Literary Genre as Ethnic Resistance in Maxine Hong Kingston’s
Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book

Derek Parker Royal
Texas A&M University—Commerce

In one of his better known stand-up bits from early in his career, Woody Allen tells his audience that once, while hunting, he bagged a moose and tied what he believed to be the dead carcass to the front of his car (the premise itself is funny enough—imagine Woody Allen, tramping about the outdoors, stalking wild game). Driving back into Manhattan, he discovers that he only grazed and temporarily disabled the moose, so that by the time he gets back home he has a live moose on his hands and he doesn’t have any idea what to do with it. Luckily, Allen remembers that he has a costume party to go to that evening, so he decides to take the moose to the party and dump him there. As one may guess, given the direction of this joke, the moose fits right in and starts mingling beautifully with the other guests. The critical moment in Allen’s story comes when everyone votes on the best costume. The prize goes, not to the moose, but to an old Jewish couple, the Berkowitzes, who have come to the party dressed in a moose suit. The real moose, in a fit of indignation, locks horns with the Berkowitzes and the two parties fight for the prize.

Allen’s moose joke is a humorously appropriate way to introduce some of the critical issues at work in Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. The joke and the novel share many things in common: both are surrealistic tales that defy a more traditional realism, both incorporate images of animals in
terms of "the Other," both include a party and crowds of people in which critical revelations are made, and both are funny texts. Yet, what is most important, at least in the scope of this study, is that both are tragi-comic narratives of the representation of identity; Wittman Ah Sing describes himself at one point as a "stand-up tragic" (317). Early in Kingston's text, Wittman's Asian American love interest, Nanci Lee, complains that a director criticizes her portrayal of an "oriental" peasant because she isn't "Chinese" enough. "Act oriental," he tells her. "Can't you act more oriental?" (24). Similar to Allen's moose, Nanci is caught in a bind of being upstaged by a fictional representation that threatens not only her economic livelihood, but the assumptions of identity which she (or at least the reader) has taken for granted. So that she will not be tempted to change either surgically or cosmetically in order to fit any preconceived roles, Wittman promises to write for her a theater "where the audience learns to fall in love with you for your ochery skin and round nose and flat profile and slanty eyes, and your bit of an accent" (27). The task for Wittman the artist figure, then, is to create a role that will allow Nanci a freedom of expression denied her in the popular media while at the same time disrupting those repressive stereotypical assumptions of what it means to be a Chinese American. As we see in the final chapters of the book, Wittman's theater is one of multiple possibility that defines itself not in terms of any static or categorical representations, but instead through an embracing of a freely negotiated ethnic heterogeneity.

The means by which Wittman attempts this critical intervention are most significant: he takes a well-established genre in Western literature, drama, and transforms it into a narrative vehicle that violates or transcends its assumed boundaries. He doesn't just engage in experimental theater where the fourth wall is violently transgressed or disjunctive dialogue is used to abuse the sensibilities of the audience. He brings to his stage a pastiche of discursive genres that, taken together, radically undermine any traditional notions of theater: family drama, comedy, improvisation, performance art, dramatic monologue, narrative epic, social protest, autobiographical confession, song and dance, and what Jean-Paul Sartre would call *littérature engagée*, just to name a few. What I would like to foreground in this examination of *Tripmaster Mon-
key is the inextricable link between the construction of ethnic identity and the engagements of literary genre. Just as her maniacally heteroglossic protagonist opens up the stage to a dramatic redefinition of what it means to be a Chinese American, Kingston manipulates genre expectations in order to open up Chinese American representations as well as the very act of representing itself. Similar to the ways in which she attempts to redefine conceptions of ethnicity, Kingston incorporates multiple or ill-defined genres that allow an opening up (or at least a re-evaluation) of the canon in terms of what it means to be an American female writer of color.²

Although she does not discuss Kingston’s works, bell hooks in some of her writings highlights one of *Tripmaster Monkey*'s central themes: the need for a wariness toward any essentializing theories underlying our notions of race. A politics of difference, hooks argues, can turn repressive when rooted in those master narratives from which marginal subjects have attempted to free themselves. In other words, the search for some “authentic” black (for her) identity not only assumes a highly problematic “modernist” point of origin, but perhaps more importantly silences the vast multiplicity of expressions that broadly defines the black experience in America. Looking at the possibilities for a black subjectivity, hooks puts it this way:

The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of “the authority of experience.” There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black “essence” and the recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle.

