

# Gene luen yang and toni morrison, on the triumvirate of identity



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There is a common symbol found throughout ancient culture, the triumvirate. From the Christian Holy Trinity, the Islamic Wudu and Salat, the First Triumvirate of Rome, etc., the number three is important. This matters to us why? Because in *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang, and *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison, three is the number of self. Both novels explore their themes and ideas through the idea of a triumvirate, or three part identity. This is best summarized in the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the first three numbers, starting one is perfect singularity, two is dualistic chaos, and three is perfect synthesis. It is one and two, chaos and order, synthesized by three. This concept of three representing synthesis is an excellent example of its meaning in the books, wherein the authors show that the characters have three aspects to their own identity. While identity is limitlessly complex and discrete, the three sections the authors divide it into are as follows: one, internally idealized self image, the idealized version of oneself constructed in one's own mind; two, the externally created image and identity, the version of oneself created from society's stereotypes and ideas; and three, the true internal self, someone's actual, not socially unmodified, but self made identity. Internal idealized and externally created image are constantly in conflict, but united in their attempted modification of the third. Both works use their themes and literary structures to show us the power society has upon individual identity and agency, and that when social identity and self image is convoluting one's true self, one must remember that one's true identity is who one is.

*American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang, is a story told, akin to our main theme, in three parts. It begins in a mystical Chinese kingdom, where the

Monkey King is birthed from rock to rule all other monkeys. He masters the disciplines prerequisite to deity-hood, and is prepared to attend a heavenly dinner party, reserved for those of godhead. He arrives, but is refused entry by a guard. This moment, as we later see, is representative of what aspect of identity the king represents. The guard, while treating him with seemingly the utmost courtesy, refuses him entry, first citing his shoes, but then outright stating: " Look. You may be a king- you may even be a deity- but you are still a monkey" (p. 15). In this line, the guard is implying: " you are not wanted or accepted, leave." This rejection, leads the king to leave heaven in anger and embarrassment, but upon his return, the meaning of the guard's words are cemented by his thoughts: " When he entered the royal chamber, the thick smell of monkey fur greeted him. He'd never noticed it before. He stayed awake the rest of the night thinking of a way to get rid of it" (p. 20). This is accompanied by him sitting on his throne, alone, surrounded by darkness. This is symbolic of his resolve. He only noticed the smell for the first time, because he was made aware of the fact, that he, as a monkey, is considered a lower-class citizen in the deific, a metaphor for white dominated, society. This is the Monkey King's identity crisis, he is a monkey, but because of how the other deities think of monkeys, he doesn't want to be one. Even though the deities aren't forcing it on him, he has taken their mental image of what a " good god" is and wants to become that. The monkey king is representative of internally idealized self image. He has used external, sociological views on abstract concepts such as " the ideal monkey" and, " the ideal god" and has made it his goal to become them, he has said, " My ideal identity is this, because I want my ideal identity to reflect other's ideals for me." It is Yang's way of telling us why people

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become internally idealized images of themselves, why they give up their essence to become what they are not, for acceptance, and for love. Our next story, is that of our main character, a small boy name Jin Wang, born to Chinese immigrants who came to America for school. He was born in San Francisco's Chinatown, and grew up there with several friends, all of Chinese descent. On a weekly visit with his mother visit to a Chinese herbalist, Jin waits in the front, with the herbalist's wife, playing with a Transformer toy. One day, she asks him: " So little friend, what do you plan to become when you grow up?" (p. 27). Jin tells her, an idealized fantasy of being a transformer, and she responds with a simple declaration: " It's easy to become anything you wish... so long as you are willing to forfeit your soul" (p. 29). This is symbolic of the central identity conflict: you can achieve your goals of becoming an idealization, if you're willing to become iconoclastic to your true self. Yang is telling us the result of trying to accept your internally idealized self image and make it who you are, you forfeit your rights to your true self, your " soul."

