

# Bakhtinian Dialogue, Polyphony and the Trickster Countertype

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This article explores the concepts of dialogue, polyphony, and the carnival, while providing an in-depth analysis of the 'trickster countertype'<sup>1</sup> (based on the Chinese mythological figure of the Monkey King) as a concept and a character in Gish Jen's novel, within the context of creating a community without borders. It arrives at the conclusion that Gish Jen's novel has clear examples of polyphony and Mona in the novel is a unique exemplar of a trickster countertype.

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Gish Jen is a celebrated Chinese American writer, and in her first novel with a trickster protagonist, she explores the second-generation Mona and her sister Callie's experiences as Chinese Americans, tracing their story not as an 'ethnocentric return to roots' but by decentralising the ethnic experience of the Changs in America (Nelson 2005: 443). In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen revisits the Chang family, exploring the turn of events in the life of Mona Chang/Changowitz, the older daughter of Helen/Hailan and Ralph/Yifeng. One of Jen's major themes in *Mona in the Promised Land* is community: in *Mona in the Promised Land* Jen creates 'Camp Gugelstein' to show how different cultural and ethnic identities interact and transform into an ideal/utopic community where ethnic differences are not a reason for ideological clashes and unequal treatment.

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- 1 A countertype is developed in the face of a stereotype perpetuated about a certain group or ethnicity. Countertypes are positive portrayals that display how wrong the stereotypes are concerning the targeted group, by reflecting positive traits of that group and/or showing the opposite of the stereotype. As such, a countertype is, according to Nachbar, a 'positive stereotype' (Nachbar and Lause 1992: 238). Building on the notion of the countertype, the trickster countertype functions in a similar way to the countertype, with a few significant differences. While the countertype directly aims to replace existing stereotypes, the trickster countertype does not necessarily aim to take the place of a stereotype. Rather, a trickster countertype, such as found in Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*, functions to challenge and dispel the dominant ideologies, such as essentialism, inequalities and cultural reductionism, which create stereotypes.

Jen's conception of Camp Gugelstein is central to the narrative and operates as a Bakhtinian carnival in the narrative structure of the novel, turning everything upside down as a rebellious upheaval to the established order and racial hierarchies. The mood of the narrative is far from the oblique and gloomy unpredictability and frustration of the events that the newly migrated Changs go through in *Typical American*, Gish Jen's first novel. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, the focus is on the new search for community reflected in Mona and her friends' attempts at creating a utopian community. As settled immigrants from Shanghai, the Changs now enjoy the fulfilment of the American Dream that they had so fervently sought in the first novel, having nothing else to worry about than their daughter's Monkey King-like rebellious behaviour and transgressions against authority, making Mona's encounters and adventures the central narrative of the novel.

Although Jen does not explicitly say that she has based Mona on the Monkey King, there are signposts in the narrative that strongly point to the affinity of Mona to the Monkey trickster of Chinese literature and mythology. Apart from the linguistic word-play on Mona, Jen often invokes the image of monkeys when talking about Mona: Barbara, Mona's close friend, exclaims the phrase 'Monkey see, monkey do' (Jen 1996: 214), when observing Mona's relationship with her boyfriend Seth. It is notable that in the overall narrative, Mona is the one who receives such racist remarks as 'monkey' and is asked fervently about how the Chinese can eat the brains of a living monkey, but brushes them off with witty answers that expose the absurdity of such remarks (as in Mona's answer, 'scalpels', when asked what the Chinese use when eating a monkey's brains) (Jen 1996: 8).

Mona, in fact, invokes monkeys in her parody of ethnic stereotypes and racist remarks about the Chinese, talking about how 'eating monkey brains' readily attracts attention while peeling tomatoes 'isn't gross enough' (Jen 1996: 8). In another passage about Mona's previous love interest Sherman, the phrase 'mono' is used, to refer to Mona not having to worry about 'mono' (popularly known as the 'kissing disease'). Although the passage explicitly refers to the kissing disease, the phrase is used in relation to Mona's love interests, anticipating Barbara's envious exclamation 'Monkey see, monkey do' in reference to Mona's romance with Seth. 'Mono' (as in 'catching mono') here is an abbreviation for mononucleosis (the 'kissing disease'), but also signifies 'monkey' in Spanish, similar to Jen's choice of naming her protagonist 'Mona' (meaning 'female monkey', among other meanings), the feminine version of 'mono'. That the very first quotation at the beginning of the novel is from a Mexican American writer, Richard Rodriguez, who asserts that he is 'becoming Chinese' (Jen 1996: ii), also hints at the 'monkey' reading of Mona's name and to the Spanish connections of Mona's name in the novel's title. Furthermore, it is also notable that the name Gish Jen gives to Mona as her Chinese name, Meng-na, apart from being a transliteration for the English

