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“I HAVE HEARD THE LAND SING”: (RE)READING AMERICAN LANDSCAPES IN SHAWN WONG’S *HOMEBASE* AND MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S *CHINA MEN*

Over the course of the last three years, the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) under the Trump Administration has been reversing the course on over eighty environmental protection policies, regulations and rules, some of which have been in place since the 1980s.¹ Examples include: the rollback of Obama’s Clean Power Plan, the loosening of toxic air pollution regulations, the revocation of the Waters of the US rule that protected rivers, streams and wetlands from industrial discharge, the lifting of the freeze of new coal leases on public land, the downsizing of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah for mineral mining and oil-and-gas extraction, the expansion of logging on public land by thirty-one percent, and the lessening of regulations pertaining to the Endangered Species Act. One of the administration’s first moves on the international stage was to withdraw from the Paris Accord. At the same time, Trump has been rallying for the revitalization of the fossil fuel industry, despite warnings by scientists and economists that it would be unable to sustain America’s energy needs in the long run and that it is being replaced by cheaper and cleaner energy sources. The administration’s reasoning for the deregulation of environmental protection laws and the resignation from the Paris Accord are manifold. However, the overarching argument that is often used to defend the administration’s rollback on environmental regulations is that it severely hampers America’s economic growth and in effect, the welfare of the American people. For instance, in his withdrawal announcement in June 2017, Trump argued that the Paris agreement imposed “draconian financial and economic burden” on the United States costing Americans millions of jobs and weakening America’s economic productivity. In guise of the administration’s “America First” policy, environmental regulation is depicted as an injustice, restricting the ‘right’ of Americans to control and optimize their yield of the nation’s rich natural resources.

The episteme of ‘rights’ over the natural world—to ‘claim,’ to ‘conquer,’ to ‘cultivate,’ to ‘reap’—are historically connected to America’s founding mythologies, its political treatise of freedom and democracy, its justification of colonialism, to the founding claims of nationhood. From John Winthrop’s call sermon calling pilgrims to build a “city upon a hill” in 1630, J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur’s “Letters from an American Farmer” in published in 1782, John L. O’Sullivan’s coinage of the concept of “manifest destiny” in 1845, to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis of 1890, the story of America is rooted in the land. These ideologies of entitlement, industry, and divine right justified as well as propelled America’s expansionist, imperialist projects from the Westward settlement to the Mexican-American War. The New World was imagined as the frontier, as Eden, bestowed by God to the stewardship of White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men. The legitimacy of these myths and narratives hinges on the de-legitimization of other ethnic groups within the imagineering of the American landscape—in other words, these myths are contingent on the silencing and disappearance of racialized groups; a whitewashed imaginary of tabula rasa-Eden, the pristine wilderness, the unclaimed frontier. The American West became a canvas onto which myths, legends, national narratives would be *inscribed*—myths that would, for centuries, shape the history and imaginaries of the American landscape while erasing the histories of Native Americans and other non-WASP immigrants, overshadowing a tenuous, complex history of

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¹ See the New York Time’s article “83 Environmental Rules Being Rolled Back Under Trump,” June 7, 2019.



colonialism, imperialism, and global capital that extends from the Sierra Nevada and California to the Pacific Islands and Asia.

This paper is a reflection on the epistemology of American myths relating to nature and the “American West” as echoed in the current administration’s environmental policy. In juxtaposition, it explores new currents in the field of Asian American Studies related to a planetary and diasporic approach to literary and cultural ecocriticism—fields that have for over two decades been confined to a corpus of knowledge historically rooted in American environmentalism. In this paper, I demonstrate both the necessity and the urgency of reading Asian American literature as a means of challenging the mythologies of the American West, the dehistoricized imaginaries of American landscape, and the ideological underpinnings of entitlement that began with stories of the American land and nature. This paper offers a reading of Shawn Wong’s *Homebase* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* from the perspective of ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and citizenship, to suggest new ways of reading the American landscape in Asian American Literature.

