

Performing Identity in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

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In this essay, I first examine the new mode of subjectivity in the postmodern-global-capitalist era through illustrating the way characters in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* engage in the free play of identity performance. Next I argue that their identity as a set of performances is only possible against the terrain of the Capital. In addition, the performers in the novel try to disavow class antagonism in their performance of identity of differences. The disavowal of class, however, suggests both that class secretly overdetermines other differences in political identity and that class antagonism still predominates over others in the struggle for hegemony. My final discussion, focusing on the final scene of *Mona in the Promised Land*, explores its political strategy as a mode of resistance and subversion.

Today's postmodern-global-capitalist regime favors a new mode of subjectivity, one characterized by an accusation of essentialist fixation and a demise of totalizing identification. The new politics of subjectivity celebrates multiple shifting identifications and free choice to identify with a proliferation of differences. The postmodern subject experiences him- or herself as an agent caught in a contingent particular context but incessantly involved in an activity of hybrid identities without constraint. Interestingly, as one asserts one's fluid identities and shifting identifications, one at the same time promotes one's particular difference(s) to indicate one's proper place within this given field. While liberating diversification is thriving and more differences are produced in late-capitalist society, one is increasingly preoccupied with differences of gender, race, culture, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—various particulars and diverse lifestyles. Identity becomes performatively enacted and open to endless play of substitution: one performs and moves freely between difference(s). Yet, with no firm predetermined difference(s), one also experiences oneself as radically unsure since all identifications or performances may be reenacted. In the background of late-capitalist globalization that produces and promotes difference(s), our free choice incessantly to perform particular difference(s) aims for recognition. In fact, our demands for recognition have always already been assumed by the nexus of postmodernism, global capitalism, and multiculturalism. A multicultural society especially appeals to our demands: endlessly divided subgroups coexist, no one is excluded, all differences are tolerated, and we are all (mis)recognized.

While recognition and tolerance of multiplication of differences ground multiculturalism's politics of identity, it is assumed that all differences are equal

and each carries the same weight. Inasmuch as none of the differences is privileged, class difference becomes at best one species of proliferation of new political subjectivities. Once promoted in the Marxist tradition as the determinant of social reality and human subjectivity, the politics of class difference has been referred to as essentialism, and the charge is made that class struggle can no longer overdetermine the complexity of the social reality and multiplicity of subjectivity. Today, the politics of class difference has become less fashionable and “progressively decentred by an increasing preoccupation with gender, race, ethnicity, [and] sexuality.”¹ Even class consciousness is denied because to draw clear class distinctions becomes impossible or impracticable in today’s so-called classless society in which we are all middle class or working class.

Though there is a long tradition of confronting issues of class and race in Asian-American literature, Asian-American literary works shift toward investigating the possibility of a fluid, decentered identity in a postmodern era, challenging the very notion of a stable identity of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. Even in the Asian-American critical field, new tendencies can also be observed: the lessening of cultural nationalism, the increasing feminist and deconstructivist mode, and the embrace of a postmodern subjectivity opened up to multiplicity and free play.² The antiessentialist convictions are apparent in the stories of Gish Jen, a Chinese-American writer. In many interviews, Jen, a daughter of immigrant Chinese parents who grew up in Scarsdale, New York, herself advocates the concept of identity in flux, an identity performatively enacted.³ In addition to her antiessentialist position and highlighting the notion of performativity, Jen also devotes her attention to the politics of class.

The issue of class in Jen’s stories is not obscured by such multicultural concerns as ethnic rights, inequality, racism, representation, intolerance, or immigration. Instead, her writing explores the problematic of class stratification among racial groups and “ethclasses”⁴ in our current postmodern-global-capitalist regime. While her novels *Typical American* (1991) and *Mona in the*

¹ Andrew Milner, *Class* (London: Sage, 1999) 7.

² For a detailed discussion, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) 1–12, King-kok Cheung, *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1–2, and also Begona Simal Gonzalez, “The (re)birth of Mona Changowitz: Rituals and Ceremonies of Cultural Conversion and Self-making in *Mona in the Promised Land*,” *MELUS* 26 (2001): 225–42.