name Mona, has other meanings as well: Meng-na's first character also means 'to trick, to pull one's leg' in Mandarin (蒙娜 'Meng-na' being the standard transliteration of Mona), foreshadowing Mona's trickster attributes. Given that Jen deliberately attaches multiple meanings in different languages to the names of her characters (as in Bailey Wong, the Chinese American baby of the Wong family, who is given the Chinese name Baili by his Chinese nanny Lanlan, whose meaning is given as 'White Power' (白力)<sup>2</sup> in the novel, referring to Bailey's mother being White Anglo-Saxon), Mona's name is no exception. There is another example in the plot where Mona gets called monkey in an unexpected encounter with a burglar, adding to the references that show Mona's affinity to the Monkey trickster. The burglar repeatedly calls out 'skinny monkey' when Mona catches him red-handed. Here, it is noteworthy that the authorial voice identifies skinny monkey with Mona's name, remarking, 'Did he really say her name?' without quotation marks (Jen 1996: 285). Mona then reminisces that Cedric, the Chinese cook at her parents' pancake restaurant, also used to call her 'skinny monkey': 'That's what Cedric used to call us' (Jen 1996: 285), at which moment the burglar repeats the phrase in confirmation, 'Skinny monkey' (Jen 1996: 286).

Apart from Mona's affinity with the Monkey King through her name, her relationship with Camp Gugelstein is also indicative of her connection to the Monkey trickster. Mona's Camp Gugelstein is a rebellion against the establishment. Her courage and willingness to disrupt the establishment and ingrained racial hierarchy, at least for a short while, by creating Camp Gugelstein is similar to Monkey King's rebellious behaviour at the Heavenly Peach Banquet. When Monkey King learns that he is given a lowly rank of being responsible for the horses at the stable in Heaven, he gets frustrated. Then he is given the duty of supervising the heavenly peach orchard. Instead of taking care of the orchard, the Monkey King eats as many peaches as he wants after catching the guards off-guard. And when he learns that he is not on the invitation list to the Heavenly Peach Banquet (the list including names of deities and heavenly bodies from the top to the bottom in a hierarchical manner), he becomes furious and decides to play a trick on the authorities and disrupt the banquet. Thus, he goes to the banquet area earlier, before anyone invited arrives, and puts the guards to sleep with a magic trick. Thereafter, he disrupts the banquet by consuming all the wine and food. Seeing what he has done, he then tries to escape the area quickly.

At the end of this short adventure, as he escapes, the Monkey King gets into the

2 There is a clear irony here, given that Baili/'White Power' (白力), the name given to Bailey by Lanlan, echoes the Black Power movement of African Americans, adding another layer to the multiple meanings that Jen attaches to her characters' names. Lanlan's giving the name to Bailey also has a further significance, given her negative view of White Americans as individualistic, dominant and selfish. In a trickster fashion, Lanlan adds sarcasm to the names she gives to the Wong children.

quarters where heavenly pills of immortality are held and steals the pills without thinking twice. When the Jade Emperor learns all of these rebellious actions of the Monkey King, he gets very angry and sends for an investigator to bring a full report of his actions. When Monkey King's mischief is confirmed, the Jade Emperor then sends armies after him to catch and punish him for his deeds. Unsurprisingly, Camp Gugelstein also begins with a wish to disturb racial and ethnic hierarchies and disrupt authority, when Mona and her friends of different ethnicities gather together in the basement of a house, without their parents' consent. Furthermore, Camp Gugelstein also ends abruptly with an incident of theft, when someone unrecognised steals a flask from the room where Camp Gugelstein was being held, and the whole group takes on the role of investigator to see where things went wrong.