(29)

Hooks’s critique has strong political implications that extend beyond the African American community. Instead of an ethnic or race theory that centralizes the cultural law of the tribe, she calls for critical strategies that foreground psychological states common to a variety of marginalized subjects. A “radical postmodernism,”
she believes, should focus on those "shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitment, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition" (27). Here is a criticism that is overtly political in its rejection of what could be called a radical group individualism. Instead, hooks emphasizes shared experiences and, rather than focus solely on one group's class/gender/race predicament, attempts to locate common ground among individual communities.

This critical intersection of race and postmodernism can be a useful schema from which to approach Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* and the criticism surrounding it. In the past several years there has been a growing amount of critical attention given to the novel, and most of it approaches the text in terms of its redefining ethnic identity. While not wanting to completely jettison notions of selfhood, most of these critics argue, Kingston nonetheless refuses to (re)fix any representations of Chinese Americanness. Instead, she sees the ethnic subject as a pastiche of discourses that embody more than any simple Chinese American (both words used as adjectives) binary.

For instance, King-Kok Cheung highlights the genderization of Chinese American literature by focusing on the, at times bitter, division between its male and female practitioners. She criticizes outspoken writers such as Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan for being too focused on masculine themes of war and aggressive self-assertion and accuses them of buying into the white male constructs that they are attempting to work against (244). (In some ways, this argument is similar to that of bell hooks when she criticizes African American militants of the sixties and seventies for subscribing to an essentialized sense of blackness.) By contrast, Kingston, along with other female Chinese American writers, is attempting to reconceptualize ethnic subjectivity by opening up the gender definitions based on stereotype (240).

Malini Johar Schueller reads *Tripmaster Monkey* as a complete subversion of ethnic identity. Wittman is the Other that is always changing, a Chinese American actor/artist who easily shifts from one role to another. Any ethnic empowerment in the text, Schueller argues, comes not from any fixed redefinition of Chinese Ameri-
canness but from the realization that any "origin" to which Wittman might aspire is, in the Bahktinian sense, always linguistically based (73). With her discursive and contextual sense of identity, Kingston uses "ethnicity as resistance" in that she "articulate[s] it in such a manner that it cannot be reduced to definitional criteria which have always been used to marginalize people of color" (83).

Patricia Lin sees Kingston's hyphenized American hero in a more radical light. In his refusal to locate anything that is essentially "Chinese American," Wittman functions as the embodiment of the postmodern condition, juggling the many cultural codes and discourses that make up his life. Lin calls this discursive practice an "indigenous ethnography" that is constantly defamiliarizing representation by undermining traditional novelistic realism (334-35). In a move that attempts to deconstruct all notions of identity and leave no space for agency, Lin argues that "Wittman stands for the constituted self that is eclectic, ephemeral, and an empty signifier moving from one theater of action to another without serious engagement in the actualities. Disengagement through disguise becomes a means of both challenging and transcending social and cultural boundaries and norms" (339-40).

While not completely erasing ethnic subjectivity in the way that Lin does, Isabella Furth, much like Schueller, sees Kingston's text as an ongoing intervention within the problematic flux of ethnic identity. She takes the hyphen in "Chinese-American" and reads it as one of the central metaphors in the book; it is a mark that conjoins the ethnic subject to a community that nonetheless scars or separates her (or him) (34). Any attempt to escape from this "bondage of the hyphen" comes not through any assimilative unity, but through an acceptance of multiplicity. "Uncomplicated identity and wholeness," she argues, "are impossible fictions; rather than a body or a nation that is stable, self-sufficient, and impregnable, Kingston envisions a world of constant transformation and flux" (37). Ethnic identity, for Furth, is an always already process of renegotiation.

