

Songs of Ourselves: The Immigrant American City and Whitmanian Modernism in
Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*

by

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(I have a superstition that as long as I,
any writer, have things to write, I keep living.)
—Maxine Hong Kingston, *I Love a Broad
Margin to My Life*

You will hardly know who I am, or what I mean;
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged;
Missing me one place, search another;
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

Introduction: Witt/Whitman

The figure of Walt Whitman skirts the margins and street corners of the city in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*; shapeshifting, vaporous and beckoning, Whitman walks in out of view, stopping somewhere, “waiting for you.” Our glimpses of him recall his obsession with emergent photographic technologies and his self-fashioning as a literary personality through his daguerreotypes and portraits. “I have been photographed to confusion... I’ve been taken and taken beyond count,” he once noted, stumbling on images of himself he had forgotten about.¹ In duly Whitmanesque speech, he quips, “I meet new Walt Whitmans every day. There are a dozen of me afloat. I don’t know which Walt Whitman I am.” Maxine Hong Kingston’s protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, is yet another iteration of the American bard, reframed and distorted to confusion. Transplanted from New York to San Francisco in the reincarnation of fifth-generation Chinese American Wittman Ah Sing, Kingston’s portrait is closer to a superimposition. In this

¹ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1906), 45.

novel published in 1989, we find a double-exposure more than a century after-the-fact. As such, we might do best to heed Whitman's caution, "It is hard to extract a man's real self—any man—from such a chaotic mass—from such historic debris."²

Walt Whitman's likeness remains not just historic debris, but an omnipresent intertext loafing, tramping, singing throughout Kingston's oeuvre. In her 2011 memoir-in-verse, Kingston returned to the figure of Whitman *qua* Wittman Ah Sing, contributing another palimpsestic layer to her store of Whitmanesque figures. However, *I Love a Broad Margin To My Life* begins with a portrait of Kingston herself:

I am stretching head and neck toward
the light, such effort to lift the head, to open
the eyes. Black, shiny, lashless eyes.
Talking mouth. I must utter you
something.³

This is a practice of reverse ekphrasis. Kingston describes not the image that results from this portrait session, but the act of posing, of catching the light at sixty-five years old. It strikes the reader as an image of a birth—an emergence followed by a struggle for utterance—as much as a depiction of a Tiresias-like figure unbound by time, unseeing yet all-seeing and oracular. As in her other works, which explore tensions between preservation, mythmaking, and the oral tradition of "talk-stories," Kingston here poses the question of how we remember. How do you write, speak, or "image" yourself back into an American history of your own erasure?

Consider Andrew J. Russell's famed 1869 ceremonial photograph of laborers atop the completed First Transcontinental Railroad. Though overflowing with the figures of dozens of

² Ibid., 108.

³ Maxine Hong Kingston, *I Love a Broad Margin To My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 5.



Figure 1: “East and West Shaking Hands at Laying Last Rail,” photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1869

men, the snapshot is haunted by absence. The 15,000 Chinese immigrants who built the railroad, 90 percent of the workforce on the Central Pacific line, are conspicuously missing from the photographic record of “the wedding of the rails.”⁴ Kingston writes of her grandfather’s labor on the railroad and his disappearance following its completion: “While white demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs.”⁵ Here, she destabilizes photography as a medium aligned with history, one purporting to contain and reflect reality. The photograph, an emblem of a moment captured, is animated to exceed the borders of its own frame in Kingston’s works—where images and settings morph and disappear before our eyes. In the author’s spatial imagination, history is thus given free rein to appear and overwrite the experience of the past and the present.

⁴ Karen Zraick, “Chinese Railroad Workers Were Almost Written Out of History. Now They’re Getting Their Due,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2019.

⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 143.

The moment captured in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Kingston's first and only novel, is a fittingly anachronistic 1960s. According to the preface, it is "a time when some events appeared to occur months or even years anachronistically." Wittman Ah Sing, his very name conjuring a sinofied transliteration of Whitman and his "I sing myself," is *Tripmaster Monkey*'s Berkeley-graduate "Chinese Beatnik" protagonist, steeped in literary history, with a tongue-in-cheek irreverence lapsing into stubborn sincerity, and, above all, with the vision of becoming a poet-playwright.⁶ He traverses the geography of San Francisco—between side trips to Berkeley, Sacramento, and Reno—with an impressionistic eye, at once facetiously considering suicide via the Golden Gate Bridge, before impulsively marrying in Coit Tower to avoid the draft. Peppered with asides and monologues, Wittman's story is told in "disjointed and episodic form" as he maps out the city before us in hallucinatory prose.⁷

The city also takes on a mythic and global charge. Wittman gradually inhabits the persona of Sun Wukong, monkey king of the sixteenth-century Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West*. The plot, subordinate to Wittman's musings and interiority, is succinctly described by critic Julia H. Lee: Wittman spends his days "strategizing ways to avoid the draft, wooing and raging at various women, attending parties, visiting his parents and 'aunties', and trying to collect unemployment benefits."⁸ Throughout, he self-consciously performs and masquerades, lapsing into moments of self-revelation, and perpetually blurring the lines of what constitutes an authentic self in his freewheeling stream-of-consciousness. Wittman might as well tease us with the words of his eponym: *You will hardly know who I am, or what I mean*. Yet we can be fairly certain of what he *does* as he interacts with the city.

⁶ Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (New York: Vintage Books USA, 1990), 82.

⁷ Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

Channeling Walt Whitman's ethos, Wittman Ah Sing becomes obsessed with constructing a democratic, utopian community. He hopes to do so through the staging of an epic play of his own reconstructed version of *Journey to the West* in San Francisco's Chinatown. The play is to feature all the characters to whom we have been introduced in the novel, and "everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place."⁹ This, he fantasizes, is what might solidify his identity as "the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America."¹⁰ Walt Whitman's presence, even as he ducks out of view, remains steadfast in *Tripmaster Monkey*—through the thematic concern with democratic community, and through his namesake and other direct allusions, such as the novel's chapter titles. But elsewhere, other specters of American modernism and bohemia, rooted in the Whitmanian tradition, also dance between the lines. The novel opens with an invocation of Hemingway's suicide, and is punctuated throughout with allusions to beat poets.

Tripmaster Monkey begins with a view of the city from the vantage of Wittman's frenzied subjectivity. Breathlessly, the narrator tells us, "Maybe it comes from living in San Francisco, city of clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn—omen, o-o-men, o dolorous omen, o dolors of omens—and not enough sun, but Wittman Ah Sing considered suicide every day."¹¹ Beneath such bleak suggestions—a foggy atmosphere of self-destruction mapped onto the city through the wry observation that "anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate"—lies a more lively impulse. Wittman concurrently demonstrates his pleasure in the musicality, play, and malleability of language. San Francisco's noisy "omen" transforms into a call prefaced by the poetic "O." A mere one letter separates this exclamatory

⁹ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

address from Walt Whitman's "O Me! O Life!," in which the American bard faces the same existential doubts as Wittman Ah Sing at *Tripmaster*'s outset. Whitman's "questions of these recurring....of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish" and "of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me," amounts to his final question: "What good amid these, O me, O life?" His "*Answer*"? "That you are here.... And you may contribute a verse."¹² *Tripmaster Monkey*, from its first sentence, plants this seed of Wittman Ah Sing's reckoning and renewal. He will attempt to forge his own "*Answer*" to the question of living.

Kingston heeds Walt Whitman's call to contribute her own verse, yet revises his meanings. Her o-o-men shifts the emphasis from the individual pronoun to the question of collectivity. "O-o-men" also bestows on the land its own voice, suggesting the myriad ways in which the city calls out, rapturously and yearningly, to its inhabitants. Listeners are free to interpret these calls fluidly. Yet "dolorous" elides into "dolors," a homophone suggesting that Wittman's woes have as much to do with the material flows of the city as they do with "not enough sun." As though we needed more confirmation that Wittman considers himself an inheritor of the modernist literary tradition, he remarks, "Hemingway had done it in the mouth."¹³ But rest assured, Kingston's narrator notes, "he was not making plans to do himself in, and no more willed these seppuku movies—no more conjured up that gun—than built this city."¹⁴ Still, he imagines himself apart from those who face land and "the City" as they fall to their deaths and vows that instead, "Wittman would face the sea."¹⁵ The influence of Hemingway, as a figure associated with the anti-social and self-destructive strain of modernism, is here eschewed in favor of Walt Whitman's exuberant modernism. His is the more visionary,

¹² Walt Whitman, "O Me! O Life!," Poetry Foundation, Accessed May 7, 2022.

¹³ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

ocean-facing and expansive imagination. But Wittman Ah Sing and his death drive fantasies are first positioned as external to, and facing away from, the actual space of the city. His engagement with space seems to take place solely in the sprawl of his imagination, which latches onto and creates pastiches of images as ostensibly haphazard as the connection between Hemingway's death, the Buddhist Quang Duc's spectacle of self-immolation, and a fancy about Laurence Olivier's Hamlet throwing himself off the Golden Gate. How, then, does Wittman interact with the city itself?

In this essay, I will trace how the ghostly presences of Walt Whitman, American bohemia, and literary modernism are mapped onto the novel's exploration of spatiality. These traces provide an entry point into the novel's embodied and phenomenological urban imagination within the modern, immigrant city. Kingston's novel constructs a space haunted by the past, a nation and city of immigrants where F.O.B.s (fresh-off-boats, derogatorily so-called) drift as spectral figures, nameless and searching. Yet as Wittman traipses physical and psychic geographies, *Tripmaster Monkey* begins to construct a third space where the two are collapsed. This is the labyrinth, the trip, through which we are guided by a tripmaster: Here be dragons, Wittman warns as he meanders through streets and neighborhoods and drives along California coastlines. Under the broader cartography of Kingston's novel, from time to time, her narrator interjects moments of stark lucidity within the oneiric prose. What results is a space for a democratic experiment reminiscent of the ethos of *Leaves of Grass*, yet reimagined in the mid twentieth-century with the Asian American community and its complex history thrust onto center stage.