This concept of internally idealized self image taking over true identity is also illustrated in a quote from Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*: " It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights-if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (p. 46). This quote illustrates that the main character, Pecola has internalized an image of perfection and beauty, in this case, as stated throughout the text: " Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes"(p. 45). This is a unifying theme of the two texts; they use their characters thoughts to show how society affects their

perception of themselves and others. We see the Monkey King is told he is less because he is a monkey, so he wants to become what others consider the ideal, a great and powerful sage who is not a monkey, but is “civilized.” Pecola sees this cherry cheeked, idolized girl, with big, blue eyes, and is enraptured, seeing it a society’s epitome of beauty, as illustrated here: “She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (p. 122). Society has beamed a message, via the movies, right into her mind; it has said “beauty is on a scale, this is where you fall, if you had blue eyes, you would be here instead.” Both of these characters, though a world and a species apart, are representative of the same idea, of what happens to someone’s true self when their idealized self image overtakes their true identity.

As previously touched upon, in Morrison’s text, Shirley Temple is the “ideal beautiful American girl,” but in Yang’s novel, we see the darker side of externally created images, the racist stereotype. It is presented in a Saturday morning cartoon called, “Everybody Ruvs Chin-Kee.” From the start, we see the stereotype of Asian accents switching l’s and r’s, and Chin-Kee’s name is both reminiscent of the demonym Chinese, and the racial slur “Chink.” We also see at the bottom of every panel taking place during the show, there is laughter, and while Chin-Kee’s mouth is nearly always open, the laughter is not his, it is the laughter of the children, laughing at a racist stereotype. This is representative of what aspect of identity Chin-Kee symbolizes, the externally created image. Because this is an image created by society, the children accept it as truth and something to be laughed at.

Chin-Kee, in his physical appearance is also a walking stereotype. He is constantly jumping around, has caricatured buck teeth, and a calf-length braid. He is constantly drooling, and when he sees Melaine, he is openly perverted towards her. In everything from his appearance to his suitcases being Chinese take out containers, Chin-Kee is a stereotype. He exists to show the negative result of an externally created image. Because of society's pessimistic and flaw seeking nature, the negatives are amplified, and everything else is minimized, similar to the internal effect of adopting an internally idealized self image. Yang uses this to show the relationship between the one and the two of identity, to show how they are connected and interrelated, and Yang does nothing but reaffirm this later. Morrison continues this trend of stereotypes, but in her novel, the focus of externally created identity is not a direct negative; however, by definition, when you create a standard, something must be lower than something else. The following quote illustrates this concept exquisitely: " Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty. Probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in dissolution." While in Chin-Kee and Yang's text, this external image is blatant and loud, Morrison shows a subtler, seeming more dangerous side of it. Powerful words like " envy, insecurity, and dissolution" set a tone of mourning and loss, central tones of the book. Morrison aims to create a pervasive feeling, as if this physical beauty, an abstraction of a specific figure, (i. e. Shirley Temple) is the idealized external identity, it is dangerous, it can corrupt your true self, hiding who you really are under a miasma of darkness and dissent.

Even though Morrison's identity based miasma may seemingly be limited to abstract ideas of physical beauty, it simply is not. It is a pervading theme, and though in different forms, we see it manifest across both novels. In Yang's text, we see it manifest as the result of senseless violence. Because of how the Monkey King is treated, he first, the day after his embarrassment, declares that all monkeys must wear shoes, and the first panel of this section shows them stumbling and unable to jump around the trees. This is Yang showing the effect of coercing an internally idealized image upon oneself. While it's not shown, it can be assumed that the king himself has the same issue, yet he does not repeal his decree. It is debilitating, yet because of the society, here, celestials denying him entry and citing his lack of shoes, he goes through with it. He then retreats into a cave to master the eight other heavenly disciplines of kung-fu, and when he returns, his appearance physically changed into a more human like form. In the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, changing one's appearance can indicate a shift in fundamental identity and being. Here it indicates a fundamental continuation of the change in identity. The Monkey King then receives a message, saying he has been sentenced to death, but when he arrives at his execution and announces his changed name: " I shall now be called-The Great Sage, Equal of heaven" (p. 60), he is met with laughter and derision. The author uses this to communicate to us the Monkey King's changed thoughts and ideals, how they have been shifted by the societal structure, but how because of his physical appearance, a show of strength is necessary. We see the King continue to rampage across the land, defeating Lao-Tzu, Death, and even Taoism's second highest God. Eventually, in defeat, the celestials flee to emissaries of Tze-Yo-Tzuh, the creator of everything. When the King meets