In a variety of ways, Tripmaster Monkey provides a fruitful ground upon which to illustrate the conflicting approaches to race and ethnicity. For instance, Wittman is constantly struggling against the dominant cultural assumptions that inscribe, or prescribe, identity. Yet unlike other ethnically-conscious texts,
Kingston’s text does not foreground an individual’s conscious negotiation between his or her ethnic heritage and the assimilative forces at work in the society. If anything, Kingston problematizes the very notion of ethnic origin. Wittman Ah Sing does not use his Chinese roots as a point of departure because, in the strictest sense, he has no Chinese roots, as Kingston makes clear when Wittman unsuccessfully attempts to capture the Joang Fu story:

What had [Wittman] to do with foreigners? With F.O.B. émigrés? Fifth-generation native Californian that he was. Great-Great-Grandfather came on the Nootka, as ancestral as the Mayflower. Go-sei. The story boat has got to light out on the Mississippi or among the houseboats on the San Joaquin Delta. It should work the yachts at Lake Tahoe. His province is America. America, his province. (41)

Similarly, when Wittman takes Taña into PoPo’s room, they see a model village that one would assume to be a representation of the family’s ancestral roots. Yet, as Wittman makes clear, it is nothing more than a guise with which to deceive Immigration. “It is not a model of anything, do you understand? It’s a memory village” (192). Authentic Chinese roots are as elusive and as fictional as the street names and numbers that adorn PoPo’s village.

A recognition of the constructedness of these roots also emphasizes the legitimacy of an American identity, as Wittman later tells his theater audience: “You’re going to stay F.O.B. as long as you hear and say ‘Revolution,’ and be thinking 1911, 1949. Forget Tobacco Shit War and King Fu War. Seventeen seventy-six, Siew Loong, July 4—our Revolution. We allthesame Americans, you sabe? Get it?” (281-82). If Europeans can define themselves as quintessentially “American” after two or three generations, Wittman argues, then why shouldn’t he be given the same discursive privilege? By focusing on the race-specific codes that deny him that privilege, one can give a more accurate reading of the dynamics at work in Kingston’s text. It should be evident that by approaching Tripmaster Monkey from a larger race/ethnic perspective, one can more easily circumvent an oppressive essentialism that denies particularity—or, in Kingston’s terms, surgically alters eyelids and noses in order to fit repressive representations.

If, as her critics have argued, we can read Kingston’s text as a disruption of ethnic assumptions that problematizes our concep-
tions of what it means to be an American (not just a Chinese American), then we can also read it as a disruption of genre: one that challenges common expectations of representation so as to problematize any prescriptive or highly restrictive conceptions of literature. The question of what it means to be an American goes hand in hand with the question of how to define an American literature. Like other ethnic representations, constructions of genre can be used to restrict and limit inclusion in what is to be considered legitimate. As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued, genre formulation can be the means by which restrictive political boundaries are drawn. Certain genres have traditionally been conceived as male territory, thereby limiting or repressing the expression of female writers. The same may be said for genres in general. Certain genre types—including those of the short story, the novel, and those of poetry—have traditionally been seen as more "legitimate" forms of literature than others, such as diaries, memoir, and autobiography. What is more, many of these hierarchical assumptions hold even within particular "legitimized" types.

These distinctions, while on the surface a mere issue of semantic formality, can nonetheless take on tangible political consequences, both within and outside of the classroom. A text's academic exposure is determined largely by the ways in which its professional critical audience chooses to categorize it. Likewise, the ways in which a text is marketed can profoundly affect the size of its more popular readership. All of this is to say that by fixing a text to any one prescribed notion of genre, one is necessarily limiting the scope of that text's reception. Such distinctions, either overtly or not, are used in the formulations of literary and critical canons. By attempting to disrupt these assumptions with her hybridized "novel," Kingston puts into question our notions of both ethnic literature and American literature.