³ See Jen’s interviews with Te-hsing Shan, “Gish Jen,” in *Dialogues and Interchanges* (Taipei, Taiwan: Field Publications, 2001), Rachel Lee, “Gish Jen,” in *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, ed. King-kok Cheung (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), and Don Lee, “About Gish Jen,” *Ploughshares* 26 (2000): 17–22.

⁴ Yen Espiritu and Paul Ong, “Class Constraints on Racial Solidarity among Asian Americans,” *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, ed. Paul Ong et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 308.

Promised Land (1996),⁵ and her collection of short stories, *Who's Irish?* (1999), deal with immigrant experiences, they focus at heart on class. These works all attempt to examine the multicultural-capitalist-postmodern context where the characters in her stories, including "typical" Americans, Jews, Chinese, Blacks, and Irish, are all driven by the politics of class. In her stories, everyone is a "typical American," living in "the promised land," or, rather, a late-capitalist world, and the question of "Who's Irish?" is better understood as an inquiry about class—"which class?" It is class that concerns those characters most, sets their desires in motion, and drives them to act. In her writing, Jen investigates how capital functions as the field against which the performance of differences emerges.

The Cartesian notion of the subject suggests an agent of rational self-legislation and a unified being of disparate parts, mind and body, each with its own attributes. Distinguished by their opposition to this epistemological model, postmodern theories of subjectivity highlight a subject's inability to remain either stabilized or unified, thereby featuring a liberating proliferation of multiple forms of subjectivity. The radical uncertainty of any subjective position conditions the postmodern subject to experience identity as a matter of choice and an act of performance and thus to float from one contingent identification and temporary embodiment to another. The endless open practices of displacement are illuminated by Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity in which all gender and sexual configurations are performed through a process of recycling and mimicking societal markers of gender, sexuality, and desire. Because performativity, for Butler, serves as the basis of gender constitution, gender identity can only be understood as a fiction in which all members of a culture tacitly agree to act. Gender identity is not what one is, but what one does.⁶ Race or ethnicity might work in a similar vein. Butler's "racialization of gender norms"⁷ affirms de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born but becomes woman [black/white/Asian-American]." *Mona in the Promised Land* shows to what extent the notion of an "Asian-American" identity is performatively enacted.⁸

In the novel, which takes place in the late 1960s, almost all the characters engage in the free play of switching identities. Identity switching is extensively explored by the title character, Mona Chang, by her sister, Callie, by their parents, the Changs, and by Jewish characters of a fictional suburb in New York, Scarshill, modeled upon a mainly Jewish New York suburb, the Scarsdale of Gish

⁵ Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land* (New York: Vintage, 1996). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation *MP*.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 33.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 182.

⁸ For a reading of *Mona in the Promised Land* through Butler's concept of the performative, see Erika T. Lin, "Mona on the Phone: The Performative Body and Racial Identity in *Mona in the Promised Land*," *MELUS* 28 (2003): 47-57.

Jen's youth. Opening with the Changs' relocation from Chinatown to that affluent neighborhood, the novel first pictures the fulfillment of the American dream in the economic success of the Changs, a newly prosperous immigrant family who own thriving pancake houses. Seen in Scarshill as "the New Jews," they represent "a model minority and Great American Success" in their community (MP 3).

The Changs' younger daughter, Mona, contentedly immerses herself in the Yiddish neighborhood as an adolescent and enjoys performing an identity at will. At first, in the eighth grade, Mona, like a "permanent exchange student" (MP 6), indulges in performing stereotyped, exotic, and mythic Chinese types, ones who are credited with "get[ting] pregnant with tea" (MP 5), having no body smell (MP 6), eating living monkey brains (MP 8), and inventing scalpels, tomatoes, noodles (MP 8). Boasting about her performative "Chineseness," Mona is once urged by her friend to "make a career out of it" (MP 8). Through adolescence to adulthood, Mona extends her identity switching from Chinese or Catholic to WASP or Jew. Embracing the idea that "American means being whatever you want" (MP 40) and identity performing and switching only require practice of "some rules and speeches" (MP 14), Mona converts to Judaism. She studies Jewish history, attends Jewish rituals and ceremonies, befriends Yiddish youths, and ultimately marries a Jew. At the end of the novel she changes her surname from Chang to Changowitz (MP 303). In her becoming "Mona Changowitz," her act of renaming inaugurates a new mode of subjectivity, one no longer consistent or essential, but performative and shifting.

