavery that inevitably lie within the lines of the Flying Africans song. Understanding “Pilate’s song” about the Flying Africans, Milkman returns north (Morrison *SOS* 303). Eager to see the woman who “had shown him the sky,” Milkman enters Pilate’s house only to realize that Hagar, his former lover and Pilate’s granddaughter, has passed away, in part because of Milkman’s cruelty and inability to love her (Morrison *SOS* 210). Milkman then learns the darker legacy of the Flying Africans. When Solomon flew away, “he disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go. The wife saw him and the children saw him” (Morrison *SOS* 322). Desperate to save himself from slavery’s dehumanization, Solomon returns back home to Africa. Having Solomon as Milkman’s new role model and hero is complicated by the irresponsibility that taints Solomon’s rebellious flight; he achieves freedom at the expense of his family’s wholeness. Ryna, the “black lady” in the song who “fell down on the ground” and “threw her body all around” bemoaned the loss of her husband and was left to care for twenty-one children (Morrison *SOS* 303). This moment of flight, though transcendent for Solomon, signifies Ryna’s total loss and devastation.

Like Solomon who flew off and left Ryna, Milkman deserted Hagar. He realizes that “while he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying” (Morrison *SOS* 332). Morrison’s juxtaposition of “flying” and “dying” suggests the underlying influence that slavery still has on Milkman’s generation; those who were able to escape slavery inevitably left behind a multitude of those who could not. By learning the memories and history of his family, Milkman rises above the self-hatred he inherits from Macon’s dislike for his own

race. Conversely, Hagar, paralyzed by her inability to achieve dominant standards of beauty and Milkman's lovelessness, dies. As Morrison suggests in her first novel *Bluest Eye*, Hagar and Macon exist within a society that, deeply influenced by slavery's value system, valorizes all things white. The remembered effects of slavery's trauma pass from one generation to the next in a cycle of sorrow and pain. In order to stem his generation's replication of the Flying Africans trauma, Milkman must engage the past and shoulder the burdens of his present actions.

As Milkman begins to see himself in the family's line of Flying Africans, he enacts what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory. Hirsch applies the term postmemory to the second generation of Holocaust survivors who must, in order to survive, learn how to translate the trauma of their parent's experience into their own present lives. However, Hirsch defines postmemory broadly as the "response of the second generation to the trauma of the past," so that postmemory is especially applicable to African Americans dealing with the ancestral legacy of slavery (10). For Milkman, "it is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (Hirsch "Surviving" 10). His ultimate comprehension of his family's troubled and heroic memories connects the realities of slavery's influences on his ancestors to his own present generation.

In contrast to Milkman's earlier dismissal of Emmitt Till's lynching and total disassociation with racism, Milkman engages Hagar's death. Her death, unlike Till's, deeply affects Milkman. Rather than letting Pilate bury the box of Hagar's hair, Milkman assumes responsibility for his flight from Hagar; he asks for possession of the box. As he

and Pilate return to Shalimar to bury her father's bones, Milkman, perched on Solomon's Leap, the same spot from which Solomon took flight back to Africa, occupies what Hirsch would call a "transgenerational space of remembrance" ("Surviving" 10). In this space, Milkman identifies as both the victim of trauma, with Hagar's hair, and the victimizer, as the present generation's Flying African. His combined sense of postmemory and nonlinear time allow him to set alongside each other Solomon's past and Hagar's present. His willingness to "adop[t] the traumatic experiences" provides Milkman an avenue to confront the myriad ways that slavery has scarred his family. Linking himself to his enlarged African American community, Milkman faces rather than eludes his family's multigenerational struggle for survival. Gurleen Grewal posits that "escape routes are not the same as routes to liberty. The entire novel is about the interdependence of individuals and the insurance of mutual life. Redemption cannot be individual" (73). Whereas before he cared little for other members of his race, Milkman now has a shared sense of African American identity that is both a release and a burden. Hirsch states that often those who undergo postmemory feel that they are "too late to help, utterly impotent," but they "nevertheless search for ways to take responsibility for what we are seeing" (26). Milkman's connection to his family history comes "too late;" he cannot repair the damage he has done to Hagar nor can he fully atone for Solomon's legacy of leaving women behind.