1. Ecocriticism and the Asian American movement

Since the 1970s, ecocriticism began gaining momentum as a critical interdisciplinary approach responding to the environment in crisis. However, ecocritics such as Edwardo Lao Rhodes have noted that “[j]ust as people of color until recently have not had a major presence in any part of the environmental movement, explicit reference to race, ethnicity, class or to issues concerning the poor simply has not appeared in modern natural resources and environmental agendas” (2003, 31). In the 2000s, scholars such as Mei Mei Evans, Robert T. Hayashi, Lawrence Buell, and Hsuan L. Hsu began problematizing the absence of racialized groups in the field of ecocriticism and the field’s incapability of addressing the issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and disability. Three main factors contributed to this absence. First, ecocriticism’s reliance on canonical authors such as Willa Cather, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, and Henry David Thoreau fails to incorporate marginalized voices, perspectives and experiences, privileging white narratives within the interstices of ‘nature’ and ‘civilization.’ Second, quoting Hayashi, “ecocritical inquiry continues to remain historically rooted in American environmentalism which, having evolved from the dialectic between conservation and preservation of natural resources, is steeped in an ethos that values untainted nature above all else,” oftentimes at the expense of socially, politically and economically disenfranchised populations (2007, 60). Within the discourse of American environmentalism, ‘nature’ is equated, de facto, with the ‘environment’ obscuring and vilifying ‘anti-pastoral,’ urban environments of marginalized groups.² Ecocriticism and environmental justice must challenge mainstream definitions of nature and the environment beyond the wilderness/preservationist framework in order to understand the intersectional workings of race, gender, immigration, labor, globalization, neo-liberalism, class, disability, planetary environmentalism, etc. Third, while ecocriticism and the environmental justice movement has “helped uncover the unequal distribution of environmental dangers and benefits” it tends to orient “towards the mediation of current environmental risks and injustices and to the prevention of future ones” (Hayashi 2007, 59). This focus on the present and future oftentimes neglects the past—the history of discriminatory environmental and urban policies, urban segregation, economic dispossession and political disempowerment that has created the inequitable landscape where marginalized communities are most exposed to the environmental degradation and hazards. Environmental justice remediation needs to address the historical processes that have led to these unequal distributions of environmental dangers and one crucial approach, is to include cultural texts—specifically texts from racialized and marginalized groups, as an avenue of critical historical re-visioning (Hayashi 2007, 59-60).

The two novels analyzed in this paper, Shawn Wong’s *Homebase*, published in 1979, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, published in 1980, are commonly associated, and historically contextualized, within the early years of Asian American Studies. As a product of the struggle for civil rights and equality, much of Asian American cultural work between the 1970s and 1990s engaged first and foremost with materialist and anthropocentric political agendas. Although the height of the Asian American movement coincided with the

² For instance, the political and social rhetoric of New York’s urban planning during the industrial era advocated for the creation of green spaces within the densely-packed districts of the urban poor. Ideologies and the nostalgia of the spiritually rejuvenating American pastoral and the republican ideals of “nature” translated into massive urban policies of slum clearance, urban eugenics, and the condemnation of neighborhoods such as Chinatown and the Lower East side as diseased, “cess pools,” and public health hazards.



publication of William Rueckert's inaugural essay *Literature and Ecology* (1978), ecocriticism did not become a mode of critical analysis until the 2000s. Scholars of ecocriticism did not include narratives of most marginalized groups for over two decades even though the American landscape, 'nature' and the wilderness were the central feature of a myriad of works by Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. As Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic have pointed out in their important introduction to *MELUS's* volume on Ethnicity and Ecocriticism, the roots of America's environmental movement "can be traced back to the abolition movement, which revealed the connections between colonization, conquest, slavery, resource exploitation, and capital, and many of the most successful strategies of early environmentalism were borrowed from the abolition, civil rights, and women's movements and American Indian Land Claims lawsuits" (Adamson and Slovic 2009, 5-6). Rereading both *Homebase* and *China Men* from an ecocritical perspective, I argue, sheds light on the relationship between land, landscape, nature, capitalism, diaspora, citizenship and identity which and is intricately connected to the history of colonialism and imperialism. Analyzing these books from a planetary ecological perspective not only destabilizes American founding myths but also reveals the intricacies and complexities of the Asian American diasporic identity. Moreover, it creates new pathways of understanding and forming socio-political allegiances within the Pan-Asian, Pacific American community.