Like Mona, other family members are obsessed with identity switching and performing. Though once sick of being Chinese (MP 167), her elder sister, Callie, becomes aware in college of the term "Asian American" coined in the late 1960s. Exploring attributes of this new subject position, Callie devotedly acts out "Chineseness." Doing so, she practices Tai Qi, eats shee-veh instead of muffin, speaks a Chinese dialect foreign to her parents' ears, wears padded Chinese jackets and cloth shoes already obsolete in China, and finally, like Mona, switches her name to "Kailan," which, to her, sounds more original and authentic. Baffled by their daughters' behavior, the parents, however, are just as "performative" as any. An overseas Chinese in Jen's first novel, *Typical American*, Ralph has become a typical American in the second novel, and Changkee—"Yankee," perhaps—is his favorite word. An owner of three pancake restaurants, Ralph is successful and his motto is "[t]here is no sure thing. I still believe make sure" (MP 210). He worries that "even our restaurant, standing there so nice, can fall down, good-bye. Forget about sure thing" (MP 210). His identity as an American (or, rather, as a WASP) is performatively enacted on the basis of capital. Similarly, Ralph's wife, Helen, clings to a subject position based on performance of class. Arranging a WASP environment for her daughters, Helen always asks them to act "properly," like WASPS, especially "in a place where people might look down on you" (MP 280). How to stand, how to sit, how to

walk, and how not to drag the feet—"it's all a matter of manners," she claims (MP 53). Her own mannerisms are more obsessive: in public she always firmly holds her pocketbook (MP 280) and once cried just because her shoes did not match it (MP 300).

Many characters besides the Changs are engaged in performing multiple identities. Mona's best friend, Barbara Gugelstein, first endeavors to be a typical American teenager, which means being cool (that is, less polite than Mona) and being popular (that is, having big boobs and using a Lord and Taylor charge card). Then she abruptly announces that she is "Jewish" (MP 30) and begins to attend Jewish youth activities, to join the Temple Youth Group, and to immerse herself in Jewish rituals and traditions. She even claims that "being Jewish is great" and "there's something special about being Jewish she wouldn't want to give up" (MP 135). Yet, before long, Barbara turns to fixing her "Jewish" nose and switches back to being an American or, rather, a WASP because, as she explains to Mona, "a little Jewish is fine, but ... too much is too much" (MP 222). Likewise, although Eloise Ingle, half Jewish, wavers between being a Jew and a WASP, her father, a rich and successful businessman, firmly performs what he believes: "*You've got to know how the game is played,*" he insists (MP 177; original emphasis). That is "*the great lesson of life,*" he always teaches his children (MP 177 original emphasis).

In the novel, the person most skilled at performing and switching is not Mona, but her boyfriend and, later, husband, Seth Mandel. Ironically, Seth is also one who insists on absolute genuineness throughout the novel, saying that "between the inside person and the outside person there should be no difference" (MP 121). Harboring antibourgeois values, Seth performs and switches identities among Jew, Japanese, Chinese, hippie, black, WASP, and Native American. He lives in a tepee, uses chopsticks, does yoga, sleeps on a tatami mat, wears dashikis, displays exquisite Zen-like melancholy, believes in a possible previous life in which he was Japanese, and endeavors to behave as "an authentic inauthentic Jew" (MP 112). At the end of the novel, having become a professor on tenure track, Seth nevertheless remains ("performs" best as) a WASP.