### **Polyphony, Liminality and Creation of Community in Camp Gugelstein**

Polyphony signifies a fictional text's being open to different layers of interpretation and the trickster author's conscious use of it as a narrative strategy. This is particularly the case with narratives that employ tricksters. I infer my argument of a multi-voiced quality in Gish Jen's novel largely from Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and Gates' embellishments of the concept in his theory exploring the language and 'rhetorical strategies' of trickster narratives (1989: 75). I prefer to use the phrases 'multi-voiced' and polyphony, given that Gish Jen creates a multi-voiced discourse, particularly in the confines of Camp Gugelstein.

Through a multi-voiced narrative, the author in a trickster-like manoeuvre instils multiple functions and meanings in his/her text, allowing the text to be read on multiple levels. It is as though the author is all the while having a conversation with the character, creating an internal dialogue (Bakhtin 1998: 324–5) between the character and the narrator within the novel. This internal dialogue not only involves the author and the trickster character, but also the reader; therefore, the trickster cannot be analysed on its own, in isolation (Vizenor 1993: 189). One of the significant characteristics of polyphony is the use of 'comic, ironic and parodic discourse' (Bakhtin 1998: 324). This is very much in line with the attributes of the trickster, who uses irony and parody often for different purposes within the text. In line with Bakhtin's elaborate discussion of double-voiced discourse, Henry Louis Gates Jr. also includes storytelling, connotations and figurative language as signifiers of a double-voiced trickster discourse (1966: 74–75). I argue that through a trickster technique with an ethnic focus, the multi-voiced interaction between the author, trickster figure and reader extends to the invocation of various mythic trickster figures, who also display a multi-voiced discourse, invoking multiple trickster and cultural figures in a single trickster, which endows the character with a multi-voiced quality. This quality of the trickster allows the trickster writer to reinterpret a traditional mythical narrative that

includes the trickster (in this case, *The Journey to the West*) and allows her to voice her ethnic and cultural experiences on a new, Chinese American scale. A multi-voiced discourse is the key feature of a trickster countertype like Mona.

Camp Gugelstein becomes a space where Mona and her friends realise a community outside the boundaries of social, racial and ethnic inequalities and divisions. The people who start the idea of Camp Gugelstein, Mona's friends, Alfred and Evie, transgress the boundaries of ethnic mixing, talk about 'love of all humanity' (Jen 1996: 203), and do yoga to 'take charge of anxiety and fear' after a fiery discussion about racial tension and inequality (Jen 1996: 202). In Camp Gugelstein, when the Vietnam War is mentioned, the speeches of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King are invoked with quotes by Mona's African American friends (people of colour like Mona), speaking of their desire for non-violence and inter-ethnic understanding (Jen 1996: 202). Furthermore, through Mona's African American friends, Jen extends the Monkey trickster tradition she uses in the novel to the Signifying Monkey of Afro-American trickster tradition, through the dialogues of various African American participants at Camp Gugelstein. Through the Signifying Monkey, Mona's African American friends speak of injustice, need for reform in ethnic relations, and of 'cutting bullshit' with their searing words and fiery remarks. Through the interruption of 'the Estimator' (echoing the investigator sent after the Monkey King), Luther or Dr. King (reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King), Benson, Ray and other Afro-Americans in the group, Jen also shows that racism and ethnic issues also have a wider resonance in the society that connects ethnic Chinese Americans to the other ethnic groups stigmatised by racism and discrimination.

Through Camp Gugelstein, each member of the multi-ethnic group is able to discuss issues related to racism and ethnicity: although the events lead to increasing tension, they do not amount to fighting. As Ray, one of the African Americans in the group, holds: 'I seen everything, man. [...] This ain't nothing compared to what went on in 'Nam [Vietnam]' (Jen 1996: 202). In the liminal space of the camp, Ray argues that the Empire, a metaphor for the establishment and institutionalised racism, 'is falling apart' (Jen 1996: 202). As the liminal space of the camp can give a glimpse of a world without racism, ethnic inequality and ingrained hierarchies, Evie argues: 'But here we are, integrated, [...] Is it unnatural?' (Jen 1996: 202). By using the signifiers of open criticism and disruption, Jen's characters make use of the Signifying Monkey as a rhetorical trope. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, the practice of signifying represented metaphorically by the Signifying Monkey is a 'trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes', which include metaphor, irony, and hyperbole, and which transform the degraded position of the African slave by deriding and upturning the racist rhetoric by using the same racist image of black as monkey, only to revise and reverse it (Gates 2005: 178). The camp for ethnic harmony becomes a 'hellhole' in

the words of the Estimator, when a fiery argument follows after the flask goes missing. When the Estimator exclaims, '[l]et's get the hell out of this hellhole', Luther freely criticises the final developments at the camp that put the Blacks in a suspicious position, arguing that '[a] lot of racist bullshit [is] coming down here' (Jen 1996: 205). Then the Estimator affirms Luther, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, 'We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream' (Jen 1996: 205). The camp's liminal space in the fictional narrative allows for free exchange of ideas but represents only a temporary ideal of freedom from hierarchies.