2. From Guam to Berkeley: the entrapping of American Exceptionalism and the difficulty of representational strategies

Shawn Wong began writing *Homebase* while co-editing the *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) with Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, and Lawson Fusau Inada. The anthology was a project to salvage lost and forgotten works by Asian American authors. It included excerpts from Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1943), Diana Chang's *The Frontiers of Love* (1956), John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), amongst others—novels that are now staples of Asian American Studies syllabi and 'canonized' in major American literary anthologies. Coinciding with the nascent socio-political Pan Asian movement, the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* not only marked the critical moment of the beginnings of a new field of study in the American academia, it also established a heteroglossia of Asian (hyphenated) America. The anthology was crucial to the community at that time as it testified to the literary 'presence' of Asian Americans in American literary history. Despite the different histories, languages, and cultures, *Aiiieeeee!* gave the Pan Asian movement a common vocabulary to voice their experiences of racism and discrimination, as well as a common ground in their fight for social, political, and economic equality. It is also of great significance that *Aiiieeeee!* was published by Howard University Press, signaling an (often forgotten) close allegiance between civil rights and Asian American activists.

Homebase was written during this critical cultural milieu of experimentation and identity formation. While Frank Chin borrowed strategies and tactics from the Black Panthers and the civil rights movement, challenging the emasculated stereotype of the Asian men and the exoticized spaces of Chinatown, Shawn Wong's first novel focused on the violence of the erasure of Chinese American history and the right of belonging and citizenship. *Homebase* is a 98-page melancholic novel written in non-linear, free-association prose that meanders between memories, dreams, and stories narrated by the protagonist, Rainsford Chan. Combining the forms of the bildungsroman and the travelogue, Rainsford travels across America searching for the ghosts of his paternal ancestors and the stories embedded in the spaces and places they had lived. By recovering and stitching together the fragments of his father's, grandfather's, and great-grandfather's stories, Rainsford also creates an archeological account of the history of the Chinese in the United States. Throughout the novel, America's natural history, landscape, and nature is juxtaposed with the erased histories of the subalterns. The dialogical relationship between the anthropocene and human history, between the colonial American West and the *unincorporated* territory of Guam, destabilizes America's anthropocentric national myths but at the same time problematizes Rainsford's quest to legitimize his family's claim of America. As American identity is intimately bound to the quintessential myths of the American West and to the imaginaries of its landscapes and nature, Rainsford's strategies of claiming belongingness based on his family's history of labor 'on the land' is entrapped within the same discourses and myths that had excluded his family and all other ethnic minorities from it. His quest to find homebase unveils the internal struggles of a generation of Asian/Chinese Americans in their negotiation of identity, citizenship and belonging while highlighting ambiguity and dangers that this venture holds.



Homebase begins with a poignant passage which not only sets the tone of the novel but also connects nature and the American landscape with the history of his family's origins in America:

I was named after my great-grandfather's town, the town he first settled in when he came to California from China: Rainsford, California. Rainsford Chan (Chan is short for California). Rainsford doesn't exist anymore. There's no record of it ever having existed, but I have heard stories about it. I've spent many days hiking and skiing through the Sierra Nevada looking for it. I've never found exactly where it was, but I'm almost sure I've seen it or passed by it on one of those days. I recognized it from a hill. It was one of those long, wide Sierra meadows. A place of shade. The sound of a stream reaches my ears. Dogwood trees make the place sound like a river when the breeze moves through the leaves (1991, 1-2).