Identity as performatively enacted by characters in *Mona in the Promised Land* presumes some knowledge of the subject. First, a subject, denying the split within consciousness, can be fully conscious of his or her performance. Second, it assumes that identity relies on one's successful performance of difference(s). Third, it assumes that no intra-contradiction exists within a difference and that inter-relations among differences are smoothly and completely signified in language. In the novel, characters presuppose the existence of a doer who is one hundred percent conscious of what he or she is doing prior to choosing an identity to perform, an identity that is effectively constituted by their successful performance. The novel's most skilled performer, Seth, insists on being fully

conscious of his deed and endeavors to maintain a radical uniformity “between the inside person and the outside person,” as he claims (*MP* 121). Yet, staying one hundred percent conscious is impossible, and, moreover, the subject, as Slavoj Žižek maintains, is “*nothing but* the failure of symbolization, of its own symbolic representation” and “nothing ‘beyond’ this failure” (original emphasis).⁹ That is, identity (or, rather, subjectivity) is based not on a successful performance but its failure, not on the chain’s meaning but its disruption; in other words, one’s identity emerges not when identification (or dis-identification) is made but when it fails to be made.¹⁰ One always performs more or less because one’s destined failure to perform results from a sense of loss in mastering an excess of signification. An insistence on accurate performance ridicules its performer (as, for example, with Callie and Rabbi Horowitz). Thus, being Chinese is not constituted by a successful performance but by the inevitable impossibility of exactly performing Chinese. Nevertheless, in the novel, being Chinese, black, Jewish, or WASP appears as an ethnic difference that can be totally translated into a repetition of acts or a set of predetermined representations so that it can be adequately performed. But a difference without any intra-contradiction simply serves as a type, a totalized and completely rhetoricalized form that excludes a nonmimetic account of identification based on Lacan’s concept of the Real. Though the subject can be signified in language, it is not purely linguistic. While a subjective position with no intra-contradiction merely functions as a representative type, to arrange differences smoothly among subjective positions orients identity to one-to-one relations (for instance, white versus black), idealizes the dominant norm, and reinforces peripheral differences. The subject is thus reduced to identification with projective models and, unable to develop into an individual being, thereby remains trapped within an essentially prescriptive discourse.

Identity as a set of performances is especially validated by the teenaged characters in *Mona in the Promised Land*. On the threshold of the Symbolic, the order of languages and the realm of culture, they strive to differentiate themselves from one another and to seek after an identity through performing a proliferation of differences. They are eager to identify differences and anxiously perform one difference after another. Yet, it is not difference that “produces great anxiety,” as Jane Gallop states.¹¹ Rather, performing differences eases their anxiety—*anxiety about how little difference there really is, anxiety about “not being exposed to the Other’s gaze,”*¹² and, as Žižek frequently asserts, anxiety

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!” *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000) 120.

¹⁰ Tim Dean explicates the notion of desire in a similar vein in his *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 200–205.

¹¹ Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) 93.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (New York: Verso, 2001) 249–50.

about the Other itself as “lacking” and “impotent” in today’s world.¹³ The novel precisely exposes one’s anxiety in a postmodern world of diminishing Symbolic efficiency, a world in which Symbolic authority is disintegrating and an ultimately fixed socio-symbolic identity is suspended.¹⁴ In the face of the demise of the big Other, one not only *has to* freely and endlessly experience one’s life as a shifting, always ongoing pursuit of one’s particular lifestyle. One also *has to* freely and endlessly reshape one’s fluid multiple identities through performing a proliferation of differences without any Symbolic point of reference or anchor. As Žizek suggests, because the big Other has retreated, the ego ideal, which used to be the “bearer of symbolic authority” and the ontological guarantee of one’s existence, is reduced to an ideal ego. Now, the ideal ego involves “imaginary competitors,” ones like the father with whom, into his forties, a subject may still continue to compete and thus “remain [an] ‘immature’ adolescent” (TS 334). That, or the ego ideal is replaced by ones elevated into the position of the Lacanian “Subject Supposed to Know” in such “guides” as books or TV programs devoted to marriage, sex, diet, meditation, God, child-raising, and many other topics. In Jen’s novel, the big Other withers and the ego ideal is suspended: teenaged characters seek one after another for an ideal image or a “subject supposed to know,” one who operates somewhat to guarantee their choices and who performs (dis)identifications with idealized or stereotyped images. In the novel, it is Rabbi Horowitz and Naomi who occupy the position of the one who is presumed (particularly by Mona) to know.