Even the language of *Tripmaster Monkey* “bounces, caroms and collides; abrades and inflames.”¹⁶ Part of this collision arises from Kingston’s vision and revision of modernist ideals and language, brought to bear upon different times and spaces—specifically, the Asian American community of the 1960s Bay Area. Given the whirling narrative motion of Kingston’s novel, and in particular of Wittman Ah Sing’s “trips” through the city and beyond, I chart here a “roadmap” guiding this paper’s navigation of Kingston’s relationship with Walt Whitman and American modernism. I will first trace the genealogical connection between Whitman and American modernism, contending that by positioning Whitman and Kingston as modernists *avant* and *après la lettre* respectively, modernism need not be a temporally-bound and rigid category. What is at stake in this discussion is nothing less than a reorientation toward a newly assembled American canon.

I will then discuss how Kingston’s work has been read by critics, paying special attention to her biography and to the era’s fledgling debates among critics and writers over what constitutes an “Asian American” identity and literature. As I will demonstrate, much of this debate circles around questions regarding the histories and literary lineages with which Kingston engages and which she ultimately seeks to appropriate and revise. Focusing on what has been neglected in the existing scholarship of Walt Whitman’s presence in Kingston’s work, I explore the ways in which their shared modernist bent is revealed by their movements through physical space and the urban scene as well as their experiments with literary form. Both aim to construct new modes of speech and new modes of engagement with community and spatiality in the immigrant American city.

¹⁶ John Leonard, “Of Thee Ah Sing,” *The Nation* 248 (1989): 768.

Moving then to the text of *Tripmaster Monkey*, I outline Wittman Ah Sing's shift from alienation in the city to a utopian vision of shared space—informed by the spirit of *Leaves of Grass*—in which Wittman Ah Sing finally becomes a part of the city. My first section begins by detailing his psychology of exclusion and his visually oriented epistemology, in which he subjects other city denizens to his scopophilic and antisocial gaze. Yet within Wittman's ambivalent explorations of space, his retreats into literature invite him to imagine more utopian spaces for democracy and urban kinship within the Asian American community and the immigrant American city at large. I examine how this paradox of the slippery co-existence of alienation and community, and of the self's interiority and the external world, is modeled in the Whitmanian bohemian roots claimed by Wittman Ah Sing.

In the second portion of my treatment of *Tripmaster Monkey*, I consider Wittman's movement into a more embodied and multi-sensual relationship with the city space and its communities. In the spirit of viewing the twentieth century as “an epoch of space,” I introduce the spatial theories of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau as other models for examining the novel's delineation of the limitations and possibilities of subverting urban mechanisms of alienation.¹⁷ Wittman's varied attempts to center the marginal spaces of the city can be characterized as a “heterotopic” endeavor, relating to Foucault's “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹⁸ Although the Foucauldian framework circumscribes heterotopia as serving a largely disciplinary function, the trajectory of Kingston's novel aligns with de Certeau's more utopian discussions of the pedestrian individual's potential for disrupting the spatial order—an image that resonates with Walt

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (1986).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Whitman's pragmatic, utopian modernism. As Wittman Ah Sing begins to perform his own mythic and hybridized city in the final epic play, staged in Chinatown, he casts a slew of actors each with crucial roles in the formation (and negotiation) of the spatial, narrative, and social fabric at work.

As the roadmap's final stop, I will consider Kingston's memoir-in-verse, alongside her questions of textual form, as her own performance of the interplay between psychic and physical spaces. Furthermore, I examine this memoir as part of Kingston's ongoing reckoning with writing herself into American history, and into the "photograph" documenting the modernist genealogy.

“Let there be commerce between us”: Walt Whitman’s Modernism

Central to my argument is the notion that modernism is more than a temporal category. Ezra Pound’s dictum “make it new,” a guiding ethos of modernism, itself suggests the temporal conundrums of modernism as a nexus of literary movement, style, and attitude: what characterizes the *new*? And what is the original *it*? Walt Whitman might be recognized as both the object of revision (the *it*) and the *maker* in this framework, depending on the temporal lens through which we view him—either as poet of his contemporary context, self-consciously making new the formal and cultural geography of American poetry, or as the model from which later modernists departed. Ezra Pound seemed to regard him as both. In a 1909 manuscript appropriately titled “What I Feel About Walt Whitman,” Pound, foremost curator, editor, and entrepreneur of an American strain of literary modernism, recognizes Whitman as a “spiritual father.”¹⁹ It is his “crudity” or pure creative impulse—in Whitman’s words, his “barbaric yawp”—which earns Whitman his position as “America’s poet.... He *is* America.”²⁰ Despite evident disgust toward Whitman’s expansive and decidedly non-imagist style, Pound concedes, “I honour him for he prophesied me while I can only recognise him as a forebear of whom I ought to be proud.”²¹ Whitman’s relationship with Pound is characterized as multidirectional, so that while the former “prophesies” modernism, the latter also illuminates and revises his forebear’s work and transforms his spiritual father into a modernist. So, what is modernism if it is not just time-bound?

¹⁹ Herbert Bergman, “Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman,” *American Literature* 27, no. 1 (1955): 145.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Pound integrates his ideas on Whitman into verse in “A Pact,” a single-stanza poem in which he writes of his initial disavowal followed by his ultimate embrace of Whitman as a literary presence in his conceptualization of modernism:

I make truce with you, Walt Whitman—
I have detested you long enough....
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.²²

Through his use of free verse, Pound pays homage to Whitman’s poetics by absorbing his forebear’s work into his own formal vision of economical, modernist imagism. And Pound’s “economical” attention to language here deserves further attention. His word choice of “commerce” signals the poem’s migration from the natural imagery of wood, sap, and root—associated with Whitman’s “crudity” and rawness—into the polyvalent qualities of “commerce.” On the one hand, commerce refers to the idea of union, and a sense of productive exchange or fecundity. Yet, derived from the Latin “commercium” with com- meaning “together” and -mercium suggesting “merchandise,” the word also calls to mind trade and monetary exchange. In this shift of the poem’s tenor, Pound suggests Whitman’s “prophesying” of the modern world of urban capitalism, with the commercial activity of urban sites replacing the wood, and steel taking root in its stead.

As Pound expresses in both his prose and poetry, Whitman’s work and persona thus anticipates the modernist turn of American literature. Reading Whitman’s work as modernist itself opens up the category beyond its temporal constraints, and suggests that it is, among many things, an artistic reaction to the urban scene—including a brand of avant-garde bohemianism

²² Ezra Pound, “A Pact,” Poets.org, Accessed May 7, 2022. <https://poets.org/poem/pact-1>.

later taken up by intellectual disciples such as the beat poets—as well as an attempt to forge new languages and modes of expression. Furthermore, Whitman’s modernism proposes alternate formulations, explanations, and solutions for the alienation of modern American life to open up the possibility of inclusion and democratic community.

We might contextualize Whitman’s modernism and his literary lineage within modernist posterity through Pound’s essay “Patria Mia,” a treatise on the contemporary state and future of American arts and letters. The primary object of study is the city itself, regarded as the first sign of the modern impulse in the U.S., where other arts lag behind. Writing in 1913, Pound observes the lively masses of New York City as “a crowd pagan as ever imperial Rome was, eager, careless, with an animal vigour.”²³ In characteristic modernist style, allusions to the mythic and historical animate the present and future. Pound transposes this temporal overlap onto the topos of urban space, noting that architecture heralds the potential beginning of an American rebirth or “Renaissance,” and the skyscrapers of the city are “our first sign of the ‘alba’; of America, the nation, in the embryo of New York. The city has put forth its own expression.”²⁴ New York’s urban setting, figured as a gestational space for this Renaissance, becomes home to America’s creative and generative impulses. The city also becomes the speaker of its poem. At night, glittering skyscrapers announce, “Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.”²⁵

Thus, while architecture’s “sign” stands in for poetry as the only original spectacle of the creative impulse, America’s literature suffers a lack of originality pervading both the arts and everyday conversation: “Pin an American down on any fundamental issue you like, and you get

²³ Ezra Pound, *Patria Mia and The Treatise on Harmony* (London: Peter Owen LTD, 1985), 104.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 107.

at his last gasp—a quotation.”²⁶ Pound chastises “post-Whitmanians” for quoting and imitating the poet, whom he regards in contrast as the “first honest reflex” of American art. Whitman, embodying an uncouth, rustic American poet who incorporates slang and speech into his unrestrained poetics, exists in the very atmosphere Americans breathe: “Whitman established the national *timbre*. One may not need him at home. It is in the air, this tonic of his. But if one is abroad; if one is ever likely to forget one’s birth-right, to lose faith, being surrounded by disparagers, one can find, in Whitman, the reassurance.”²⁷

But what if an American finds herself “abroad” while at home? How might Maxine Hong Kingston’s work, in which she mixes Chinese texts and mythology with American literary tradition, provide a counterpoint to Pound’s claim that “one may not need [Whitman] at home?” A modernist who lacks the same privileges by virtue of her race and gender, furthermore in a different time and context—positioned as marginal in American geography and literature—will indeed have a different relationship to Whitman. Kingston’s relationship to the quintessential American poet is one that amounts to productive resonances and dissonances in her interruption of Whitman’s “national *timbre*.”