The town of Rainsford represents a generic, metaphorical space of the beginnings of Chinese American history—a place that no longer exists, wiped off the map and the annals of time. This 'disappearance' echoes a long and violent history of Chinese miners, laborers, and immigrants murdered, robbed, and driven out of towns and cities across the United States in the 19th century. Three generations of Rainsford's paternal ancestors, having worked and lived in temporary, makeshift camps as miners, transcontinental railroad builders, ranchmen, and US servicemen in Guam, were in a constant state of dispossession and displacement. This *dis-location* propels Rainsford on a quest driving, hiking, skiing across California and Sierra Nevada tracking the footsteps of his forefathers, traveling back through time and space in search of traces in nature and landscape that would attest to his belonging on America, that would root him to the ground on which his ancestors toiled. Throughout the narrative, Rainsford struggles to define home, having been told by his taunting, allegorical wife—America—that his history and identity lie in the distant shores of exotic China, or within the boundaries of Chinatown—an abject, illusory "edge of China" (1991, 66). Significantly, it is only during the formative year of 1957 which Rainsford and his family spent in Guam that he came to learn about America—"I knew America by living away from it" (1991, 68).

Rainsford describes Guam as a "boy's paradise," "that tropical, white, sandy *piece* of America" where he "saw what other boys in America saw," and the "things they only imagined" (1991, 4; 68). With this, he refers to Guam as "a world of real aircrafts carriers, destroyers, submarines, bombers, sunken ships, and palm-lined white sandy beaches" (1991, 3). It was a place where material remnants of the Second World War littered the landscape, a place where nature had begun its slow work of absorbing it—the "charred fighter jet lying mangled amid the roots of the trees" behind their house, and the "gleaming brass bullet casings" found buried under "fallen leaves and loose earth near the base of the tree" (1991, 3; 4). Although Rainsford's family participated in America's military-colonial occupation of Guam, and bore witness to the material realities of imperial power and the destruction of war, his memories are colored by the naiveté of a six-year old boy, and preserved by the melancholic nostalgia of the last year spent with his father before his death. Hsuan L. Hsu has argued compellingly that Rainsford's "exceptionalist desire to find and lay claim to Chinese American remains in US landscapes" is undermined by his time in Guam (2012, 288). Hsu points out that Guam becomes "an ideal place for Rainsford's interpellation into US American Exceptionalism myths" (2012, 289). Away from the America that considered them the abject, Rainsford's father's employment at the US military airbase *situated* in an American *un-incorporated* territory provided the geopolitical space and socio-political positionality to test the legitimacy and limits of their American citizenship. Rainsford remembers with great affection times his father "play[ed] General of the beach," or the times his father took him along when "a ship or air base had open house" (1991, 62; 68). In a scene, as Rainsford and his parents were waiting to board a Chinese destroyer from Taiwan as guests, Rainsford "looked in horror at the slim gray destroyer" and said: "[T]hat's not a Chinese destroyer. It looks just like one of *ours*." Rainsford's disbelief reveals both his identification as American and his exceptionalist imagination of American military pre-eminence (1991, 69, italics mine).

Rainsford's nostalgic memories of Guam and his romanticized rendering of nature on the island veil a long history of violence beginning with the Spanish colonization of the island and the Chamorro people in the 17th century, the capture, occupation, and cession of Guam to the United States in 1898, the invasion of imperial Japan during WWII, to the Guam Organic Act in 1950 which established the island as one of America's thirteen unincorporated territories. Despite his blind spot, Rainsford's peripheral vision unconsciously registers the disjuncture between the 'paradise' of white beaches and coral reefs and his surroundings that betray a more



disturbing reality. Besides the physical sediments of the brutal occupation of the Japanese during the Second World War (the charred remains of the fighter jet, the land strewn with bullet casings), Rainsford's flashbacks of his childhood contain seemingly superfluous details that cast shadows over the paradise he paints. For instance, Rainsford recalls celebrating the New Year at Utamac Bay, "where the green grass grows right up to the edges of sheltered reefs, where my father carried me on his back as we walked alongside the Filipino boys leading water buffalo home" (1991, 62). This idyllic picture of pristine nature is punctuated by the image of the Filipino boys—a reminder of Guam and the Philippines's shared colonial history as pawns in the shifting powers of the Spanish and American empires.³ Rainsford's father, falling in line with US military *weltanschauung*, taught his son to sing "Home on the Range"—"I sang out for my father about our home on the range and my friends the buffalo and antelope" (1991, 3). The lyrics of the song were originally written by a Homestead Act beneficiary, Dr. Brewster M. Higley, in 1872. Since then, two other versions were written, including one in 1910 by folklorist John A. Lomax whose disquieting refrain told the story of the erasure of Native Americans within the landscape of the American West:⁴

The red man was pressed from this part of the West
He's likely no more to return,
To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
Their flickering camp-fires burn.