Most critics who look at Kingston's intermixture of literary genres have done so in terms of *The Woman Warrior*, a poetically volatile mix of memoir and fictional modes. But if one can problematize that text as woman's autobiography, then one can likewise hold up to question *Tripmaster Monkey* as a traditional novel. As its subtitle reveals, this novel is a fake book, a text of basic melodies that only hints at the direction of its accompani-
ment, leaving the way open for personal improvisations that transcend the written text (Kingston, Interview 175). Kingston herself explains that she is attempting to do something different that may be beyond the scope of what we think of as fiction: "I have to use and invent a beautiful, human, artistic language of peace. This has rarely been done. The shape of the novel and the short story is violent because we have violent confrontations—[then] a denouement where things explode" (Interview 173). This is similar to what Wittman yearns for in *Tripmaster Monkey*. He makes it a personal crusade to create for everyone a new type of theater, one that is not based on any form of war. "Whatever there is when there isn't war has to be invented. What do people do in peace? Peace has barely been thought" (306). The violent confrontations of his theater, the Gwan Goong story and the fire that sends everyone running out into the street, are all merely illusions created so as to highlight the dangers of real violence, the kind that mesmerizes both patriots and radicals behind a particular cause. This is the paradox of Wittman's transformation, and of Kingston's project: using established forms of expression in a way that will subvert or open up the forms. "Studying the mightiest war epic of all time, Wittman changed—beeen!—into a pacifist" (340).

Wittman sees himself as Sun Wu Kong, "the present day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys" (33), who can change into any one of his seventy-two transformations. He is a Protean character who, in his fight against cultural stereotyping, refuses to be fixed in any one form of representation. Even his physical appearance—shaggy hair and beard, Brooks Brothers three-piece navy-blue pinstripe suit, green shirt, and dark green tie with orange and silver covered wagons and frontier rifles—is a consciously-constructed multiplicity used to disrupt expectations, "an affront to anybody who looked at him, he hoped" (44). As a poet turned dramatist, he underscores the "fake" nature of the text: its ability to take a story (or stories) and improvise on it in a riff-like fashion that highlights a variety of genre "sounds." After Lance and Sunny's party, as he is sitting around with the leftover guests spinning out his story of Sun Wu Kong, Wittman thinks "whadayaknow, I've written one of those plays that leave room for actors to do improv, a process as ancient as Chinese opera and as far-out as the theater of spontaneity that was happening in streets
and parks. Everyone is a poet-actor adlibbing and winging it” (141).

Kingston’s improv(ed) text is filled with retellings and allusions to multi-genre texts, many of which are transformed when placed within the confines of her tale. The most apparent of these are the Chinese epic tales of The Water Margin, The Three Kingdoms, The Dream of the Red Chamber, and Journey to the West. Like classic epic tales, Wittman’s Gwan Goong stories take on a “flat” tone of surface action that ignores the more novelistic exploration of psychological determinacy. During these sections of the book, the reader can easily become lost in the story, momentarily unaware of the other narratives in which the epic is embedded. At the same time, Kingston subverts or reinvents the epic’s authenticity by placing it within an American context. Wittman describes the mood of his theater in terms of American pop culture: “The curtain for my play will be made out of tinsel... We’ll hang one of those junior-prom rotating mirror balls. Vegas nightclub floor-show glitz production values, but we’ll shoot for transcendence” (134-35). With his talk story of Tai Chung and the one hundred and eight outlaws, he is highly cognizant of its cinematic potential à la Cecil B. De Mille: “You could get rich taking the adventures of the Black Whirlwind [Li Kwai] to Hollywood” (257). What is more, Wittman takes the Chinese epic and attempts to purge it of any exoticism that may be used to marginalize both him and his artistic project. On the third night of his show, he debriefs his audience on the sheer Americanness of his epic play: “There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West. This is The Journey In the West” (308).