Still, Pound’s emphasis on the “crudity” and liveliness of Whitman’s modernism rhymes with the immigrant experience of the immigrant city, foregrounding the transformations of non-native language and hybridized English. Similarly to Pound, Kingston is aware of the ways in which Whitman’s radical uses of language “prophesied” her writing. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing seeks to “reclaim” the language of his ancestors by highlighting its creative impulse as a linguistic practice that is living, and perpetually in process. He self-consciously pronounces English words to himself “in Chinatown language,” drawing out the syllables and

²⁶ Ibid., 102.

²⁷ Ibid., 124.

jokingly noting, “just to keep a hand in.... to remember and so to keep awhile longer words spoken by the people of his brief and dying culture.”²⁸ Wittman Ah Sing embodies Walt Whitman’s linguistic boldness and excess, and his use of language channels Whitman’s assertion: “I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”²⁹ How does Kingston’s own “barbaric yawp” work to incorporate the heterogeneous strands of her “Chinatown language” as well as of the American modernist tradition represented by Whitman? Kingston’s translations and mistranslations of these languages and their fluid localities set the stage for *Tripmaster Monkey*’s frenetic urban imagination. She depicts San Francisco as an immigrant city through the eyes—and embodied senses—of a figure whose preoccupation with forging a new future must first make inroads in the language of the past.

²⁸ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 6.

²⁹ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass*, 85.

More than a “gentle mockery”: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Modernism

Teasing out the implications of Maxine Hong Kingston’s views on the expansive possibilities of Asian American literature and political expression, Josephine Park notes that “Kingston unsealed the literary past that ethnic nationalists rejected: she has foregrounded her debt to high modernism and framed her work as a continuation of this lineage.”³⁰ In response to critics of *The Woman Warrior*, who denigrated Kingston’s first book for its lack of authenticity and historical accuracy, Kingston has countered, “after all, I’m not writing history or sociology but a ‘memoir’ like Proust.”³¹ Her quotations around “memoir” speak to her critics’ inability to place her works in generic formulas, distancing herself from tried and true creative modes just as other modernists have sought to do. Kingston’s relationship to modernism therefore deserves greater attention, particularly in the context of her concern with forging new, hybridized languages and modes of expression.

Kingston has cited Walt Whitman, along with the modernism of William Carlos Williams and Virginia Woolf, as a major influence on her work. *Tripmaster* is also a *Künstlerroman* in the same vein as Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*. According to Kingston, the body-shifting and time-crossing literary strategies of Woolf’s *Orlando* and Williams’s *In the American Grain* “make me feel that I can now write as a man.... as a black person, as a white person; I don’t have to be restricted to time and physicality.”³² In the same 1991 interview, Kingston described her interest in the peculiar textures, rhythms, and turns of Whitman’s “American language”:

³⁰ Josephine Park, *Apparitions of Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 125.

³¹ Maxine Hong Kingston in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 64.

³² Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Maxine Hong Kingston, “Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston,” *American Literary History* 3 (1991): 785.

I like the freedom that Walt Whitman was using to play with and shape the American language. Especially in writing *Tripmaster Monkey*—I just lifted lines from *Leaves of Grass*. You would think they were modern sixties’ slang—“Trippers and Askers” and “Linguists and Contenders Surround Me”... I like the rhythm of his language and the freedom and the wildness of it. It’s so American. And also his vision of a new kind of human being that was going to be formed in this country—although he never specifically said Chinese... I’d like to think he meant all kinds of people. And also I love that throughout *Leaves of Grass* he always says ‘men and women, “male and female.” He’s so different from other writers of his time, and even of this time.³³

Kingston here echoes the perception of Whitman as an artist whose work has shaped American literature and language itself, and has even been reincarnated in the lively, erratic slang of the 1960s. She conceives of Whitman, carrying his poetics of inclusion, as a sort of time-traveling figure. In this sense, the open road he travels is not only the intertextual network of literature responding to his work throughout the years, but also that of everyday language and speech.

This sentiment of Whitman’s enduring, traveling influence embeds itself formally in Kingston’s literary work, as well as in the dialogue and speech within her works. Her descriptions of Whitman—although more laudatory—echo Ezra Pound’s eventual embrace of Whitman as a forebear of American modernism. In fact, Ezra Pound responds similarly to the allure of Whitman’s rhythmic singularity: “when I write of certain things I find myself using his rhythms.”³⁴ Thus, Whitman’s rhythms have patterned the American public imagination, from high modernism, to popular literature and speech. As Whitman wrote in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.”³⁵ Where do we place Kingston’s works, which consciously speak back to Whitman and test the limits and margins of his poetics of inclusion, within this trajectory?

³³ Ibid., 784.

³⁴ Herbert Bergman, “Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman,” 60.

³⁵ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 24.

Critics have briefly noted Whitman's presence in Kingston's writing, but often superficially or only to register a literary lineage. Furthermore, much of this scholarship lingers on questions of representation, considering what Whitman's presence signals and "means," rather than any stylistic affinities. Thus, few critics have adequately considered the authors' shared techniques, styles, and formal preoccupations. When Kingston published her memoir-in-verse, *I Love A Broad Margin to My Life*, the work was widely compared to Whitman's free verse. This publication invites us to revisit the question of Whitman as a major influence, and to work toward parsing the complicated turns of Kingston's relationship with Whitman. I turn now to existing scholarship on this subject as a means of both framing my argument and suggesting other avenues for thinking about the centuries-spanning literary dialogue between Kingston and Whitman.

Cyrus Patell argues that, by invoking Whitman in the name of her Chinese American protagonist, Kingston is both "tipping her hat to the great poet of American individualism and gently mocking him."³⁶ Wittman Ah Sing wishes to become "another Whitman—a Great American Artist—but finds that first he must disengage himself from the subordinate place that US culture has made for him on the basis of his ethnicity."³⁷ Placing Kingston on a continuum with other emergent literary movements, Patell contends that she "dramatize[s] the problem faced by all US minority cultures: how to transform themselves from marginalized cultures, often regarded as 'foreign' or 'un-American,' into *emergent* cultures capable of challenging and reshaping the US mainstream."³⁸

³⁶ Cyrus Patell, "Representing Emergent Literatures," *American Literary History* 15 (2003): 62.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

It is within this spirit of tracing “emergent” impulses and cultural and literary formations that I would like to situate this paper, attending to the ways in which Kingston works to reshape and stake her claim to real estate in American literature. Yet diverging from Patell, I consider the possibility that Whitman’s appearance in *Tripmaster Monkey* is something more than a “gentle mockery” of the poet. Indeed, there seems to be little gentleness in Kingston’s approach of boldly reincarnating and interrogating Whitman’s persona—all the while teasing out the utopian possibilities of transferring his ethos to twentieth-century Chinese America. “My name is Wittman Ah Sing, but you may call me Bold,” Wittman declares at the outset, channeling Walt Whitman’s advice to young poets “Be bold! Be bold! Be not *too* damn bold.”³⁹

How might we read *Tripmaster Monkey* as a possible stage for the reincarnation of Whitman (and his poetics of democracy) in a new and revised self, style, and time? How does Kingston construct something like a transcendent afterlife for Whitman—in a Chinese American body—where his work can be opened up and translated toward a new vision? And how does such a re-making of a canonical American poet paradoxically destabilize the canon while also drawing attention to Kingston’s own influences and her place within a canon of major American writers? Investigating Kingston’s project of “making it new” helps to reorient us toward her own modernist bona fides, and to see around the massive critical attention that has been devoted to the postmodern historiography on display in much of her work.

In the same vein as Patell, Julia Lee argues that *Tripmaster Monkey* can be read as both a celebration of Walt Whitman’s place as Great American Poet and a reckoning with the racial and gender privileges that afforded him the opportunity to arrive at such a place. Since Kingston’s “citations [of Whitman] are never ‘straight’” as she stretches and satirizes many of his poetic

³⁹ James Tanner, “Walt Whitman's Presence in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*: His Fake Book,” *Melus* 20 (1995): 63.

ideals, Lee claims that the American bard “is not the guiding spirit of *Tripmaster Monkey* so much as the embodiment of all that America seems to offer but never actually proffers to Chinese American men.”⁴⁰ Ignoring Kingston’s own discussions of Whitman’s influence, Lee suggests that at its heart, *Tripmaster Monkey* struggles with the “agonized relationship between Chinese Americans and poetic expression—that given the erasure of Chinese Americans historically and the materially difficult conditions under which they lived for decades, there can be no Chinese American Whitman.”⁴¹ While Wittman’s relationship to poetic expression is indeed fraught in a material sense, and even in a psychic sense as he struggles to piece together an identity, the pleasure Wittman takes in his creative ventures signals a sense of exploratory and linguistic play more so than an “agonized” relationship to a literary precursor.

Moreover, regarding Wittman Ah Sing as Kingston’s intentionally failed attempt at a “straight” embodiment of a “Chinese American Whitman” cannot sufficiently account for the ways in which Kingston succeeds in conjuring Whitman as a “guiding spirit” of the work. Ironically, in Lee’s treatment of “a text that consciously attempts to situate itself within both American and Chinese literary traditions and Wittman Ah Sing as an embodiment of a resistant Asian American political consciousness,” she downplays the significance of Kingston’s appropriation of the American bard.⁴² Between the novel’s explicit references to and invocations of Whitman, it is on the level of her language and her treatment of space that Kingston sustains the sense of Whitman’s presence ever at walking distance.