Like the Native Americans, the Chamorros experienced dispossession, displacement, and genocide under the rule of the Spanish, the Americans, and the Japanese: the Chamorros were required to adopt Catholicism and to undergo forced reeducation by the Spanish colonizers; for over two years during the Japanese occupation, the Chamorros were put into concentration camps and massacred; currently, a third of Guam's land belongs to the US Navy, including sacred ancestral sites and Chamorros. Moreover, despite being American citizens, the Chamorros do not have the right to vote in US presidential elections. The act of transposing a song about American colonial history onto the American occupied territory of Guam demonstrates the father and son's complicity in colonial efforts of silencing and erasure. Hsu also points out that Rainsford's account of Guam 'writes out' the role the militarized island played as a US support base during both the Korean War and the Vietnam War and that in his attempts to resolve the pain of homelessness, abjection and loss, he "arrives at a doctrine of Chinese American exceptionalism" at the cost of disavowing and dehistoricizing "the complex and divergent connections between Chinese Americans and other Asian American groups and indigenous groups" (2012, 293).

The (re)writing of Chinese Americans back onto the landscapes of the American West in *Homebase* revolves around the act of naming, describing, mapping, and categorizing. While driving across California and the Sierra Nevada "picking up the ghosts" of his ancestors, Rainsford is reminded of his grandfather advice, "that all points along a journey should be name" (1991, 60). He classifies significant moments of his life by emplacing them onto places—the "Tumon Beach time," the "Mariposa Grove time," the "Hilo time," "Wyoming, the Orte House before spring 1957" (1991, 66). In the last chapter, as he waits for the train from Reno to San Francisco, he speaks:

the names of stations and towns like prayers, as if they belonged to me: Reno, Verdi, Essex, Bronco. We moved into California and passed Boca, Prosser Creek, Proctor's, then into Truckee. Out of Truckee along Donner Creek, we ascended the side of cliffs, above canyons to Donner Summit, 195 miles from San Francisco. (1991, 96)

He continues listing all thirty-five towns between the Sacramento Valley and Sacramento and finally Oakland, as he promised himself earlier in the novel, "to give all the moments of my life the names of the places I have

³ Filipinos came to Guam as a result of Spanish Colonial rule. Between the 16th and 19th century, Guam became an important base for Spanish trade ships moving goods between Mexico and the Philippines. The ships also transported Filipino soldiers, missionaries, and criminals to Guam.

⁴ Hsu also mentions the lyrics of the folksong in his article.



been before, categorize them so that I can lift them out of my memory, find the steady pulse of my life. Root down my life into the names of places” (1991, 24). Rainsford’s strategies of (re)claiming a place in America—traversing spaces/places, naming them, dating them and “categorizing them”—in order to (re)emplace his ancestors and Chinese Americans onto canvas of the American landscape conforms to Western/American narratives of exploration and conquest, subjugating nature and landscape to the power of the Word (language), taxonomy, cartography, and historiography of colonial America. Moreover, just as he subscribed to the myths of American Exceptionalism during his “Tumon Beach time,” he once again fails to recognize his complicity in the discursive/ideological claim over the right to land, the right of belonging—a ‘right’ that resulted in the genocide of Native Americans and the plundering of the land. This right, in Rainsford’s understanding, earned through time in the United States by building and shaping the American landscape in the building of the transcontinental railroad, by contribution in form of service to the US navy and hence the US Empire’s and Capital’s pursuit, is merely a reiteration of the founding myths that produced the inequity, dispossession, and exploitation Rainsford had initially set off to rectify.