Traditionally a religious leader, a rabbi is a representative, in Lacan’s Symbolic, of the social order, teaching Judaism and imposing the law. To Mona and other teenaged characters, however, Rabbi Horowitz does not occupy such a position. He neither provides Lacan’s “point de capiton” through which their endless performances of differences can be temporarily halted nor helps them establish a cluster of master signifiers as the ego ideal to reassure their desire to be recognized by the Other. Rather, he serves, in the order of the Imaginary, as the inverse, that is, an ideal ego, a rebel against the Establishment, a model for Mona’s “adolescent rebellion” (MP 34). Or, hanging our terms to Lacan’s four discourses, we may say that he acts as the agent in Lacan’s discourse of the hysteric, in which the hysteric pushes the master—incarnated in any figure of authority—to the point where the impossibility of desire is foregrounded.¹⁵ Through Mona’s eyes, Rabbi Horowitz, wearing long black hair and an untrimmed beard, listening to Crosby, Stills and Nash, looks like a “Hasid turned rock star” (MP 33). In Mona’s words, he is praised for advising “everyone to ask, ask, instead of just obey, obey,” for insisting that “people are supposed to

¹³ Slavoj Žizek, “Da Capo senza Fine,” *Contingency* 255–56.

¹⁴ See Slavoj Žizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso, 1999) 313–99. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation TS.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of hysterics, see Paul Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender* (New York: Other, 2001) 17–34, and Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) 129–46.

be their own rabbi and do their business directly with G-d," and asking "people to make a pain in the neck of themselves" (MP 34). In this vein, in an Emersonian teaching that echoes a postmodern mode of identity, Rabbi Horowitz urges Mona to ask, to challenge, to perform, and to assert her fluid identities. Ironically, however, when Horowitz himself actually performs acts of rebellion, Mona finds that he undermines her belief in her performative act. Having performed a marriage service for a Christian couple, the rabbi is dismissed from his synagogue and afterward leaves for Boston, there to marry a gentile. At the end of the novel, no longer a rabbi at all, Horowitz is unfit to serve as either an imaginary ideal ego or as its inverse in the Symbolic, an ego ideal or a "subject supposed to know."

Like Rabbi Horowitz, Naomi also serves for a time as an ideal ego and a "subject supposed to know" to Mona and Callie. Worshiped by both sisters, Naomi awakens a racial consciousness and inculcates in their minds a resistance to colonial oppression. An African American, Naomi teaches them how to be Chinese by her living example: Naomi practices daily meditation and yoga, chanting and drinking tea, cooking "an authentic tea-smoked duck," and even speaking a clear Chinese much better than either sister. Through Naomi, Callie understands "what is meant to be Chinese" (MP 168), and Mona recognizes herself as "colored folk" (MP 170). Further, their frequent quotations from Naomi—introduced by the many times they say "Naomi says"—authoritatively expose a hidden connotation of colonial oppression even out of the ordinary. "Naomi says [a Christmas tree is] a symbol of oppression," says Callie, asking her parents not to buy one for Christmas. Likewise, Callie tells her parents, "Naomi says we should hate [Christmas trees] just as much as you hate Panasonic radios" (MP 41). Moreover, Callie corrects her mother on her impression of French missionaries who ran a convent school the mother went to in Shanghai. Callie accuses them of being "imperialists" (MP 42). Callie says to her mother, "That's what Naomi says. They were bent on taking China and saving the heathen" (MP 42). The union of Naomi, Callie, and Mona triumphs in the moment of their exclamation: "They are the oppressors" and "We are the expressers" (MP 184).¹⁶

Though Naomi is worshiped by Callie and Mona, the latter even "striv[ing] to think the way Naomi thinks" (MP 170), Naomi's identity as performance and choice is perceived by Mona as problematic. First, while Naomi encourages Callie to "be in touch with her ancestry," Naomi commands, "Forget your parents" (MP 129): "'But aren't my parents my ancestors?' says Callie. 'Only if you so choose.' Naomi herself claims for her ancestors a number of people not related to her—for example, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth" (MP 129).

¹⁶ In the interview with Satz, Jen sees "endless expression" as a sign of "the Grandiose self" (134). See Martha Satz, "Writing About the Things That Are Dangerous: A Conversation with Gish Jen," *Southwest Review* 78 (1993): 132–40.