As with Chinese epics, Wittman also appropriates classic American narratives. For instance, at the end of “Linguists and Contenders,” Wittman is referred to as a Bartleby figure, but the more significant Melville reference comes earlier. Immediately after his first monkey transformation, where he literally scares Nanci from his apartment, he begins to speculate on the importance of author ethnicity. In a hyper and almost maniacal series of fantasies and allusions, he—or is it his now intrusive author?—suddenly tells the readers to “Stop the music,” which we could read here (in terms of this fake book’s genre “sounds” mentioned earlier) as a direct intervention into narrative expectation:
I have to butt in and introduce myself and my race. "Dear reader, all these characters whom you've been identifying with—Bill, Brooke, and Annie—are Chinese—and I am too." The fiction is spoiled. You who read have been suckered along, identifying like hell, only to find out that you'd been getting a peculiar, colored, slanted p.o.v. "Call me Ishmael." See? You pictured a white guy, didn't you? If Ishmael were described—ochery ecru amber umber skin—you picture a tan white guy. Wittman wanted to spoil all those stories coming out of and set in New England Back East—to blacken and to yellow Bill, Brooke, and Annie. A new rule for the imagination: The common man has Chinese looks. From now on, whenever you read about those people with no surnames, color them with black skin or yellow skin. Wittman made an end run, evaded the block. (34)

Here, Kingston/Wittman attempts to reinvent or at least reinterpret American identity. Wittman's "butting in," in essence, becomes an intrusive corrective to traditional literary assumptions. Or put another way, Kingston uses this authorial insertion to formulate a different set of standards from which to gage the native "authenticity" of her text. New England, typically considered the cradle of American literary culture, is now no more a point of origin than are Hong Kong or China. According to Wittman's "new rule of imagination," black and yellow faces are no longer marginalized presences relegated to the kitchen, the stables, or the laundry, but central actors in American life and in the American production of texts.

Furthermore, Wittman's choice of *Moby-Dick* is significant for several reasons. First, the novel can be considered America's first epic tale, thereby allowing Wittman to align his own project, the retelling of a Chinese epic, with that of Melville's. His intended theater of spontaneity, with a space for everyone and where everyone can be an actor-poet, is every bit as ambitious as any "great American novel." Second, this comparison foregrounds the transformative intentions of Wittman (and Kingston) to write a new theater/epic of peace. By reimagining Melville's novel, which ends in violent confrontation and alienation, and the great Chinese war epics, Wittman hopes to redefine literature in a more communal way. Yet perhaps most important, Kingston has chosen Melville because of his work's experimental importance. Much like her own book, *Moby-Dick* is a hybrid novel that meanders through
what seems like a disparate series of texts and textual references. Kingston could have easily taken other nineteenth-century texts as the subject of her reimagination, but none challenge or expand the boundaries of genre as does Melville’s text. What is more, it has been the works of Melville, along with those of Wittman’s poetic namesake, that have helped define an American literature. Both Melville and Walt Whitman were highly experimental writers who challenged the traditional concepts of their respective genres. By taking on, so to speak, these two now-canonized authors, Kingston is in turn attempting to challenge the boundaries of her genres so as to open up and redefine a more inclusive American canon.

The confining limits of any avant garde in Wittman Ah Sing’s own day is clearly evident in his reference to Jack Kerouac. On one level Wittman sees the King of the Beats as his aesthetic soul mate, the one who best articulates the independent and meandering nature of his 1960s existence. Walking down Market Street, Wittman thinks to himself, “Here I am among my familiars, yeah, like we’re Kerouac’s people, tripping along the street” (69). However, afterwards, as he recites Kerouac’s actual verse, he gets an entirely different impression of the literary renegade. Recalling the phrase, “the twinkling little Chinese,” Wittman snaps:

Shit. The “twinkling little Chinese” must be none other than himself. “Twinkling”? “Little”? Shit. Bumkicked again. If King Kerouac, King of the Beats, were walking here tonight, he’d see Wittman and think, “Twinkling little Chinese.” Refute “little.” Gainsay “twinkling.” A man does not twinkle. A man with balls is not little. As a matter of fact, Kerouac didn’t get “Chinese” right either. Big football player white all-American jock Kerouac. Jock Kerouac. I call into question your naming of me. I trust your sight no more. (69-70)