James T.F. Tanner regards Whitman as a more significant intertextual presence in *Tripmaster Monkey* and has traced the novel’s “Whitmanian content” via character analysis, the

⁴⁰ Lee, *Understanding*, 65.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 63.

allusions of chapter titles, and the thematic trajectory of Wittman Ah Sing's democratic community. Taking into account the novel's bombardment of allusions and intertexts, and the references to personalities and poets like Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder, Burroughs, Baldwin and Steinbeck, Tanner notes that it is "the Whitmanian tradition in American literature, and not merely Walt Whitman himself or *Leaves of Grass* alone, that predominates."⁴³ Like Whitman and his intellectual disciples, "[Kingston] is concerned with the construction of two entities, the self and the community, the requirement in a democratic society that the individual have proper scope for development and that the community have means for furthering social goals."⁴⁴ Indeed, Wittman Ah Sing's song of himself gradually turns into a polyphonic chorus toward the end of the novel in the final staging of his epic play. Similarly to Tanner, I take into consideration this trajectory as a nod to the poetics and politics of Whitman's vision of democratic inclusion, in which the emphasis is on "the glory of the commonplace."⁴⁵

Yet while Tanner teases out the narrative and textual resonances between the trajectory of *Tripmaster Monkey* and the poetics of *Leaves of Grass*, he pays little attention to the authors' shared spatial and urban imaginations of a bohemian world. He begins to hint at this by noting that Wittman Ah Sing's trips through the city respond to Whitman's invitation that "the open road is a quest for individual freedom and for a sense of community," but stops there.⁴⁶ Furthermore, written in 1995, Tanner's essay could not yet have benefitted from a consideration of Kingston's Whitmanesque free-verse memoir, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. Moving beyond Tanner's textual and intertextual narrative analyses, I also outline the contextual and historical implications of the Kingston-Whitman dialogue in the following section. Here, I will

⁴³ Tanner, "Walt Whitman's Presence," 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66.

bring into conversation the authors' dialogue with Kingston's biography, and with debates over Asian American literature's claims to artistic traditions entangled with poetics and politics of exclusion.

“Inheritance of talk story”: Kingston’s (In)authenticity

In her book-length study of Maxine Hong Kingston’s literary career, Julia Lee remarks at its outset that Kingston’s oeuvre has been “defined by her attempts to write down the ‘huge inheritance of talk story’ that her ancestors have passed down from one family member to the next, from one generation to another.”⁴⁷ In seminal works like *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), Kingston records and reimagines Chinese legends, familial mythologies and oral histories, allowing her to narrativize her own experiences growing up in Stockton, California’s Chinatown among other families transplanted from China. As important as what is told in her family’s stories is what is left untold: the gaps in which Kingston finds her literary and fictionalizing stride. Yet Kingston’s works also attend to the relics and remnants of American anti-Chinese exclusion and racism which have shaped her own and many others’ diasporic family histories.

Maxine Ting Ting Hong was born in Stockton in 1940 to Tom and Ying Lan Hong. “The ancestral ground,” as Stockton was nicknamed by the Hongs, served as both home and resting place for many of their relatives emigrating from China.⁴⁸ Kingston’s father had been a scholar in Sun Woi, a village in Guangzhou, which he left in 1924 for the opportunities of the Gold Mountain, following in the footsteps of forefathers and uncles who had also spent time looking for work in America.⁴⁹ Juggling multiple jobs at restaurants and laundromats once he arrived in New York City, Tom Hong eventually invested in his own laundry with other Chinese

⁴⁷ Lee, *Understanding*, 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

immigrants before his wife Ying Lan joined him in 1939. Ying Lan Chew, also a well-educated professional, had had two children in China before Tom's departure. Shortly after he left, their children passed away. Ying Lan began training to become a doctor and midwife in Canton, before leaving for the U.S., arriving via Angel Island in California and then meeting her husband in New York. After they moved to California and Ying Lan gave birth to Maxine, who would be the first of six children, Tom ran a gambling house for wealthy Chinese men while Ying Lan worked several odd jobs, from housework, and harvesting crops, to laboring in a cannery. Following the end of World War II, the Hong family eventually opened the New Port Laundry, where their children worked mornings and long after-school hours.

In contrast to the neighboring San Francisco Chinatown, Kingston has noted that the smaller Stockton Chinatown of her childhood, due to its position on a rail network, was more racially integrated with Mexican, Black, and white neighbors.⁵⁰ Thus, beyond her focus on the complexities of a heterogeneous Chinese American community, Kingston also grapples with the interethnic and interracial relationships populating her works' settings. This literary labor, rooted in actual experiences, is always intertwined with Kingston's politics: she became an active member of anti-war efforts, protesting America's involvement in Vietnam—"a war against Asians"—while she attended U.C. Berkeley.⁵¹ She graduated with a degree in English in 1962 and married fellow alum Earll Kingston, an actor, later that year. After working as a teacher in Oakland and participating in peace activism and antiwar organizing, Maxine and Earll moved to Hawai'i in 1967 with their young son, Joseph. As she continued her activism in Honolulu and also spent her time teaching, Maxine began publishing her writing, which garnered immediate acclaim.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

Ubiquitous on college syllabi since it won the National Books Critics Circle Award in 1976, Kingston's first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, toggles between first-person memoir, mythology, and fiction, as well as a broader historiography of Chinese America. While the work was labeled nonfiction by her publisher, at its outset, Kingston issues a disclaimer: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?"⁵²

Given Kingston's background, her acclaim, and her association with Asian American literature as well as feminist literature and (fictionalized) memoir-writing, she has also been mired in discourses of authenticity and representation. Writing about Kingston's feminist approach to vocality and silences, King-Kok Cheung summarizes the debate that has emerged: "the tendency to read [her] texts as pure ethnography, rather than as self-conscious narratives that answer to provocative silences, has sparked protracted debate among Asian American critics concerning 'authenticity.'"⁵³ Amassing her fair share of critics, Kingston has been accused, by the likes of Asian American writers Jeffrey Chan and Benjamin Tong, of inauthenticity, a damning charge for so-called "ethnic" writers. Her supposed mistranslations of Chinese mythology, and her working in the palatable Western mode of autobiography, have occasioned charges of pandering to a white readership.

The most prominent of her critics—and certainly the harshest—might well be Chinese American author and playwright Frank Chin, known for co-editing *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. A groundbreaking 1974 anthology born out of the 1960s and 70s Asian

⁵² Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 5.

⁵³ King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 77.

American political movement, *Aiiieeeee!* helped establish the nascent field of Asian American literature. Park notes that as contemporaries, Chin and Kingston both attended Berkeley simultaneously, “where each was deeply influenced by the radical movements that swept through campus....one created a new canon, but the other radically expanded the American canon.”⁵⁴

The Kingston-Chin row, while reprising a larger conversation about what constitutes the Asian American identity, also became personal, with retorts from both sides. In Chin’s 1991 expanded reissue of the anthology, Chin’s introductory essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” lambasted Kingston, among other commercially and critically successful writers like Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang, with charges of orientalism and inauthenticity.⁵⁵ Yet as Hua Hsu has observed, “the debate ‘Aiiieeeee!’ initiated was ultimately not about the real versus the fake. It was about the marketplace—its power to anoint, its capacity to ossify the ephemeral thing that your literature is trying to articulate in the first place.... Family bonds, the psychology of immigrant households, estrangement from the mother tongue: these became the defining themes of Asian-American literature, in part because they were market-tested.”⁵⁶

In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston engages with and destabilizes these market-tested tropes by inhabiting the disorienting narrative voice of Wittman Ah Sing and his fantasies of utopian belonging. She also subtly—and at times, more openly—critiques the monopolizing discourse of authenticity and its displacement of alternative conversations about her work and that of other Asian American writers. The novel’s overarching themes of performance and mutable subjectivities emerge in her dissection of Chinese American masculine anxieties through the

⁵⁴ Park, *Apparitions of Asia*, 125.

⁵⁵ Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake,” in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Plume, 1991).

⁵⁶ Hua Hsu, “The Asian-American Canon Breakers,” *The New Yorker*, December 30, 2019.

psychology of Wittman, rife with a cultural restlessness and placelessness despite his strolling along familiar streets. Furthermore, critics such as Amy Ling and John Lowe have suggested, “with partial verification by Kingston herself,” that Wittman is loosely based on Frank Chin, real-life playwright and self-styled “Chinatown Cowboy.”⁵⁷ Lari Narcisi argues, “by using her character as a mouthpiece for Chin's anxieties about Chinese masculinity, Kingston defuses her opponent by embracing him within her text.”⁵⁸ As Kingston has put it, “it's like him sending me hate mail, and I send him love letters.”⁵⁹ What might it mean that Kingston collapses the figures of Frank Chin, the trickster monkey Sun Wukong, Walt Whitman, and her own voice in the single subjectivity of Wittman Ah Sing? Wittman is the spinning, manic, bawdy, yet strangely loveable and always entertaining, embodiment of Kingston's hybridizing effort.

⁵⁷ John Lowe, “Monkey Kings and Mojo: Postmodern Ethnic Humor in Kingston, Reed, and Vizenor,” *MELUS* 21 (1996): 104.

⁵⁸ Lara Narcisi, “From Lone Monkey to Family Man: Wittman's Evolving Inclusion in *Tripmaster Monkey*,” *Connotations* 12.2-3 (2002/03): 271.

⁵⁹ Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 81.

Tripmaster Monkey

I. “I’m the American walking here”: Seeing and Walking the City

In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing’s mode of engaging with and knowing the urban environment shifts from *seeing* while *walking* the city, to his more productive explorations of *imagining* and *singing* the city. This shift corresponds to the novel’s movement towards embracing community and radical, democratic inclusion. The narrative’s tension between the external world and the imaginative space of the self’s interiority finds a genealogical through-line in the works of Walt Whitman and his bohemian coterie. This first section of my own ambling exploration of the spaces of *Tripmaster Monkey* begins by considering the implications of Wittman Ah Sing’s visually-oriented epistemology—one that is scopophilic and antisocial—during his tours of the pedestrian city. In his walks and occasional vehicle rides, however, readers glimpse moments of Wittman’s resistance to a narrow way of knowing through visuality and exclusion, and his embrace instead of a more embodied and multi-sensual relationship with the city space and its inhabitants. This same ambivalence engendered by the topos of the modern city is modeled in Walt Whitman’s modernist, bohemian engagements with literary and physical space. Before he is able to envision and perform a more utopian city, Wittman Ah Sing must first reckon with his fraught relationships to his literary forefathers, to poetic expression, and to his desires for community amid enduring histories of exclusion and alienation.