Rainsford and his father’s oblivion of their participation in the myth of American exceptionalism and the violence which their acts entail, demonstrates the serious problems and limitations of representational politics. The adaptation of homocentric/androcentric Western strategies of *claiming* a place on ‘American soil,’ and American belonging through American historiography, ultimately fails to rehabilitate the ‘othered’ sign, and the ‘othered’ subject because its efforts of resistance occurs within the very same discursive space of American myths and ideologies.⁵ In *Homepage*, the seemingly superfluous details of landscapes and scenes betray Wong’s awareness of the perils of this approach. In one of his stream-of-consciousness reminiscences of his time with his father, Rainsford reflects on how his father had “indulged [him] in [his] fantasies and fascinations with planes, cars, cowboys, comic book heroes, and trains”—signifiers of American militaristic power, Exceptionalism, and imaginaries of the “American West” (1991, 36). Memories vacillating between Berkeley and Guam, he recalls their shared obsessions with trains and times they watched them for hours rolling pass Berkeley’s Aquatic Park and how,

On Guam, the bombers at the Air Force base took the place of the trains. My father and I would stand at the end of the runway as I plugged my ears, clenched my teeth, wrinkled my face into what must have looked like an expression of great pain, as the bombers thundered off the runway about a hundred feet over us, shaking the ground and blowing two-hundred-miles-an-hour dust at us[...]I remember those bombers like friends... (1991, 37)

He goes on remembering how his father took pictures of bombers, labelling and classifying them. He describes one of them, the B-36, as looking like “a giant toothpick, with a bubble cockpit up from, a straight black tail, and swept wings” and that it “*killed the enemy* by making them laugh” (1991, 38, italics mine). These images of war, violence, death, and destruction are summarized in a haunting memory that follows. Drifting back to Berkeley’s Aquatic Park, Rainsford remembers that “when the trains were no longer visible, he drove me down to Emeryville to see the enormous “Sherwin Williams Paints Cover the Earth” neon sign, watching the red lights pour down over the earth out of the giant, green-lighted paint can” (1991, 38). Sherwin-Williams, a paint manufacturing company founded in 1866, introduced the iconic trademark “Cover the Earth” in 1905. The controversial logo has come to not only symbolize the globalized expansionism of American capitalism, but also multinational cooperation’s irreverence of environmental protection. In the 1970s, as Wong was writing *Homepage*, Sherwin-Williams was facing mounting criticism for using lead-based paint and many of its plants in New Jersey to Ohio were disposing of large amounts of toxic industrial waste into the environment.⁶ Rainsford’s abrupt insertion of this particular memory of his father and himself standing mesmerized beneath the neon animation of a can of (green) paint being poured over the entire globe, amidst his nostalgia and seemingly unreflective memories of American military and colonial dominion, represents another slippage that

⁵ See Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong’s important essay, “Ethnic Sign, Ethnic Subject and the Difficulty of Rehabilitative Representation” on the problems of representation in Asian American literature.

⁶ Litigations against Sherwin-Williams related to environmental pollution began as early as the 1970s and continues today as more suits have been filed against the company by plaintiffs and communities that have been severely affected by its dumping of industrial wastes.



I argue Wong had intentionally emplaced within the discursive space of the American myth of exceptionalism.⁷ This punctuation of Rainsford's flow of consciousness, exposes the fragility of national metanarratives and serves as a warning of the cost of subscribing to their workings.



Fig. 1: Advertisement in the *Oakland Tribune* reporting the installation of the sign in Emeryville, April 2, 1939.