Mona as the trickster countertype orchestrates the camp, and channels her trickster energy to her gang, to criticise the establishment that creates racism, racial stereotypes and inter-ethnic tension. The trickster countertype's presence allows the camp to happen and is felt throughout the sub-plot of Camp Gugelstein in the novel. Some of the group, including Alfred and Evie, who sneakily get together in the basement without anyone noticing them for a time, are considered to be 'trick[ing]' Mona and her group of friends (Jen 1996: 95). Mona's 'gang' (Jen 1996: 203) in fact share some of the trickster energy that Mona has, and act in parallel with the Monkey King and the Signifying Monkey, using the stinging language of the Signifying Monkey and transforming the bellicose characteristics of the Monkey King. The narrator's voice emphasises the fact that the liminal space of the camp is meant to be temporary, having a particular function in the plot, which is explained thus: 'Camp Gugelstein couldn't go on forever, and at least its breakup didn't involve the law. That's how they see it from afar. [...] [T]hey think their purpose was to help Alfred back to his own feet, and they did. They wanted him to be independent of them, and he is' (Jen 1996: 206). Alfred, one of the African Americans in the group, finds a new place with the help of his 'squad', finds a new car, and no more has to live 'with some white folk like a charity case' (Jen 1996: 205). The camp in a way accomplishes a concrete goal. As such, Alfred and the African Americans in the group make their points about ethnic inequalities and racism in the society and leave the camp triumphantly, with the Estimator exclaiming, '[f]ree at last' (Jen 1996: 205). Although this does not end inequalities in the society, it stands in the plot to show the potential of the trickster's liminal position.

While Seth, Mona's boyfriend, ultimately despairs about the results of the camp and thinks that it did not work, Mona as the trickster countertype holds that it was in fact 'an education' (Jen 1996: 207). Mona recounts the accomplishments of the camp, emphasising the role of the trickster and her positive action in the confines of the novel: '[...] Alfred is on his feet, [...] Seth got to play chess, and wasn't it great how they all held hands?' (Jen 1996: 207). In Mona, the trickster countertype's transgressions take on the form of a willingness to take up social action, even at the risk of being arrested:

‘even she’s got the social-action bug now, who knows but that she’ll be out getting arrested pretty soon?’ (Jen 1996: 207). Mona’s liminal position makes it possible for her to move, interact freely and empathise between/with different ethnic groups of colour such as Chinese Americans and blacks, and allows Jen to use the Signifying Monkey’s rhetorical tropes while bestowing Mona with some of the attributes and abilities of the Monkey trickster of Chinese tradition. As such, Mona’s attitudes towards racism and ethnic discrimination reflect Jen’s concerns about racism and inter-ethnic understanding. When Cedric, one of the Chinese cooks in the pancake restaurant of Mona’s parents, complains about Alfred, saying ‘[t]hose black people, [...] [o]ne day this way, one day that way’, Mona defends Alfred, remarking that ‘it’s not *those black people*. It’s Alfred’ (Jen 1996: 208, italics in the original).

Before the camp dissolves, the creation of a community in Camp Gugelstein is expressed by the authorial persona, empathising with Mona: ‘here too is a gang who loomed up like strangers not long ago. Now, though, they are friends, plain and simple – already! What are they, besides the most interesting people Mona has ever known? What are they but a bunch of hair-bedeveled buddies?’ (Jen 1996: 203) ‘[H]air-bedeveled buddies’ as a phrase is reminiscent of the Monkey King’s tricks, his pulling a hair from his body and turning it into a group of small-size monkeys to fight monsters and rivals alike. Mona, the trickster countertype appropriation of the ‘hair-bedeveled’ Monkey trickster, achieves her goal by helping to bring together a community out of complete strangers from different ethnic backgrounds, transforming and moving beyond societal restrictions through liminal action. Mona becomes a ‘buddy’ to her friends in this newly founded community, unlike the Monkey trickster who transforms the hair plucked from his body into an army of hairy apes and controls them as their ruler. Mona chooses to befriend ‘strangers’ in contrast to the Monkey King, who chooses to crush the strangers who offend him with his cudgel. In this way, the trickster countertype Mona’s peaceful resistance to authority is parallel to the other trickster countertype Wittman Ah Sing in the iconic novel *Tripmaster Monkey* of Maxine Hong Kingston.