In *Tripmaster Monkey*’s first chapter, “Trippers and Askers,” Wittman Ah Sing plays the local and explores San Francisco streets, beginning in Golden Gate Park, commenting on the people he sees en route. The chapter title is the first of many references in the novel to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “Trippers and askers surround me, / People I meet, the effect upon

me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation.”⁶⁰ Despite his panoramic gaze, the poem’s speaker feels apart, separated from the world beyond and actively feeling this distance. As this section of “Song of Myself” continues to list noticeable external stimuli, from “dinner, dress, associates, looks,” to “doubtful news, the fitful events,” Whitman nonetheless ends with the realization that “these come to me day and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself.”⁶¹

Tripmaster Monkey, at its outset, upholds this dichotomy of the impressions of the external world and their irreconcilability with Wittman’s own “me myself”: “Today Wittman was taking a walk on a path that will lead into the underpass.... He had walked this far into the park hardly seeing it. He ought to let it come in, he decided. He would let it all come in.”⁶² The temporal confusion of the novel, as was signaled first by the preface’s reference to the anachronism of the 1960s, is solidified immediately in this early sentence, where “today” meets “was,” which in turn meets “will.” Wittman’s inability to situate himself in a stable temporality also signals the barrage of visual impressions which follow. Having spent the first few moments of the novel overlaying abstracted city spaces with images of Hemingway’s suicide and others’ leaps off the Golden Gate Bridge, Wittman turns now to the smaller-scale, material world around him, purporting to “let it all come in” as it is. Yet as we will see, Wittman’s sight of the ostensibly “real” is equally overlaid by his subjective distance from and occasional hostility toward such space and the people in it.

Wittman first observes a family of “F.O.B.”s in the park’s underpass: “Heading toward him from the other end came a Chinese dude from China.... that walk they do in kung fu

⁶⁰ Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 28.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 4.

movies.”⁶³ The abstract noun “dude,” when loaded with adjectival qualifications of “China,” turns this passing figure into a metonym of the distant country. Out of place, he might as well function as a caricature who has strolled off the set of a martial arts film. Wittman seems to echo Kingston’s opening passage in *The Woman Warrior*, in which she wonders, “what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?”⁶⁴ But while that narrator endeavors to parse through these obfuscations, in Wittman’s subjectivity, this blur is exaggerated to the point of parody. Rife with problematic racial stereotypes, Wittman’s visual assessments of this man extend to “the whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn’t know how to walk together.”⁶⁵ Apart from their ethnicity, language, and dress, Wittman first notices their gaits as indicative of something peculiar, something amiss. These walks seem telltale signs of their bodies’ inability to blend into what Wittman regards as the unspoken laws and spatial norms of their environment.

His visceral antipathy towards recent immigrants, and his visual stereotyping of other Chinese Americans constitute what Kingston referred to in an interview as his “Mayflower complex,” Wittman having absorbed a “mainstream, racist” point of view that “if you were born here, then you’re a real American.... He just doesn’t want to be taken for an FOB.”⁶⁶ It is this same defensiveness which stifles his initial attempts to write his play, and as his imagination sprawls to the purview of Chinese mythology, he stops himself: “He had been tripping out on the wrong side of the street. The wrong side of the world. What had he to do with foreigners? With F.O.B. emigres? Fifth-generation native Californian that he was.... His province is America.

⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 5.

⁶⁵ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 5.

⁶⁶ Marilyn Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, “A MELUS Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston,” *MELUS* 16 (1989-90): 66.

America, his province.”⁶⁷ While the family he watches enjoys a free day off, in both the temporal and monetary sense, Whitman convinces himself that his engagement in the same leisure activity of walking the city differs in that he is a real explorer of space, a flâneur with a discerning and artistic eye. In this sense, he is able to distinguish himself defensively from those who appear foreign in this space of familiarity, yet dangerously familiar in that they embody his distant ancestry and may otherwise resemble him. Wittman later jokes, “wherever I appear, there, there it’s Chinatown.”⁶⁸ In this underpass in which the two parties approach one another, Wittman breaks the mirror before he can see his reflection. Wittman therefore claims the space of the city as his own birthright, but this claim is built on the exclusion of others and of the parts of himself he cannot assimilate into a coherent identity as an authentic “American.”

When he encounters the “trippers and askers,” those park dwellers on drugs who call out and speak to him, Wittman regards them with the same “Mayflower complex” of superiority by figuring them as the city’s detritus, *of* the landscape rather than agents within the landscape. Selling days-old newspapers, they are “flotsam and jetsam selling flotsam and jetsam.”⁶⁹ These are the figures left behind by the American promise of success, the lingerers and the discarded. As they hawk their “folios and quartos,” Wittman ironically aligns their aged newspapers with a vocabulary of poetics, one that conjures visions of medieval manuscripts and quibbles over Shakespearean editions. Thus, these trippers and askers are excluded from Wittman’s knowledge of literature and his cultural capital. Comparably to how he perceives the recent immigrants from the underpass, Wittman attempts to distinguish his loitering, alert and purposeful, from that of the trippers and askers, absentminded and drugged out. They are visual curiosities to observe

⁶⁷ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 41.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

either as diversions from or mere fodder for his imagination.

Elsewhere, Wittman's visual observations of the city contrast with his retreats into literature, during which his imagination begins to harbor a more utopian view of the world around him. As he embarks on a bus ride downtown, he begins to read aloud to other passengers Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, another *Künstlerroman* of literary modernism. As Rilke's words "shaded and polished the City's greys and golds," Wittman fantasizes about becoming a professional "reader" to "Walt Whitman's 'classless society' of 'everyone who could read or be read to.'"⁷⁰ While he narrates a lengthy passage detailing the stillness and alienation of a silent bourgeois family dinner, Wittman's voice meets the silence and apathy of his fellow bus-riders, none of whom were "telling Wittman to cool it." Thus, what is left of Whitman's "classless society" of readers is the same apathy of the bourgeois and modern world recorded by Rilke.

Yet although Kingston's narrator here begins to satirize Walt Whitman's utopian ideal, her protagonist seems to exceed this critique through his obstinacy: "Wittman had begun a tradition that may lead to a job as a reader riding the railroads throughout the West."⁷¹ Listing possible authors to recite in their respective geographies, from Steinbeck through Salinas Valley to Kerouac along the Big Sur and Twain in the Mother Lode, Wittman ends his catalog by inscribing "migrant Carlos Bulosan" into his railroad tour of California. Placing the Filipino American author, one of the earliest Asian American writers, into the canon of the American West, Wittman also maps Bulosan onto the Central Valley on the Southern Pacific. This gesture is akin to Kingston's larger mapping of Wittman Ah Sing onto her Californian geography, just as she mapped her grandfather onto the historical record of Andrew Russel's "wedding of the rails"

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

photograph.

Fantasizing about his future as a professional reader, Wittman notes that he “won’t read Bret Harte either, in revenge for that Ah Sin thing.”⁷² Kingston here references Harte’s infamous “The Heathen Chinee,” a narrative poem published in 1870. Although likely intended as a satire of anti-Chinese xenophobia in California, Harte’s image of the conniving and cheating gambler Ah Sin nevertheless became a principal citation for harmful stereotypes and nativist sentiments as it took the cultural imagination of its white middle-class readership by storm.⁷³ It circulated widely as it was republished in newspapers, journals, pamphlets, illustrated editions, and even set to music by composers. As reported in the *New York Globe*, its popularity was such that “strolling down Broadway.... we saw a crowd of men and boys, of high and low degree, swarming about a shop-window, pushing, laughing, and struggling.... Elbowing our way through the crowd, we discovered an illustrated copy of Bret Harte’s poem ‘The Heathen Chinee.’”⁷⁴ Before penning this widely misunderstood poem, Harte had written a regular newspaper column under the pseudonym “The Bohemian,” in which he critiqued and satirized San Francisco’s commodity culture and bourgeois life. He was drawn especially to explorations of the city’s ethnic enclaves, like Chinatown, as marginal sites allowing for detours from the city’s dominant culture.⁷⁵ Harte’s pedestrian “urban spectatorship” is thus not unlike Wittman’s own scopophilic explorations in the earlier stages of *Tripmaster Monkey*. The difference lies more in the identities they occupy, and their divergent claims of belonging within different communities.⁷⁶

Through Wittman’s choice to substitute Bret Harte—and his complicated relationship to

⁷² Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 10.

⁷³ John Ott, *Manufacturing the Modern Patron in Victorian California* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014), 199.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁷⁵ Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858-1920* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 20.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

Asian America—with someone like Carlos Bulosan, Kingston begins to outline a vision for reshaping the canon of the American West. But in feeling the need to explicitly bar Harte from his reading project, Wittman is evidently still forced to reckon with the stereotype of Ah Sin embedded in the public imagination. Furthermore, this is a list conspicuously devoid of the voices of many other excluded and invisible figures, such as female writers. Thus, Wittman's uneasy relationship with his American literary forefathers mirrors Kingston's own position of having to co-opt, work within, and build anew a literature contingent on exclusion. This is a tension registered in Wittman's very name, Ah Sing indubitably reminiscent of Ah Sin. Crucially though, as name-doubles, they are both trickster figures who command respect through their wit, resolve, and capacity to exploit the instability of appearances and language.