Poised on the edge of a cliff, both physically and metaphorically, Milkman chooses to face his family's dualistic history of joy and grief. This confrontation embodies itself in Milkman's final meeting with Guitar. After Guitar shoots and kills Pilate, Milkman offers Guitar "[his] life" (Morrison *SOS* 337). In the family tradition of

flying, Milkman “leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar” (337). Aligning himself with the knowledge of what “Shalimar knew,” Milkman realizes that “if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (337). Susan Blake argues that Milkman’s leap into a “dangerous void” signifies his desire for “personal transcendence” (79). Without Milkman’s entanglement with Ryna, Pilate, Susan Byrd, his mother, his sisters, and Hagar, this assessment might be accurate; however, “personal transcendence” implies a connection to Solomon, who makes up only half of Milkman’s ancestry. Milkman’s loyalty to all ancestors, both male and female, imbues him with a responsibility that extends to his community. Hirsch believes that the “dual masculine-feminine legacy” balances out the problematic paternal figures, like Solomon, in his life. Highlighting this multiplicity of voices, Milkman points out that his knowledge comes from what the entire community of “Shalimar knew.” He sees himself as a new generation of Flying Africans, who, because of his deep knowledge of history, time, and memory, first assumes responsibility for and then alters his family’s course. In her seminal essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-Americans Presence in American Literature,” Morrison explains that although Milkman’s flight

carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, it is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things-as-they-are. It should not be understood as a simple desperate act, the end of a fruitless life, a life without gesture, without examination, but as obedience to a deeper contract with his people. It is his commitment to them. (392)

Milkman takes postmemory one step further. Rather than experiencing these memories from a distance, he literally re-members himself into the narrative of Flying Africans as

he leaps from the edge. His “commitment” to his community, those living and dead, male and female, initiate his carefully considered willingness to fly. His flight then is not like Solomon’s escape nor like Hagar’s courted death, but is instead an expression of his final entrance into the history and memory of his ancestors. Following the “spicy sugared ginger smell” from Macon Dead Senior’s bones and the bird with Pilate’s name in its beak, Milkman flies back to Africa, not alone but accompanied by the spirits, male and female, of his ancestors (Morrison *SOS* 335). Susan Willis notes that Milkman’s leap is “liberational because slavery is not portrayed as the origin of history and culture. Instead the novel opens out to Africa” (316). Only after confronting his family’s memories and their history with slavery on American soil does Morrison allow Milkman a return home.

Guitar, like the reader, is left behind to witness Milkman’s departure. He then comes to occupy Milkman’s former position as the detective who must piece together his best friend’s story and, like Milkman, seek his roots in the past and trace out the responsibility he bears for the present. Morrison encourages the reader to undergo a similar journey to re-inhabit the past. Morrison believes that the “text [. . .] cannot be the authority – it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale” (“Memory” 389). Through Milkman, Morrison presents the healing possibilities of remembering the past. Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* suggests re-“map[ping]” a new conception of African American history and memory that circles constantly between America and Africa. This constant circling calls for a necessary engagement with slavery but hints at the possibility of redemptive change via the willingness to remember the full pain of the past. One must seek the “dead lives and fading memories” that lie “buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country”

(Morrison *SOS* 329). The ability to look in undiscovered or purposefully hidden places for a better sense of America is particularly crucial for reconstructions of African American history. Via memory, an excavation of the past and a simultaneous examination of the present open up vistas of unexplored history.

¹ In a myriad of other interviews, Morrison mentions her aversion to being labeled as a magical realist.

² See Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*..

³ I need to go back here and site the articles that were most helpful to me.

⁴ "An Interview with Toni Morrison" Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson 1985. ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 183. In the same interview, she states that the "song in *Song of Solomon* is a song from that wing of the family in Alabama. The song that my mother and aunts know starts out, 'Green, the only son of Solomon.' And then there are some funny words that I don't understand. It's a long sort of a children's song that I don't remember. But Green was the name of my grandfather's first son and it was a kind of genealogy that they were singing about. So I altered the words for *Song of Solomon*" (173).

⁵ For some helpful articles regarding *Drums and Shadows*' influence on Morrison see Wendy W. Walters's "One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair, / Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," Gay Wilentz's "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," Susan L. Blake's "Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*," Nada Elia's "Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen': Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah," and Therese E. Higgins's novel *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. These articles fully explain the signification and history behind the Flying Africans story that informed my understanding of Morrison's use of Flying Africans.

⁶ See pages 63, 65, 91, and 92 to chart the various ways that Morrison marks Milkman's age for the reader.

⁷ I characterize Smith's death as "possible" because later on in the book, Corinthians, Milkman's older sister and a witness to Mr. Smith's leap from the building, notes that "there was no blood" (5). The question remains as to whether or not Smith, like Milkman, flew away.

⁸ I use Kongo to describe a particular region of Africa that is relevant to African Americans. The Kongo is the area in Africa where Europeans acquired the largest number of slaves that were sent to American plantations (Bunseki 2).

⁹ See pages 6, 9, 49, 265, 298, 303, and 336 for places in the text where the snippets of the song appears. Page 303 is the only spot where the entire text of the song appears.

¹⁰ Catherine Lee Carr has written an article "The South in *Song of Solomon*" that expands on the significance of the fact that Macon moves south, closer to slavery's origins and his family's history. In order to fight the alienation and fragmentation that characterizes city modernity, Milkman needs to "embrace community, the community that comes from a shared culture and history" (60).