When Mona queries her about her own racial identity, Naomi answers, “You are yellow. A yellow person, a yellow girl” (MP 170). Naomi’s definitive answer puzzles Mona since Mona’s “summertime color is most definitely brown, and the rest of the year she is not exactly a textbook primary” (MP 170). Besides, Naomi herself is not black either (MP 170). While Naomi highlights identity as performance as free choice, she at the same time essentializes and simplifies racial identity in terms of color. Indeed, Mona assesses Naomi’s identity as performance as much less subversive and in some sense even submissive to the Other. For example, while working in Scottish dress as waitresses in Rhode Island, Naomi and Callie usually respond to people’s inquiry “What part of Scotland are you from” in subversive tones, claiming that one is from “deepest, darkest Wales” and the other from “the Far Eastern part” (MP 170). But for one occasion, they proudly perform their identities in a manner seemingly ready to confront and challenge authority. One time Naomi happens to serve Mona and her friends, the Ingles. When, at the dinner table, Mr. Ingle asks Naomi the same question, Naomi’s response takes Mona aback: “‘I’m not from Scotland,’ says Naomi, and winks at Mona. Mona looks down. ‘Oh, really,’ says Mr. Ingle. And that is when, to Mona’s profound surprise, Naomi looks down too. She does not say she’s from deepest, darkest Wales. She looks as though she has never seen Mona before in her life” (MP 178). Further, Naomi’s avoidance of eye contact surprises Mona. Indeed, there is “an aspect of Naomi” that disappoints Mona because Naomi does not hold firmly to her own political strategy. As a result, Naomi’s performance, her political statement, loses its subversive potential and turns into mere humor. When also facing Mrs. Ingle’s next question, “Where are you from?” Mona appropriates Naomi’s subversive statement, but Mona’s answer—“from deepest, darkest China”—only evokes laughter and a follow-up inquiry: “‘Is that a joke?’ ‘Yes,’ Mona says” (MP 181).

Finally, Mona recognizes that Naomi and Callie’s performance is not necessarily subversive. Naomi and Callie’s “project” may even work in the service of existing order and endorse its reproduction of power relations without posing any threat to it. Their project, later published as a book credited only to Naomi, is encouraged by the editor to be more “personal” and even just “one person’s”—namely, Naomi’s (MP 270). Callie explains to Mona that “We’re not book material. Naomi’s experience has an import ours just doesn’t. After all, blacks are the majority minority. Also they’ve been slaves and everything” (MP 270). Yet Callie also takes some comfort from the editor’s encouragement that she has “a book in [her] too,” because “people are interested in China,” and, more importantly, she is proud of being “a natural ambassador” (MP 270). Mona wonders what the point is, however, since Callie has “never been to China” (MP 270). All this means is that their performing identity as a resistance has been absorbed into the capitalist marketplace. At the end of the novel, Callie’s “straight A life”—be a doctor, have “two beautiful children and the big-success husband” (MP 302)—is proved also to be merely submissive to traditional authority. Moreover, when Callie brags of her ability to choose—“I’m my own

person" and "I made my own choice" (MP 302)—we recognize that hers is merely a pseudo-individuality, merely one supported by a given field, by, specifically, a late-capitalist global society.

The postmodern politics of contingent performances—freely floating from one temporary embodiment to another—is only possible against the terrain of the Capital.¹⁷ In the novel, as I have suggested, Callie's performance, whether submissive or resistant, relies on this background: her "free" choices supported by a father as an owner of three pancake restaurants, her performances valid only on the condition of her secure financial and social status. Even Callie's part-time job at Rhode Island is not as a regular waitress but, as Mona explains, one for which only those who "go to Harvard or Yale or Brown" can qualify (MP 173). Moreover, Mona's and Seth's rebellion against parental authority or the capitalist framework is also endorsed by the Capital. Mona's decision to leave home is supported by the "charitable contribution" of Seth's stepmother mother, Bea (MP 259), so that Mona can continue, in Bea's words, her "rebellion in peace" (MP 257) after her fight against her mother to defend her right to free performance. Seth best represents the one who is privileged to have "a rebellion in peace" within the background of the Capital. He calls his stepmother a hypocrite, whose "do-gooding," in his eyes, is just a way of maintaining her social status. Seth finds a safe and comfortable way to protest by dropping out of school and sleeping in a teepee on his parents' lawn, though still enjoying use of the household facilities. Throughout the novel, it is the Capital that creates the underlying field in which one's performances can thrive.