What professed to be an expression of anti-establishment sentiments turns out to be in reality nothing more than another apology for the status quo. “Jock Kerouac,” the white all-American poet, is trapped within the same master narratives from which he attempted to free himself. He exoticizes and romanticizes the “lonely young Negroes,” the “dark Puerto Ricans,” and the “twinkling little Chinese,” and by doing so marginalizes those very subjects with which he desires to identify.
Far from any act of liberation, Kerouac’s verse is an act of ethnic appropriation and exploitation that he uses to position himself as a solitary rebel. Wittman sees the emptiness and potential danger in this gesture of heading out “on the road.” Viewing the occupation film at the unemployment office, he voices what could well be another critique of Kerouac’s brand of rebellion: “An American stands alone. Alienated, tribeless, individual. To be a successful American, leave your tribe, your caravan, your gang, your partner, your village cousins, your refugee family that you’re making the money for, leave them behind” (246). Wittman wants nothing to do with this philosophy, for his reinvention of a new and interventionist art will be binding and participatory. As he states at one point, “We make theater, we make community” (261). Furthermore, this individual connectedness stands alongside Wittman’s ancestral connectedness, as demonstrated by his willingness to incorporate the form of Chinese epic tales into his own drama. As John Lowe points out, by the end of the novel, Wittman “has found a way not only to integrate his selves into a vital and productive dramatic dialogic, but also to forge this voice together with aspects of his personal and ethnic pasts” (“Monkey Kings” 123). Lowe sees this as a particularly postmodern move, and it is worth noting how similar his assessment is to hooks’s earlier-stated notion of a “radical postmodernism.”

Community-building lies at the heart of Wittman’s creative project, but it is not just any kind of community that he wants to construct. An essentially imposed community, one that defines him strictly in terms of his ethnicity or otherness, is something that he resists throughout the text. Likewise, a consumer-based community is equally problematic. Wittman’s first experience with a community in the text comes when he attends the Mattel sales rally, an event that leaves him ill at ease. “Everyone sang out together like a community” as they watch the Va-room cycle and the parade of Barbie models move across the floor, and Wittman finds this display repulsive. “Oh, god, I don’t belong on this planet” (62). For him, this is nothing less than a sanitized Nuremberg rally, with cute little boys dressed “in Nazi leather jackets and boots” (62) and Aryan-looking Barbie dolls in fishnet stockings strutting their stuff for the spectators. There is even a chant to bind and mesmerize the audience: “YOU CAN TELL—IT’S MAT-
TEL—IT’S SWELL” (61). In this form of community, spontaneous expression is nonexistent: identity is frozen and fetishized in the form of Malibu Barbie, and rebellion (the little boy on the cycle looks like Brando in _The Wild One_) is commodified into an antiseptic and nonthreatening form.

By contrast, Wittman’s idea of community is based on a purposefully ill-defined concept of literary genre. Unlike the fine-tuned and fascistic gatherings at the Mattel rally—a performance that is both comically frightening and leaves little in the way of individual expression—Wittman’s concept of community and performance is inclusive, uniting, and not fixed in one form, space, or time: “Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. . . . He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create” (306). This can be read as Kingston’s artistic credo, where not only ethnic identity, but also American literary identity, must be constantly renegotiated and redefined so as to allow for new and self-empowering forms of expression. What is more, this credo is presented in a literary work that refuses to be pigeonholed and challenges its readers to transcend their traditional notions of genre. Both its content—the ongoing references to poetry, dramatic performance, and fictional prose—and its very form (is it a novel? inspired essay? the text of a performance artist?) constantly draw our attention to the problems of unequivocally categorizing, once and for all, the creative product in terms of genre expectations. And, if the creation says everything about its creator, then Kingston is certainly warning us against fixing our notions of identity, ethnic or otherwise.

Since in many ways _Tripmaster Monkey_ works well within the American comedic tradition (yet another genre), it would be appropriate in this context to return to Woody Allen’s moose story. After all, every good joke needs an effective punch line. Allen tells us that while locked in battle, both moose are knocked unconscious. Seeing this as his opportunity, he grabs what he believes to be the real moose, straps it back onto his bumper, and drives it back out to the woods where he originally found it. But, he finds out later, he had grabbed the wrong moose. “The following morning, the Berkowitzes wake up in the woods—in a moose suit. Mr.
Berkowitz is shot, stuffed, and mounted at the New York Athletic Club. And the joke is on them [the club members] because it is restricted.” Like Berkowitz, Wittman Ah Sing is an ethnic other in disguise—in this case as a monkey—who through fantastical means, finds himself confronting the club of a dominant and repressive ideology, aware of the carefully constructed walls that surround him, and trying to place his own story alongside that of his fellow immigrants, the sons and daughters of the *Mayflower*. By giving us a hybrid American character within the pages of a hybrid text, Kingston has attempted to write her way into America on the very terms that resist stereotypical notions of ethnic representation.