Although Wittman therefore partially disavows the literary presence of Bret Harte, he continually brings Harte's contemporary, Walt Whitman, into the fray. Popping up in California, as he did in Allen Ginsberg's supermarket, Whitman offers his poetic spirit and persona for use, inspiration, and reinterpretation. It is primarily Whitman's tradition of urban American bohemianism that takes hold of Wittman Ah Sing's imagination as the beatnik endeavors to absorb his city of San Francisco and its neighboring locales, as Whitman once did of New York. Eventually quitting his job as a salesperson at a department store, Wittman will become another iteration of the loafer who romanticizes and strives toward a life spent with artistic and creative intentionality, shirking expectations of assimilation into the dominant culture's models for a productive and normative life.

Walt Whitman's poetry is intimately entangled with his contemporary urban experience and the daily textures of New York's city streets, on which Whitman was known to dwell and amble. The first review of *Leaves of Grass* situated Whitman within the "class of society

sometimes irreverently styled ‘loafers.’” Another called him “a rowdy, a New York tough, a loafer, a frequenter of low places, a friend of cab drivers!”⁷⁷ David S. Reynolds writes on Whitman’s poeticizing of the urbanism of his era as a means through which the poet was able to envision alternate formulations of engaging with space: “Appalled by squalid forms of urban loafing, he outlined new forms of loafing in his poems.”⁷⁸ Whitman’s self-portrait in “Song of Myself,” “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” elevates and places the walking “rough” among a vocabulary of patriotism and, broader yet, as worthy of inclusion within mystical concepts of the cosmological order. In his repeated elevation of the city—and of the act of walking through it as a model for engaging with space and community with care—Whitman contributed to the construction of the image of the modern American flâneur. This attitude of rubbing shoulders with the city’s myriad inhabitants as an exercise in empathy and intersubjectivity also foreshadows the bohemian disciples who would later follow in his footsteps.

Let us consider more closely, then, the original American roughs and loafers who provide a model for Wittman Ah Sing. Joanna Levin tracks the formation of a “self-consciously American version of *la vie bohème*” from the late 1850s and into the turn-of-the-century—“part literary trope, part cultural nexus, and part socioeconomic landscape.... within and without literary narrative.”⁷⁹ Like its European counterpart, American bohemia steered between “naturalistic ‘real life’ and romantic enchantment.”⁸⁰ Moreover, as a “distinctively urban phenomenon,”⁸¹ bohemianism “charted and tested ‘the boundaries of bourgeois life.’”⁸² Among

⁷⁷ David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 31.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858-1920* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 12.

figures like Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, and Henry James, Walt Whitman is positioned as an active participant in the construction of an American *vie bohème*, a cultural geography formed and negotiated in sources as disparate as poetry, novels, periodicals, popular literature, guidebooks, and memoirs.⁸³ Levin traces the “mythic territory” of American bohemianism to emphasize the ways it shaped its contemporary cultural spaces and divisions, as well as anticipated later countercultural movements and their equally mutable relationship to the bourgeois world from which they sought to distinguish themselves.

The toggling of Whitman and American bohemia between “naturalistic ‘real life’ and romantic enchantment” is also modeled in Wittman Ah Sing’s engagements with city space. Kingston’s Wittman inhabits this role ambivalently, alternating between antagonism towards other walkers, and moments of appreciation reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s celebration of those around him. Returning to the material world immediately around him, Wittman Ah Sing disrupts his fantasy of being a professional reader and gets off the bus for a date with a fellow Berkeley alum. Having regarded the city space antagonistically at the novel’s outset, it is when he walks the downtown streets of North Beach—historic haunt of the Beats—with the beautiful Nanci Lee (“O Someday Girl”⁸⁴), that he changes his tune. The city shifts from a repository of “flotsam and jetsam” to a romantic setting in which “the air of the City is so filled with poems, you have to fight becoming imbued with the general romanza.”⁸⁵ Strolling through familiar streets (“O Home”), he experiences the present intensely as he describes the allure of the quotidian sights and people, and marvels at the contrast between North Beach’s seedier nightlife and the picturesque evening before him.

⁸³ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁴ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

But this celebration is undercut when history suddenly appears in the streets as Wittman mourns the loss of the neighborhood's erstwhile bohemian strongholds and underground network of thinkers:

Though they walked through the land of the wasted, no Malte sights popped out to hurt him, [Nanci] dispelling them. By day, the neon was not coursing through its glass veins. The dancing girl in spangles and feathers had flown out of her cage, which hung empty over the street. Nobody barked and hustled at the doorways to acts and shows. The day-folks, wheeling babies, wheeling grandpas, holding children by the hand, were shopping for dinner at the grocery stores and the bakery.... poets, one to a table, were eating breakfast. The Co-Existence Bagel Shop was gone.... The Bagel Shop, Miss Smith's Tea Room, Blabbermouth Night at The Place—all of a gone time.⁸⁶

While Wittman initially describes the bourgeois, family-friendly scenes with the same kind of celebratory gaze of the city found throughout Walt Whitman's poetry, implicit in his observations is a discomfort with the disappearance of beatnik establishments "of a gone time." By emphasizing the absence of former sites of alternative discourse and creative exchange, he archives these institutions as irrevocably part of the topography of North Beach as well as of the beatnik artistic scene. Wittman's desire for community in the alienating city is therefore also a yearning for an artistic hamlet, as the narrator interjects, "He, poor monkey, was yet looking for others of his kind."⁸⁷

Wittman Ah Sing's ambivalence toward the city and the loss of idealized forms of community rhymes with Walt Whitman's own contradictory writings on urbanism and bohemia. Whitman's unfinished poem, "Two Vaults," pays homage to the German beer hall that served as a subterranean meeting place for the earliest coterie of self-proclaimed American Bohemians, but complicates his prior idealism.⁸⁸ He figures the "vault at Pfaffs" on Broadway as an

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁸ Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 17.

ambivalent locus in in relation to the material city above-ground:

—The vault at Pfaffs where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse
While on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway
As the dead in their graves are underfoot hidden
And the living pass over them, recking not of them,
Laugh on laughers!
Drink on drinkers!⁸⁹

Oscillating between unity and dispersal, imagination and the real, these verses register—on the eve of the Civil War and Whitman’s waning optimism, no less—American bohemianism’s struggle to position itself against a dominant American culture. The lively thinkers become “the dead in their graves” while the living tread upon them. But Whitman inverts this characterization as he articulates the phantasmagoric effects of the modern urban world in which senses obfuscate and overload, dramatized as “Overhead rolls Broadway—the myriad rushing Broadway”:

The curious appearance of the faces—the glimpse just caught of the eyes and
expressions, as they flit along
(You phantoms! Oft I pause, yearning, to arrest some of you!
“Oft I doubt your reality—whether you are real—I suspect all is but a pageant.)

As the home of the bohemian movement, the vault is therefore figured as the last bastion of authentic community. Though these Pfaffian bohemians are ignored by the visible, dominant America overhead, Whitman spies through the faces and bodies of the walkers as they become immaterial, false, mere performers of the city’s bourgeois and commercial impulses. As in Kingston’s outline of the disappearing North Beach underground, the loafers below, however invisible, represent the possibility of another America.

Yet this bohemian possibility is dampened by the material and historical constraints of another misrepresented group to which Wittman belongs. As he and Nanci enter Chinatown, he

⁸⁹ Walt Whitman, “The Two Vaults,” in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, vol. 2, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1921), 92–93.

speaks sardonically of the material culture fetishized and associated with Chinese American communities: “If Chinese-American culture is not knickknackatory—look at it—backscratcher swizzle sticks, pointed chopsticks for the Jade East aftershave in a Buddha-shaped bottle.... No other people sell out their streets like this. Tourists can’t buy up J-town.”⁹⁰ He anxiously ponders the thought of “Chinese-American culture” becoming its simulacrum, as envisioned by white American culture historically eager to either exclude and orientalize its Asian and immigrant communities.

Furthermore, how can Wittman become a politically engaged artist when he must return to his day job? As he sets up the department store’s display cases with toys for sale, he marvels at the strangeness of the shoppers and their itinerancy: “Are there many people like himself, then? They’re all poets taking walks? ‘Just browsing.’ ‘Just looking.’” Kingston ironically translates the dissident politics of the bohemian flaneur into the commercial setting of urban capitalism, demonstrating the decline of the radical potential of loafing in 1960s San Francisco. At a work conference, Wittman channels his namesake when he proposes that management training abide by the ideal that “every meeting in a democracy should be a democratic meeting” and only meets silence as his bosses continue to hand out “‘literature’.... stock numbers, order forms, handouts, inserts.”⁹¹ Once he is fired from his job, after arranging a Barbie in a compromising position with a monkey toy, he takes to the streets once again.

But San Francisco’s busy avenues, antithesis of the Parisian streets of *la bohème*, seem particularly hostile to romantic reenactments of loafing: “Market Street is not an avenue or a boulevard or a champs that sweeps through arches of triumph. Tangles of cables on the ground and in the air.... How am I to be a boulevardier on Market Street? I am not a boulevardier; I am a

⁹⁰ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 27.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

bum-how, I am a fleaman.”⁹² As enchantment with the boulevardier disintegrates among chaotic city streets, leaving him a mere “fleaman,” Wittman’s affiliation with bohemian life becomes increasingly untenable. Thus, Wittman’s shirking of professional life represents only a partial step in his hopes to create a coherent identity. He must also face the other glaring impossibilities of his fantasies. While walking like “Kerouac’s people, tripping along the street,” Wittman recites a Kerouac poem which features among its list of urban types the “*twinkling little Chinese*.” Offended and emasculated by the line, he begins a dialogue with the invisible poet and asserts, “I call into question your naming of me. I trust your sight no more.... I’m the American here. I’m the American walking here. Fuck Kerouac and his American road anyway.”⁹³ Wittman is here finally, firmly alienated by the community promised by beat poets’ and by their hypocritical reproductions of dominant ideologies built on exclusion and racism. But he likewise struggles to find community within Chinese American San Francisco, contemplating, “the place that a Chinese holds among other Chinese—in a community somewhere—matters.... It would pain a true Chinese to admit that he or she did not have a community, or belonged at the bottom or the margin.”⁹⁴ Wittman must learn to turn his engagements thus far with seeing and walking the physical city space into a more transformative model of imagining the margins—of himself and of his communities—as the city’s centers.

⁹² Ibid., 68.

⁹³ Ibid., 70.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

Tripmaster Monkey

II. “At sea, a shore”: Imagining and Singing the City

“My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theater and parties,” Wittman Ah Sing announces unapologetically to an acquaintance minutes after meeting.⁹⁵ Introduce democracy first in spaces home to “The dressing up. The dancing. The loving. The playing,” and the rest will follow.⁹⁶ Kingston’s use of the Whitmanian technique of the catalog—as a formal gesture of inclusion and democratization—is here further politicized through its parallel content, which demands material inclusion across categories of racial difference.

Fittingly, a turning point of the novel’s depiction of Wittman’s alienation arrives in the form of a party; a slew of personalities and characters hailing from all backgrounds converge serendipitously in the Oakland apartment of Wittman’s childhood friend. Likewise, it seems appropriate that Maxine Hong Kingston chooses to return to her birthplace, centering it as a disruptive, generative setting for the transformation of Wittman Ah Sing’s subjectivity. As a hallucinatory scene where partygoers interact with one another while intoxicated and “tripping,” repression is left by the wayside and drug-induced trysts of body and soul abound. A significant union to arise from this party is Wittman’s introduction to his future wife, the dazzlingly blonde Taña De Weese. Their coupling, not only in its interracial character but also in its offering of emotional intimacy when most needed, is a harbinger of other “unions” Kingston’s narrative will pursue. The space of the party, attracting a community of free spirits, poets, and dissidents,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

allows for the novel's restaging of early American bohemian sites like Whitman's "vault at Pfaff's." These partygoers similarly toggle between enchantment and "real life," "chart[ing] and test[ing] 'the boundaries of bourgeois life.'" ⁹⁷

Midway through the party, Wittman is drawn to a voice singing verses of poetry to a popular tune: "*There's a race of men that don't fit in, // And they roam the world at will.*" Struck, he jokes, "she's melting my loneliness. Four years of Chaucer and Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens, Whitman, Joyce, Pound and Eliot, and you shoot me right through the heart with Robert W. Service." ⁹⁸ Robert Service, as a popular verse writer, also styled himself a roaming "Bohemian." ⁹⁹ Taña's casual interest in the poet reflects the widening scope, over the course of the twentieth century, of bohemian attitudes and the once avant-garde eventually being absorbed into the mainstream folds of popular culture. Who is included in this roaming, transient "*race of men that don't fit in,*" and where might they settle to sustain community?

As Wittman dances, "monkeying around," he engages with space and community on a multi-sensuous and embodied level for the first time in the novel: "Its pulse, my pulse. Ears, eyes, feet, heart, myself and all these people, my partners all." ¹⁰⁰ This celebratory gathering of countercultural activities, just like the Whitmanesque bohemia it reenacts, might be understood to function as a sort of "heterotopia," one of Foucault's "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." ¹⁰¹ Here, spatial rules cease to apply, and guests revel in crossing boundaries. Through this makeshift heterotopia, the novel begins to

⁹⁷ Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 12.

⁹⁸ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 113.

⁹⁹ Robert W. Service, *Ballads of a Bohemian* (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1921).

¹⁰⁰ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 110.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

delineate both the limitations and possibilities of undercutting urban mechanisms of discipline and separation. Such anomie, as Wittman notes, textures quotidian city life: “A soul extends in nature...Buildings, jackhammers, etc., chop it up, and you took drugs to feel it. The extent of the soul is from oneself to wherever living beings are.”¹⁰² As drug-induced states are aligned with a return to nature, the regulating spatial structures of the modern urban world are figured as hostile to the very soul.

While partygoers lounge and flirt and speak with one another (“Circulate. Mix,” the host repeatedly teases Wittman), they muddle the spatial integrity of the apartment so that only the dining room is a “safe zone, quieter with normal lighting—the eye on the noise.”¹⁰³ They overflow onto the sidewalk and the building’s roof, telling obscene stories and joking about ways to avoid the draft. As someone known to “see the film behind the film” describes a series of movies to a room of inebriated guests, Wittman halts, “Hold it. That about blind men walking the streets of unknown cities. The familiar City has been weirding out lately—flashes from a movie yet to be seen.”¹⁰⁴ It takes a short-lived embodied absorption into this heterotopic space for Wittman to realize that he has been walking the streets “blindly” despite his constantly panoramic and critical—in Foucault’s terms, panoptic—observation of those around him.

Yet these revelers must return to their jobs and sun-lit lives after the raucous night, thus highlighting the ways heterotopia exists only in private and isolated pockets, set apart from city streets, and left alone—by the Oakland police in this case—as disciplining stopgaps to release the tension of public life. Nonetheless, while the partygoers construct their own space apart from “the familiar City,” this pocket of countercultural possibility allows Wittman to begin to access

¹⁰² Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 176.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

“flashes” into the future, or visions of alternate worlds. Moments later, when Wittman compares himself to his wealthy host, the narrator notes, “The minimum-wage earner—the unemployed—goes for a walk in the park, where Wittman Ah Sing has had vision enough. Everything that comes in—that’s it. Foolish ape wants more vision.”¹⁰⁵ Wittman leaves this gathering with a renewed sense of the power of imagination and community in staking out space to illuminate “flashes” of a different sort.

This Oakland party heterotopia, as a heterogenous space that both mirrors and inverts the “real sites” of dominant culture, serves the role of guiding Wittman towards new psychic and physical territories. Its navigational qualities rhyme with Wittman’s acknowledgment of a “tripmaster” at the party: “At sea, a shore.”¹⁰⁶ This sort of parataxis offers a metaphor for the narrative strategy at play in the rest of the novel, in which Wittman arranges fragments—spatial, temporal, and textual—and revels in unexpected juxtapositions to create new meaning. While one fragment might be Walt Whitman and bohemia’s intertextual presence, others might be introduced through retellings of Chinese legends, from Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West* (in Wittman’s iteration, “*Journey in the West*”), to Luo Guanzhong’s fourteenth-century *Three Kingdoms*, and its contemporary Shi Nai’an’s *The Water Margin*.

Another resonance of “at sea, a shore” is its evocation of the immigrant experience of crossing borders, approaching distant lands, and anxiously awaiting precarious futures. While Wittman writes his epic play, his flights of fancy are unleashed as if he too is a migrant traversing space and time: “He touches down here, and he takes off and touches down there. Over Angel Island. Over Ellis Island. Living one very long adventurous life, perhaps

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 102.

accomplished with the help of reincarnation and ancestors.”¹⁰⁷ The immigration stations of San Francisco’s Angel Island and New York’s Ellis Island—which can also be characterized as heterotopias in a more violent and disciplining sense—are transformed from material symbols of the traumatic history of immigrants into settings Wittman might transcend through his imagination. Moreover, the party’s tripmaster, as a guide of the roaming consciousness of others, is also aligned more generally with the abstracted figure of the storyteller, chosen “for his articulateness in the midst of revels.”¹⁰⁸ In this parallelism, Kingston hints at her own role, the role of her narrator, and of Wittman’s stream-of-consciousness as three distinct tripmasters sharing and occasionally vying for narrative primacy.

As Taña and Wittman drive along the California coastline the day after the party, and impulsively decide to stop and marry in Coit Tower, it is to Walt Whitman that Wittman Ah Sing returns. From the observatory vantage of the structure, he first views Alcatraz and the nearby Angel Island and registers the latter’s history of detaining Chinese men attempting to enter the U.S., while imagining a plan to “make a theater out of the Wooden House, where our seraphic ancestors did time. Desolation China Man angels.”¹⁰⁹ What Wittman then recites as a “mantra for this place” comes from none other than his namesake:

*Facing west from California’s shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, toward the house of maternity,
the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled....*¹¹⁰

Since this recitation is positioned at the juncture of Wittman’s union with Taña, embodiment of a

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 161.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 162.

white America with solid genealogical claims to Whitman and American bohemia, Wittman in some sense “marries” into the family. However, in the context of Wittman’s own bardic aspirations, this recitation allows him to envisage himself an American poet whose “house of maternity” across the ocean resonates on a more material, literal level than Whitman’s vision of an opaque Eastern world. Thus, Wittman here becomes a “truer” speaker of the poem than its originator, and in reciting it while viewing Angel Island—a reviser of its meaning. Wittman’s appropriation of his forebear’s verses in this revised context functions less as an elegy for the perished “China Man angels” than it does as a paeon for the potential birth of a new vision of inclusion in an American literary tradition.

Yet Before Wittman can finish the poem, Taña interrupts him, “Wittman. Wittman,” her double address linking the homophones of Wittman and his ever-present alter ego of Whitman. In *Leaves of Grass*, the poem’s next lines see the speaker traveling further westward in cosmic flights across Asia and the world, before concluding with parenthetical uncertainty: “(But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?)”¹¹¹ In omitting these lines, this sense of the urtext’s ultimate disillusionment is not eschewed, but rather it haunts the pages of *Tripmaster Monkey*. As Whitman’s final question echoes in this jarring conclusion and evident absence, Kingston pulls the reader into the narrative to insist that we reckon with these questions as the novel goes on. Wittman Ah Sing will also have his time to ponder these questions directly in his final soliloquy of the novel and of his play.