In this field of the Capital, the performers in the novel, however, try to disavow class antagonism in their performing identity of differences. In her arguments with her mother on her performing a Jew, Mona beats around the bush, for she avoids aiming at the unspeakable thing: class antagonism. Although their argument about performing identity ranges from being an American to being a tree, they skirt the central issue of class, an issue that is the cause of deep anxiety as far as Helen is concerned. What Helen really worries about is not that Mona turns Jewish, or into a tree, for that matter, but that her performance choices constitute a stepping down in class.¹⁸ Interestingly, the very anxiety about class also afflicts other mothers in the novel. Barbara's mother warns her daughter that if Barbara insists on being Jewish like Rabbi Horowitz, she can "move to the Lower East Side" (MP 222). Barbara's mother even refuses to speak Yiddish and to take a vacation in Florida because she does not want to risk being identified as a Jew. She believes that "they spent their whole lives getting out of the ghetto, why should they go back for vacation?" (MP 125), as

¹⁷ The notion has been examined extensively by Žižek in his recent works.

¹⁸ A similar observation has been made by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong in "But What in the World Is an Asian American? Culture, Class and Invented Traditions in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*," *EurAmerica* 32 (2002): 641–74.

her daughter quotes her as saying. Seth's mother claims, "Better to feel guilty than to feel nothing" (MP 258).

What is disavowed—class antagonism—under the name of performance and free choice returns in the novel as the embodiment of the lower classes, represented by Alfred as well as other African-American characters in the novel, including Cedric (an illegal immigrant), Fernando (an unemployed man), and a female homeless person. As the exclusion from, or the excess in, the Symbolic, it is the lower classes that sustain those performers' thriving identity of full contingency and endless substitution. The lower classes, as represented by Alfred and Cedric, are objectively observed and compared by Mona and her friends. They wonder which one is the poorer of the two: Cedric or Alfred, an illegal immigrant or an unemployed man? To those privileged performers like Mona, Seth, and Barbara, who debate and contemplate, the story of the lower classes is worth studying. They ask, "which is worse—not speaking English and having no visa and leaving [his] family behind to be forced to drink their own piss or having a black face and living in a project and having a great-grandmother who was a slave?" (MP 139). In the case of Alfred, Barbara and Mona try to educate him in the meaning of performance. They preach to him that Judaism is "to ask, ask, instead of just obey, obey," and that by performing a Jew Alfred will learn how to have "a big house and a four-bay garage and a gardener" (MP 137). In their view, identity performance aims toward and facilitates an upward movement in class. Responding to their teaching, Alfred simply answers: "We're asking and asking, but there ain't nobody answering. And nobody is calling us Wasp, man, and nobody is forgetting we're a minority, and if we don't mind our manners, we're like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel. We're black, see. We're Negroes" (MP 137).

Alfred's reply points out the problem of identity performance. No matter how hard they try, the lower classes are stuck to performing one single role. If identity, as Mona and Barbara claim, amounts to no more than a matter of performance and a free choice of lifestyle, the lower classes in the novel should be held responsible for their own social status. That is, their status must be due to their incompetence in performance and to weak minds in making choices. In this view, class antagonism simply dissolves. If we merely impute antagonism between classes to a "green-eyed" and "incompetent" lower classes, then we also get to disregard the fact that the lower class never has the luxury of performance and free choice.