**Notes**

1. Although it is not the purpose of this study to focus on *Tripmaster Monkey* solely as an example of ethnic humor—comedy, stand-up or otherwise, is just one generic component of the “novel”—it is important to note the function of comedy as boundary-defining, or even boundary-denying. As such, a study of the various uses of humor becomes central for many scholars of American ethnic writings. (Readers familiar with *MELUS* will remember that its Winter 1996 issue was devoted entirely to ethnic humor.) One of the most distinguished critics in this field, John Lowe, highlights the significance of humor in the “Americanization” process as “part of the forced grafting of ethnic symbolism onto preexisting American mythology” (“Theories” 456). He notes elsewhere the power of ethnic joking in *Tripmaster Monkey*, especially as it takes on stereotypical assumptions, in linguistically demarcating insider and outsider status within Asian American communities (“Monkey Kings” 118-20). What is important to note here within the context of my essay is that comedy, much like the blurring of genre boundaries itself, is a way of realigning social as well as literary expectations. Kingston, in a humorous text that thematically questions the specificity of genre, encourages her readers to reevaluate the makeup of the American canon and to see it as a vast body of writing that is more ethnically varied, and generically fluid, than most syllabi would have us believe.

2. Those familiar with Kingston’s work will certainly notice the author’s penchant for problematizing generic boundaries. An unambiguous or “straightforward” reading of her first two works, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, would situate them as memoirs, making *Tripmaster Monkey* her first “real” novel. However, anyone who has taught the first books knows how easy it is for students (not to mention their instructor) to slip into novelistic assumptions and inadvertently discuss those texts as fictions. The fabulistic tone found in much of *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, clearly invites such readings. *Tripmaster Monkey* continues this tendency by integrating genre-bending into its thematic
fabric. What is more, her most recent work, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, clearly integrates memoir and fictional forms. While much of it concerns the author's attempts to understand the loss of her home and novel-in-progress—a continuation of Wittman Ah Sing's story—in the 1991 fires in Oakland, California, it also contains the author's reconstruction of that lost text.

3. In her discussion of gender and genre, Friedman presents Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as two women who attempted to break out of the traditionally "feminine" confines of the lyric and redefine the more masculine epic form, and did so in ways that both complied with and radically deviated from the accepted modes (206).

4. I am thinking here of certain hybridized forms of literature that are difficult, if not impossible, to categorize within one particular genre. Taking Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* as an example, one may find the text unwelcome on syllabi narrowly focused on either fiction or poetry. The same can be said of Philip Roth's *Patrimony: A True Story*—or even the mischief-making *Operation Shylock: A Confession*—in terms of fiction and autobiography. For a discussion of the latter within the context of genre bending, see my essay, "Texts, Lives, and Bellybuttons."

5. It is interesting to notice the change in marketing strategies that took place at Knopf in the wake of Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize and the writer's subsequent appropriation by Oprah Winfrey and her book club. For a fascinating study of this phenomenon, see Young's look at Oprah and her effects on the literary marketplace. While this, I admit, is in many ways not the best example—Morrison did have a substantial readership outside of the professional critical community prior to her award and Oprah—it nonetheless serves as a speculative commentary on the market forces at work in textual production. Many writers, especially those whose works do not fall within any specified categories, fail to make it past an acquisition editor, much less a marketing meeting.

6. As previously noted, Kingston's entire body of work, not just *The Woman Warrior*, can be read as a renegotiation, or a reevaluation, of traditional generic distinctions.

7. And from a writer who blurs the boundaries between genres, such as those between fiction and memoir, should such a question really matter?

Works Cited


Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett