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him, he is immediately arrogant and scornful. Saying that he is beyond even Yo-Tzuh's reach and no one created him. It is then revealed to him that, " It was I who formed you within that rock" (p. 70). This is implicative of Yo-Tzuh's symbolic place in the web of identity. He is the most pure form of true self, as he knows all and created all in its original form, so, implicitly, he created everyone's true identities. Despite this, in line with his previous actions, the king is scornful, claiming that he can easily escape Yo-Tzuh's reach. He flies up, seemingly escaping the stretching hand of god, quickly dashing through the entire universe, past its border, to five golden pillars, seemingly at the end of creation. He proceeds to write his " name" and urinate on the pillar, to illustrate his supposed dominance. He zooms back to Yo-Tzuh, scornfully laughing at his achievements, but is shocked to see that those golden pillars at the end of creation, were Yo-Tzuh's five fingers. He flew past what he thought what was every boundary, and was still bound. This is Yang showing us the underlying power of true identity. Yo-Tzuh never even lifted a finger, and still was substantially more far reaching and powerful than the king. Even when either of identities externally created factors battle, true identity remains, always patient, omnipresent. While this show of power is somewhat humbling to the kings, he refuses to believe Yo-Tzuh. This is symbolic of internally idealized identity refusing to accept its own origin. Because it is something held in the mind, it insists it must be created mainly by the mind. Contrary to this, Yo-Tzuh tells the king: " I do not make mistakes little monkey. A monkey I intended you to be. A monkey you are" (p. 81). Of course, the Monkey King, so altered by Society, that god himself cannot shake his resolutions, rejects this and seemingly in sadness, Yo-Tzuh seals him in a mountain of rock, with a golden seal preventing his

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Kung-Fu, the magic with which he became the “Great Sage” While the “Great Sage” is the internally idealized identity, we have yet to touch heavily upon our main character in Yang’s work, Jin.

We return to Jin in middle school, and see he has begun to fall in love with a girl named Amelia, and seeing that she is best friends with a boy who previously (p. 33) showed Jin some compassion in the face of racism, Jin begins to see that boy, Greg, as an ideal. He sees Greg’s image in his mind, then Greg and Amelia, then just Greg’s perm. This is a signal of Jin internalizing what he thinks is an American social ideal, permed hair, and the next day, makes it physically part of himself. The next day, we begin to see a visual motif, Jin’s hair literally crackling with lightning, representative of his confidence, gained because he feels more in tune with society. This begins a switch in identity between Jin and the Monkey King. The King’s side of this is shown to us in the parable of a humble monk named Wong Lai-Tsao. After showing compassion to the disguised emissaries of Yo-Tzuh for many years, they reveal themselves and give Wong a sacred task: To deliver three parcels west, and along the way find several companions, the first of whom is a familiar human shaped monkey. This entire story, as well as the rest of the Monkey King’s plot is based on a famous Chinese novel from the 16th century: Journey To The West, which details the story of the Monkey King, Sun Wukong and 3 others delivering sacred Buddhist texts, after Wong is freed from the punishment garnered by going on a heavenly rampage and revolt (sound familiar?). This connection to one of the four great novels of classical Chinese literature is purposeful, as the text promotes themes of virtue and cooperation of spirituality and identity. As Wong begins his

journey, he travels far across the land, eventually arriving at the monkey king's mountain, in the middle of demon infested land. Despite his knowledge of the demons about to attack him, Wong tries to talk to the King, convince him of his place, summed up here: "To find your true identity... within the will of Tze-Yo-Tzou...that is the highest of all freedoms" (p. 149). This quote, coupled with that fact it is spoken as Wong is about to die pushes the king to realize that he doesn't need Kung-Fu and magic to return to his true form, i. e. his true identity, he just need to accept himself for who he is. As the king escapes and frees Wong, he is ecstatic, but before he brings the grievously wounded monk to medical aid, he must do one thing, he removes his shoes. This indicates his full rejection of his previously adopted identity, he is no longer "The Great Sage" he is who Yo-Tzuh intended, a monkey, and as we all know, why would a monkey need shoes? This is the place where Jin and the Monkey King switch. They walk a mile in each other's shoes before uniting. This begins, with a lie. Jin wants to go on a date with Amelia, and needs Wei, his best friend to lie that he is at his house, as Jin's family has a "no dating till master's degree" rule. Wei, who we later learn is forbidden from lying is forced into the idealized self image, that all American world that Jin has made part of himself, and removed out of his own true self and convictions. This is further evidence of Jin's identity transformation. As evident by the back cover: "He's just an all American boy who's in love with an all American girl" (p. back cover). Jin just wishes for a "normal" and "American" life despite both being abstract and unattainable concepts.

This idea is present within both novels: in Morrison's text, the idea of a societal ideal, as previously stated, is represented by Shirley Temple.

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Because Claudia doesn't like Shirley Temple, she is ostracized, as illustrated here: " Frieda and she had a long conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley" (p. 35). Claudia views this as internalized American racism. Because of the fact that she, a black girl, doesn't look up to Shirley, a white girl, she is alienated. This internalized belief, while held not by Pecola, but by Claudia, is an expression of Pecola's deeply held belief about blue eyes. She is shown having a burning, powerful conviction about the eyes, as illustrated here: " Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see; the eyes of other people" (p. 47). The repetitive and seemingly psychotic nature of this practice, its obvious futility, and the fact that Pecola repeats this nightly, fervently, and powerfully, shows the conviction she holds: that if she prays and believes she will be considered beautiful, because in Pecola's mind: Blue eyes => Beauty => Social acceptance This logical sequence is expressive of Pecola's internally idealized identity. In her identity crisis, fighting with her externally created image, of an ugly black girl. Pecola has the insurmountable struggle of overcoming her own psychological barrier that she perceives as external, with only weak belief and pathetic prayer to protect her. She's trying to climb a mountain with a stepladder. This is symbolized in the disconnected way Pecola's story is told, an omniscient, third person point of view, which represent Pecola's crisis. The narrator is someone omnipresent and all

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encompassing, and it knows nearly everything about her, but notice, the narrator never actually looks into her thoughts, we never see direct thought dialogue from the Pecola's head in the narrator's perspective, this is representative of the fact that Pecola is fighting her crisis internally. Because she knows subconsciously she can never change her eyes, i. e. become beautiful to herself, she has blocked off her mind internally to allow it to create its own fantasy.

The theme parallel to this is in Yang's text. Jin's conflict does not serve as a mountain and stepladder, but instead Jin forms a physical external shell, in the form of Danny. Because of the abuses from his fellow classmate Greg, who asked him to stop dating Amelia, implying that Jin is a bad influence on her, because of his race. After quietly and sadly agreeing to Greg's "favor," we see Jin proceed through the day, with his perm a-crackle, a symbol for his determination, but as he suddenly approaches Greg, who is standing with Amelia, that fire dies. He had to work up that electricity and fervor over the entire day, and Greg, sitting there passively, snuffs him out. It is symbolic of the power someone who's "universally" accepted by society has over an outsider. Jin has tried so hard, even physically changing his appearance with his hair, and this boy, who is and has been shown to be part of the popular and accepted kids in elementary school "defeats" him in less than a second. This expresses to Jin's mind that no matter what he does, people who are American and White, or more abstractly, societally accepted, are better, universally, no matter what. As a last ditch effort to try acceptance, while sitting with Suzy, waiting for Wei, as she begins to cry about being called a Chink, he, with crackling hair reaches over and kisses her. She immediately

punches him away, screaming at him, asking why he would do that, and storms off. He then gets visited at home by Wei, distraught, and wanting to know why his best friend just tried to kiss his girlfriend. They begin to fight, eventually ending in Wei punching Jin and leaving. That night, he remembers the herbalist's wife, all those years ago, telling him what to do to become anything he wants. This triggers a fusion of identities within Jin. His internally idealized image creates a physical shell, Danny, the boy from the cartoon, who is an externally created image. This physical change represents two things, first, a change in dominant identity, which for Jin, has always been, in majority his true identity, has now become his own internally idealized image and externally created image. Secondly, it represents a fusion of the worlds and storylines. Yang does this to show how these stories are all aspects of the same identity, how they are interconnected and incomplete without each other, but if they get thrown out of balance, it can be disastrous, a metaphor for the triumvirate identity itself. Because, for the time, Jin is gone, all that is there are the two externally created identities that need to fill that space, so one will try to take over. This is expressed by the author as a fight between Danny, Jin's ideal self, and Chin-Kee, Jin's stereotyped and caricatured externally created self. We physically see symbols of internally idealized identity and externally created image battling it out to see who, and which will dominate. It begins with Chin-Kee resisting violence, but eventually, unleashes his stereotypically racist "Chinese food Kung-Fu" moves to almost defeat Danny, who, trying to end it all, punches his head, and physically knocks Chin-Kee's head off, to see the Monkey King in disguise.

We see him return, implying a synthesis of identities, as the King started as internally idealized identity, then learned to be his true self, and Chin-Kee, externally created image being the King in disguise shows what he, after his "reformation" has become: True Synthesized Identity. Not just true self, but as said at the beginning, perfect synthesis. The line: "Now that I've revealed my true form, perhaps it is time to reveal yours... Jin Wang" (p. 214).

Reverses Jin's transformation into Danny. He is serving to begin Jin's healing process he explains to Jin, he is serving as his "Conscience, a signpost to [his] soul" (p. 221). The King is symbolizing an anchor for Jin to latch on to, an ideal of the self, he will realize and internalize a part of himself, or in essence, learn to love himself. The King tells him, right before he return to heaven: "I would have saved myself from 500 year's imprisonment in a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey" (p. 223).

While Jin's identity crisis is something resolvable, Pecola's is inverse, her crisis arises from the abuses of others, and requires others to stop, as illustrated in the beautiful quote: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we has a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (p. 205). In essentia, this quote represents the flaws  
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Pecola sees in herself, and where they come from. She wasn't born hating herself, but because the white society used her as a dumping ground for all the negatives of themselves, they have made it so that to fit in you must serve them and make yourself lower, but in doing this, you raise your status, as is apparent, a paradox that only serves the societal bourgeoisie.

The fringe of society is a place many live on, many more have experienced, but even more, are stuck in. Because of the intrinsic nature of humans to find and recognize patterns, we also have the need to organize, everything from taxonomic classifications, to the nature of subatomic particles, and this is apparent in our society. Even in today's "classless" nations, we have a social hierarchy, and as is in the nature of a hierarchy, someone is at the bottom. These people, even if they support and are the base of society, they are ignored, abused, and treated as less than human because they are not included above. This leads into the central theme of both books, in the socially classed world someone's true identity is corrupted, it is twisted, sometimes beyond recognition, all in the name of create perfection for those "Above." and both use their literary structure to tell us: "Remember who you are, you have your own unique true identity, who you are. You are not a by product of society, you are an integral piece of a worldwide system, just as every other human is. You are valuable in your own identity, as is everyone else, but everyone must remember that their identity cannot be transformed by others, for if we forget this, we will crumble, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.