Camp Gugelstein becomes a gathering where the concept of the ‘carnival’ (as understood by Bakhtin) as an ambivalent process can be observed. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is not meant as a concept to be understood as a spectacle, but as an occasion which its participants equally share and experience, ‘while [the] carnival lasts’: ‘Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people’ (1984: 8). As a ‘special condition’ and as ‘the people’s second life’, the carnival also can be exempt from some of the societal rules and restrictions (Bakhtin 1984: 7–8). Mona and her friends celebrate a free exchange of ideas in a set of celebratory gatherings at Barbara’s house, to which Chinese American Mona, Jewish American Seth and Barbara Gugelstein

invite Alfred, an African American youth, and other friends. Camp Gugelstein's carnival-like qualities are reflected in the group dancing together, playing various board games, and drinking (Jen 1996: 199). Further, the participants try things they have never tried before in a carnival fashion, which shows one of the functions of the carnival, as an escape from daily realities and restrictions: thus, the group tries mah-jongg, Checkers ('Chinese and regular'), and almost every kind of outdoor and indoor sports in a festival mood, as '[t]he squad tries tennis [and] Badminton', 'billiards' and 'Ping-Pong' (Jen 1996: 199). In all the activities from billiards to yoga, all the participants are allowed to take part equally. After the fun activities, a call goes out and a meeting takes place during which everyone expresses their opinions freely, without any central authority or hierarchical structure to restrict views and silence unwanted voices. In Camp Gugelstein, various identities (African American, Jewish American, and Chinese American) are represented, while at the same time there are no claims to an essentialist conception of identity as homogenous and unadulterated. Partridge describes Camp Gugelstein as 'an experiment in cross-ethnic integration and solidarity' (2007: 107). This almost universal extent of discussions and exchange of different worldviews is in accordance with Bakhtin's understanding of the nature of the carnival, which allows for a spirit of freeing individuals from society's restrictions to flourish, instilling in them such a spirit with universal proportions (1984: 7).

In conclusion, whereas in the beginning Camp Gugelstein had become 'a symbol of interracial communication and alliance' (Partridge 2007: 108), in the end it dissolves when a precious flask goes missing in the household, after which Alfred and his friends leave the house in fury when they are accused of theft (Jen 1996: 204–205). However, this incident only ends the Camp Gugelstein gathering, and the contact between these young people of differing backgrounds maintains its impact throughout the novel. Mona and Seth go to Alfred to apologise for the incident, and there develops a close friendship between the three (Jen 1996: 292). Mona defends Alfred when her parents fire him from his job at the pancake house. Given that historically in the United States, relations between White Anglo-Saxon Americans and Black Americans have been strained as a result of a history of slavery and racial inequalities (Fenton 2010: 28), that Gish Jen brings together a Chinese American protagonist, a Jewish American youth and African American Alfred is remarkable.

In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen brings heterogeneous identities like Chinese American and African American together and 'puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; [...] that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable' (Lyotard 1991: 81). According to Partridge (2007: 111), the fact that Jen's novel does not represent Chinese American life as a 'clash of two monolithic cultures' [Chinese American versus White American/Anglo-Saxon] is what makes it markedly different

from previous depictions of Chinese American life as in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Both Gish Jen and Amy Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* address the 'third ear' (H. Roberts quoted in Gates 1988: 70) of the Chinese minority reader as much as the non-Chinese American readership, through allusions and references to the trickster and mythic figures from Chinese oral and written traditions. However, Jen specifically breaks the assumption of a dichotomic relationship between the Chinese and non-Chinese segments of American society. In the end, it could be said that through *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen points towards a multiplicity of voices (among her novel characters in line with Bakhtinian polyphony) within the Chinese community and the American society at large, which clearly breaks from monolithic narratives in Chinese American fiction.

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