3. Organic matter: Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*

Similar to her previous biographical novel *The Woman Warrior*, which celebrated and commemorated Kingston's maternal ancestors, Kingston's *China Men* was written as a companion, chronicling the history of her paternal lineage and their lives in the United States. Utilizing the same narrative and stylistic strategies as *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's unique 'talk-story' pays tribute to the oral traditions of Chinese culture while circumventing the problems posed by writing about the subaltern through Western forms of biographical writing and historiography such as the centrality and authenticity of the author, linearity of time, and 'factuality.' Kingston has explained that both books were experiments in "stylistically [...] discovering the Chinese American Voice, which is American English influenced by Chinese rhythms, attitudes and images" finding it "particularly satisfying to use Chinese American vocabulary and syntax and to describe the world from the viewpoints of people who think in a combination of modern American English and Chinese speech ideographs" (qtd. in Grice 2006, 44). Kingston's 'talk-story' and the rhythmic, fluid nature of Chinese American syntax in the chronicling of (Chinese) American 'history' embraces slippages while exposing the ambiguities of the founding myths and narratives of the American nation.⁸ In his seminal essay *DissemiNation*, Homi Bhabha elaborates on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community*, arguing that the imagineering and constructedness of the nation and nation-ness occurs within the narrative realm "as a form of social and textual affiliation" that

⁷ The color of the paint in the Sherwin-Williams sign is red. It is unclear why Wong chose to use green in his description.

⁸ I am referring to Benedict Anderson's work on Imagined Communities as well as Homi Bhabha's seminal essay "DissemiNation" by which the nation is a construct of narration and a constant negotiation between



is ambiguous and is constantly struggling to maintain the semblance of a holistic, cohesive, modern, socio-cultural category, “mediating between the teleology of progress tipping over into the ‘timeless’ discourse of irrationality” (1994, 201, 204). Bhabha also develops a spatial metaphor of the nation, one that maintains a seeming homogeneous continuity:

the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space—representing the nation’s modern territoriality is turned into the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism. The difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning People into One. The liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the ‘outside,’ into the authenticating ‘inward’ time of tradition. (1994, 213)

In other words, like the temporal element of nationalism, the idea and imaginaries of the nation-space is continually being readjusted to maintain a seamless, homogeneous plain that is transposed into expressions of collective unity through collective memory and experience. If narratives are the battleground for the legitimacy of nationhood, citizenship, belongingness and identity, reading Kingston’s *China Men* provides a way of subverting the national myths that have created the illusion of a collective imaginary of a homogenous ‘*American landscape*’ and ‘*American environment*’ in the making of the imagined community. Moreover, unlike the seemingly cohesive national narratives of America (as Eden, as the *background* onto which manifest destiny materializes), Kingston’s tale of Chinese immigration to America blends Chinese traditional folklores, Western myths of the ‘discovery’ of North America, archetypal stories, and biographic details. The novel’s six chapters span two centuries and trace the genealogy of “China Men” from their arrival in the mid-19th century as railroad and plantation workers, to their recruitment in the Vietnam War. This reading will focus primarily on two chapters of *China Men*, “Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains” and “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” to draw moments and spaces that provide alternative ways of reading the American West.

The understanding of the relation between ‘nature’ and human beings held by the characters in the novel is described by the dialectical Daoist relationship between humanity, the earth (or nature), heaven, and the Dao. Daoism, antithetical to the logic and structure of laissez-faire economic liberalism and the anthropocentricity of American environmentalism, mandates a state of equilibrium between humanity and nature—both being of equal energy (Dao) and agency. In the chapter, “Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountain,” having been promised a substantial wage, Bak Goong is lured to the sugar cane fields of Hawaii as a coolie laborer. Making his way to the campsite when he arrives, he is astonished by the beauty and abundance of the land:

The trail led upward among banana trees. Bak Goong ate bananas to his heart’s content, throwing away the peels instead of scraping their insides and eating the fibres; there were that many bananas, hands of them, overripe fruit rotting on the ground. He ate fruits and nuts he had never seen before [...] He wished he could give his wife some. With a handful rice a day, he could live here without working. (1989, 97)

The equilibrium between humanity and nature hinges on the interdependence, the coexistence between both agents and within this state of balance, labor is relegated to necessity, to the basics of human survival: food and shelter. Bak Goong’s initial utopian visions of the island was violently disrupted as the “China Men” reach the work camps. They were immediately to work clearing the wilderness for the sugar cane plantation.