Between Wittman’s long-winded pitches of his play to his friends, Kingston’s narrator interrupts: “Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart.... Because they need to do something

¹¹¹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 111.

communal against isolation, [they]...organized themselves into a play.”¹¹² Wittman eventually stages his days-long epic play in the “Chinatown Benevolent Association,” an early community support organization and remnant from nineteenth-century Chinatown.¹¹³ As he writes and casts it, the production begins to incorporate Wittman’s family, friends, and all the characters in the novel.

Journey in the West becomes a “combination revue-lecture,” including traditions from improvisatory Chinese opera, built on spectatorial engagement and interruption, “to entertain and educate the solitaires that make up a community.”¹¹⁴ In his play’s grandeur and sprawl, Wittman conjures early Chinese Americans’ history of putting on theatrical shows in the Chinatown of Gold Rush San Francisco. This tradition is but one within the deluge of voices and narrative threads, envisioning spaces of transpacific cultural and textual exchange. Among myriad other characters, We meet a South Carolina woman who writes “democratic love poems” when the Chinese hero she falls in love with is drafted into the Civil War.¹¹⁵ Wittman also conceives of a Chinese Whitmanesque tramp as “grandfather” Guan Yee, a Han dynasty general featured in the legend he is adapting: “The times are bad, that a man thus built be an unemployed tramp of the road. The old Chinese audience will be moved with pity because they recognize our grandfather.... He’s no ordinary bum-how. He sings, ‘I place my bow against the wall, but I do not take off my moon-curved broadsword.’”¹¹⁶ The figure of Guan Yee performs an alternative to the American loafer, reincarnated in an ancient Chinese body, as the novel transposes its motif of the bohemian onto a counterpart in Chinese myth. This singing, tramping grandfather figure

¹¹² Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 141.

¹¹³ Kevin Mullen, “The Six Companies,” Found SF.

¹¹⁴ Kingston, *Tripmaster*, 288.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

also aligns itself with the iconography of Whitman.

As the madcap production grows each day, the “show palace on the frontier” also begins to attract a general audience of passers-by: “The public, including white strangers, came and made the show important....The audience sat on the staircase and windowsills; there was no longer an aisle.”¹¹⁷ The production thus exceeds the limits of its own space, calling out to pedestrians on Chinatown’s streets, and reconfiguring the actual space of the neighborhood. Michel de Certeau’s revision of Foucault’s heterotopia—which in its original formulation, is oppositional to the “utopian”—provides a useful counterpoint to the disciplinary imperative inscribed in Foucault’s theorization of space. Instead, the spatial order is “marked by a contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation.”¹¹⁸ Wittman’s production can indeed be figured as a “reappropriation” of the city space of Chinatown as a marginal and ghettoized locale, which he transforms into the site of a communal act of defiance. He also “reappropriates” the textual space of Whitmanian American modernism, writing himself into a literary lineage while declaring a new vision for an American bohemia rooted in a multicultural and radical inclusion.

While Foucault circumscribes heterotopia as serving a largely disciplinary function, the trajectory of Kingston’s novel better aligns with de Certeau’s more utopian discussions of the pedestrian individual’s potential for disrupting the spatial order. In turn, this resonates with Walt Whitman’s pragmatic, utopian modernism and image of the flâneur who absorbs the city beyond the visual. De Certeau regards urban visibility and the city’s “totalizing eye”—such as the gaze looking down from a skyscraper—as encoding “the fiction of knowledge.... related to this lust to

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 296.

¹¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

be a viewpoint and nothing more.”¹¹⁹ This role of the “voyeur,” he places in opposition to “walkers,” whose varied journeys through city space form a new kind of “text”: “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.”¹²⁰ Wittman therefore shifts from walking the city and being confined in his gaze, to actively embodying and performing a mythic city—into which he draws new pedestrian presences that disrupt the order of the urban space.

In the final act, which stages a climactic battle at the close of the legend, the boundary between the audience and actors dissolves in what becomes a riotous scene: “Everybody chased one another outside and battled on 22nd Avenue among the cars. Audience hung out of windows. Ten thousand San Franciscans, armed with knives, shouted ‘Death to capitalists,’ attacked the railroad office, and set fire to Chinatown.”¹²¹ While Wittman’s use of hyperbole distances this scene from realism, the mythic city constructed by his and the play’s contributors’ imaginations nonetheless spills out onto the novel’s space of the “real.” As a heterotopia, the counter-site has exploded into the real-site. Wittman’s ability to finally center this marginal space, an old building in Chinatown and the community it signifies, becomes central to the novel’s heterotopic endeavor as Wittman builds his own city. Moreover, the text of Wittman’s play reshapes the “text” of Chinatown’s spatial arrangement, calling for walkers near and far to contribute to this improvisatory project. And he hopes to sustain this on a material level, since “community is not built once and for all; people have to imagine, practice, and recreate it.”¹²²

In his final soliloquy, Wittman cries, “There is no East here. West is meeting West. This

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹²¹ Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*, 301.

¹²² Ibid., 306.

was all West. All you saw was West.”¹²³ At the end of his capacious play, itself a cosmos for everyday Californian sagas and ancient Chinese epics alike, Wittman jolts us with this odd sequence of assertions. What can he mean by declaring, from inside the Chinatown Benevolent Association, that “there is no East here”? He seems to swat away any evaluations of his play as a charming amalgam of two sides of the Pacific, or even as a story of the immigrant’s split self torn between here and there. Instead, he insists he has staged a meeting of West and West—the West’s confrontation of itself. This self-confrontation may be a recognition: that the West has always contained Wittman and his ancestors and *all* of the life tangled together in his play. Whispers of half-remembered Chinese legends, spoken by immigrants who might imagine themselves to be the descendants of those legends’ heroes—these are an integral part of the American tradition, in fact they were uttered by the very men who built the West. As Wittman delivers his soliloquy, he heeds one of his many Whitmanesque mottoes, “End the day gracefully. See each day out, toast it, feast it, sing its farewell.”¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid., 308.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 213.

Conclusion: *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*

When Maxine Hong Kingston revisits Wittman Ah Sing in her 2011 memoir-in-verse, she departs from their California geography to offer Wittman the chance to explore his ancestral connection to China. Analogous to this gesture, she models her embrace of poetry in the twilight of her career as offering a return to something ancestral, immanent, and latent. As put in her 2002 traipse into verse, *To Be the Poet*: “I want poetry to be the way it used to come when I was a child. The Muse flew; I flew. Let me return to that child being, and rest from prose.”¹²⁵

And as the Muse flies in *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, so does Wittman Ah Sing when he leaves his family for a pilgrimage to his “house of maternity.” At this familial uncoupling, Kingston features the same poem Wittman recited moments before his marriage to Taña in *Tripmaster Monkey*: Whitman’s “Facing west from California’s shores.” Yet rather than omitting the final lines as she does in the novel, Kingston directly cites Whitman’s echoing questions, “(But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?)”¹²⁶ This is followed by a shift back to recounting her own experiences while on a plane to China:

From on high, human beings
and all the terrible things they do and make
are beautiful. Loft your point of view above
the crowd, the party, any fray.¹²⁷

While this contrasts with Wittman Ah Sing’s gaze on Alcatraz and Angel Island while reciting Whitman’s poem in the novel, Kingston echoes the same sense of wonder and the utopian

¹²⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston, *To Be the Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4.

¹²⁶ Kingston, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, 50.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*,

possibility of radical inclusion. Her memoir's toggling between a personal archive of experiences and Wittman Ah Sing's imagined experiences extends *Tripmaster Monkey*'s performance of the interplay between psychic and physical spaces. Furthermore, in her embrace of Whitman's free verse poetics and her direct citation of his poem, Kingston demonstrates her ongoing reckoning with writing herself into American history and the modernist genealogy.

By way of conclusion, I think it is crucial to acknowledge a limitation of my argument. In my delineation of the resonances and dissonances within the Kingston-Whitman dialogue, I have yet to explicitly address the dangers of viewing Kingston's work merely from the lens of Walt Whitman's influence. A *New York Times* book review of *I Love a Broad Margin* provides a case-in-point. Poetry columnist David Orr admonished what he viewed as Kingston's lapses into "gooey mysticism," arguing that "the default 'poetic' mode here is basically bad Whitman."¹²⁸ This dismissal of her poetry—and of the myriad sources and genres within which she is clearly working, sources which may alienate a white readership—illustrates the ethical conundrums of measuring Kingston's literary acumen against its capacity to mimic our understandings of Western and American forms of expression. Again, we are forced to reckon with questions of Kingston's (in)authenticity, yet this time from the lens of white critics disappointed in Kingston's supposed regurgitation of Whitman's poetics, and in her use of a "mysticism" now regarded as more passé than exotic.

Thus, I hope to emphasize that in looking for traces of Whitman and modernism in Kingston's work, we must attend to her recasting of this canonical influence as consciously brought into conversation with her other intertextual gestures. The result is a vision of a literary and physical space as hybrid as Whitman's "teeming nations of many nations." Borders collapse,

¹²⁸ David Orr, "Maxine Hong Kingston's Life in Verse," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2011.

and once distant spaces join in embrace. Above all, Kingston's use of intertextuality still serves her creation of a distinct style and voice. Perhaps next, we should trace the presence of *Kingstonian* modernism doubtlessly on the horizon. Judging by her enduring and singular influence, I do not think it will be hard to find. As long as she, and we, "have things to write," she will keep living.

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