In the novel, members of the lower classes are not only incapable of performance but also uninterested or incompetent to do any harm. For instance, Mona regards a female vagrant she runs into in Grand Central Station as "harmless" (MP 255), even as the woman sleeps deeply with a leg in Mona's lap and Mona herself, in turn, "clasps her hands on [the woman's] slim ankles" (MP 256) and dozes off until rescued by Bea. Likewise, Fernando, a cook who is said

to stalk and sexually molest Mona and who is fired by Ralph, reappears as a thief in Barbara's house, where Mona and Seth stay. However, in either case, he is too scrupulous or too drunk to do harm. Even when an actual class antagonism does break out, it remains essentially harmless and contained. Originally an experiment expressing a fantasy of Seth, Mona, and Barbara and meant to be a utopia where people can be integrated without racial or class boundaries, Camp Gugelstein falls apart after Mr. Gugelstein's flask disappears. When Barbara Gugelstein questions Alfred and other blacks about the piece of missing silver, they protest against the implicit racist accusations made by people who at the same time patronize them by offering shelter and food. Although Alfred and the others quit the camp, call their accusers "racist bastards," and valiantly assert their "black power," their actions make no difference. Moreover, when Alfred drops his lawsuit against Mona's father for racist policies, the novel shows that the underprivileged are powerless against the dominant system. Ultimately the world for privileged performers—performers of privilege—remains secure.

Although class antagonism in the novel is either excluded or contained, Seth nonetheless identifies class struggle all the time. He tirelessly addresses various -isms, including racism, capitalism, sadism, voyeurism, onanism, and others (MP 111). Obsessed with antagonism, Seth accuses Mona's father and his mother of being "capitalist oppressor(s)" (MP 159; MP 116). He insists that anything and everything has to do with either class or race. A house key is totally "bourgeois" (MP 94) and claiming ownership in love (the term "My Boyfriend") is a "capitalistic impulse" (MP 190). To Seth, the Symbolic becomes a network of conspiracy mainly on the basis of class and racial antagonism. Obsessed with one idea, Seth denies "the split within consciousness" and refuses to allow "thoughts to slide away from conscious control."¹⁹ Being "a man of isms" (MP 74), Seth sees Sherman not as a person but as an "idea," claiming that "Everyone's first love is an idea" (MP 113). Seth denies a division between a public face and a private face (MP 208). Ironically, though, Seth, who demands absolute genuineness, is best skilled at identity performing and switching. The gap between his belief and his performance shows Seth's uncanny anxiety regarding the impotence and inconsistency of the Symbolic big Other. That is why Seth, though seeing himself "victimized" by an overwhelming network of conspiracy, accuses the Other of its impotence and failure. Accordingly, Seth retreats to the imaginary, a realm of presumed wholeness, completeness, and similarity, one where, again presumably, conflict, inconsistency, and antagonism dissolve within a harmonious state. He envisions Camp Gugelstein as a house with no walls between the rooms (MP 208), a place where, he believes, anxiety about racial antagonism can be easily released by their all chanting hand in hand in a circle with eyes closed (MP 202). Interestingly, it is immediately after one such

¹⁹ Christy L. Burns, "Parody and Postmodern Sex: Humor in Thomas Pynchon and Tama Janowitz," *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts*, ed. Shannon Hengen (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998) 152.

harmonious scene that class anxiety breaks out and class antagonism is momentarily released as someone exclaims, "A flask is missing" (*MP* 203).

In the epilogue of the novel, Gish Jen accounts for the latest developments in the lives of the major characters. Seth is now a professor and a "generally noble type" (*MP* 298); Mona, who married Seth, is a mother of a one-year-old baby. Barbara has married Andy, twice, and will visit Mona. Eloise Ingle, "charmed" and "matronly," works successfully despite her two sets of twins. Naomi is a productive author and her "main man" is a producer (*MP* 297). Rabbi Horowitz marries another Rabbi Horowitz, a "learned, exuberant, voluminous woman" (*MP* 297). Callie, a pediatrician, a wife of a "big-success husband" and a mother of "two beautiful children," leads "a straight A life" (*MP* 302). Thus, inevitably, the novel ends with the final entries of youth into submission to the Symbolic, the realm of Law. But Jen's epilogue does not address everyone. Alfred's brothers in Camp Gugelstein, including Professor Estimator, Ray, and Big Benson, are totally neglected. Exclusion of the lower classes from the epilogue only serves to sustain the consistency of the Symbolic. There, again, the excess sustaining the Symbolic is kept outside, at a distance. Clearly, if wondering about them at all, readers are left to assume that their conditions of life—their marks of class status—surely remain unchanged.