¹¹ Though I do not focus on the influence of Christianity in this essay, it is a guiding force in the novel. References to Christianity are found in various places throughout the book, particularly in Morrison's process of naming.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Memory as Political Activism in *Song of Solomon* and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

In the introduction to the special issue of *Signs* entitled “Gender and Cultural Memory” editors Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith cite the journal as a “historic volume” that marks one of the first instances that memory, feminist, and multicultural studies develop on “parallel” rather than “separate tracks” (5). The journal’s contributors, along with Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, foreground the importance of memory. They insist that “we do not study the past merely for its own sake; rather, we do so to meet the needs of the present” (Hirsch *Signs* 12). Memory studies then posit new meanings or interpretations for past events. Through the critical lens of multiculturalism, memory becomes a powerful form of cultural retrieval that seeks to uncover from the past lost or unheard voices with the potential to redefine the present.

What is particularly valuable and timely about this journal issue is the special roundtable section devoted to September 11. These writers situate memory in the very center of global and national cultural debate and “remind us that forgetting and suppression must be contested by active remembering and that the practice and analysis of cultural memory can in itself be a form of political activism” (Hirsch *Signs* 13). Memories characterized by “political activism” expose the glaring realities of American sexism, racism, and imperialism.

By making the private public, Morrison and Kingston suggest an aesthetics of memory that helps us to make sense of and confront the past, while simultaneously

suggesting a way to make it viable for the present. Whether it is Milkman's postmemory of his family's history with slavery, his willingness to understand an African-influenced sense of nonlinear time, or Wittman's performance of Chinese American identity, their memories function as a way to reclaim the past and reenvision the present. Katherine Suggs points out that "multi-ethnic literatures is a field that engages the political understandings of history and culture that are embedded in active and actual group movements for social and political transformation in the United States" (238). Critical theorists working in the academy must continue to remind themselves of this connection between the literary texts and the "real world," and their criticism must be useful and reflective of those American communities. Gates reminds us though that literary studies has its limits. The field has "transformed the analysis of texts into a marionette theater of the political, to which we bring all the passions of our real-world commitments. And that is why it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves of the distance from the classroom to the streets" (18). Gates's assessment is correct; the realities of the academy is that we are separated from the world outside and cannot presume that our scholarship will have any impact on that outside world.

However, literary scholars cannot be defeatists. Like those working in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, current academics should seek out the ways in which their criticism remains tied to the communities present in their literary texts and their own localities. I suggest in this thesis that one way to remain connected is by memory. Victor Villanueva, in his analysis of the rhetoric of academic discourse, concludes that memory "simply cannot be adequately portrayed in the conventional discourse of the academy" (12). He asks instead for a more personal, emotional narratives of memory that do not

necessarily “negate” academic discourse but instead enrich and “complement” rhetoric (14). Within academic speech, he includes room for memories in more personal, autobiographical narratives, just as Kingston and Morrison’s novel are both based upon their own artistic entanglement with their families’ histories. If we accept the supposition that ethnic studies departments are under attack in the post-September 11 era, academics must then look for new subtle and empowering ways to preserve, critique, and re-member American history. As Villanueva believes, it is memory that “pushes us forward” (19).

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Tripmaster Monkey book. Read 71 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Driven by his dream to write and stage an epic stage production o...
The setting of Maxine Hong Kingston's first novel seems as remote now as the rural China of her two earlier books. In mid-1960s San Francisco the women's movement, gay rights and the lengthening shadow of AIDS were unknown. The city had not yet seen a computer, let alone a cell phone, and instead of tweeting and texting people were forced in those benighted times to meet face to face and talk. People of color were waking up to what the possibilities of equality were open to them. That thing didn't need to stay the same and that lives could be made better and more equal. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* both authors utilize nonlinear temporality to explore the depths of cultural memory and history that extend far beyond America's geographical borders. Drawing [Show full abstract] connections respectively to the African American and Chinese American diasporas, Morrison and Kingston simultaneously challenge hegemonic constructions of American history while also creating communities that possess the potential to heal each cultural group's history of exclusion. Complete summary of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. eNotes plot summaries cover all the significant action of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.
Tripmaster Monkey is Maxine Hong Kingston's portrait of the artist as a Chinese American who attempts to assert his identity by blending together the two sides of his heritage. Using the Vietnam War as the backdrop, Kingston has also captured the exuberant antiestablishment sensibility of the Bay Area, immortalizing the flower-power counterculture of the psychedelic 1960s. Maxine Hong Kingston is the daughter of Chinese immigrants who operated a gambling house in the 1940s, when Maxine was born, and then a laundry where Kingston and her brothers and sisters toiled long hours. Kingston graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1962 from the University of California at Berkeley, and, in the same year, married actor Earl Kingston, whom she had met in an English course. Kingston has earned additional awards, including the PEN West Award for Fiction for *Tripmaster Monkey*, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, and the National Humanities Medal, which was conferred by President Clinton, as well as the title "Living Treasure of Hawaii" bestowed by a Honolulu Buddhist church.