The demons bought bullocks; they had longer horns than water buffaloes. He yoked them to the stumps, which they yanked out. But the Hawaiians quit rather than help pull the boulders out of the earth. The remaining workers ploughed around groups of big rocks in the middle of the fields. They were the first human beings to dig into this part of the island and see the meat and bones of the red earth. After rain, the mud ran like blood. (1989, 103)

The initial balance described by Bak Goong upon arrival is overturned by the exploitation of land and nature by American colonial capitalism. Unlike Rainsford and his father’s blindness towards America’s colonialist



instrumentalization of Guam and its entailing environmental, social, economic, and political consequences, Bak Goong is neither exonerated from his participation in the colonial enterprise nor is his participation depicted as merely a peripheral, unconscious slippage. Instead, he is acutely and painfully aware of his role in the destruction of the natural environment digging into the “meat and bones of the red earth” (1989, 103). Moreover, Bak Goong’s observations of the work conducted in the fields reveal a planetary awareness of the intricate connection between the exploitation of the land and the mechanisms of global capitalism and western colonialism. He describes the process after the harvesting of cane: “The wagoners [...] drove the cane to the sugar mill on a route along the sea. It was crushed into molasses and boiled into sugar, for which the world was developing an insatiable hunger as for opium” (1989, 103). Within this one moment in the novel, Bak Goong connects the dots between the multinational corporation British East India Company and their exploitative poppy plantations in India, to the Opium Wars that ended China’s reign as the world’s largest economy, to the growing demand for sugar in Europe and North America that had, since the 16th century, marked the origins of global trade and fueled Western conquests of the Atlantic Islands, the Caribbean, Brazil, and subsequently in Asia, the Pacific and Africa (Bosma 2007, 5). As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty put it, Europe and American did not only live off their lands, but off the lands of others around the globe. Bak Goong’s story, the stories of the other coolie workers from Asia, and the stories of native Hawaiians who worked in the sugarcane fields are part of an Anthropocene epoch that shaped a global force so powerful that its effects can still be observed today on the landscapes of colonized lands.

To cope with the violence and trauma of his labor in the sugar cane fields, both to his body and the land, Bak Goong develops three strategies in resistance to the oppression of the plantation overlords. First, Bak Goong uses songs as a mediation between the material and spiritual world, the human and nature. “He sucked in deep breaths of the Sandalwood Mountain air, and let it fly out in a song, which reached up to the rims of the volcanos and down to the edge of the water. His song lifted and fell with the air, which seemed to breathe warmly through his body and through the rocks” (1989, 103).

His songs, similar to African spirituals, function as both a form of resistance and a trove of collective memory and history. Structurally, like African American gospels, it involved a call and response between himself, the other workers, as well as the landscape around him.

Bak Goong’s songs are depicted as entwined with the songs of the natural world—conveying an entangled Anthropocene that defies the linear, singular His-tory of anthropocentric America. Over a century later, the narrator of the autobiographical novel, Bak Goong’s great granddaughter, travels to Hawaii to trace the history of her ancestors. She turns to the land in hopes of capturing echoes of their past:

I have stood alongside the highway at the edge of the sugarcane and listened for the voices of the great grandfathers. But the cane is merely green in the sunlight; the tassels waving in the wind make no blurry fuzzy outlines that I can construe as a message from them [...] The winds blowing in the long leaves do not whisper words I hear. (1989, 88)

The silence of sugarcane fields is analogous of the violent silencing of voices of America’s enslaved, its coolies, America’s enormous but invisible agricultural labor force—the people who, like the land, were and continue to be objectified, commodified, and exploited for the profit of white, male, Anglo-Saxon America. Bak Goong’s arrival at the coolie camp where he and the other “China Men” were tasked with “hack[ing] a farm out of the wilderness,” signified the violent severance of the relationship between humanity and nature. The Chinese laborers were prohibited to sing. Frustrated, sick and exhausted, watching the earth bleed as they tore its skin away, Bak Goong introduced a second form of coping and resistance: digging a circle into the earth, the “China Men” “flopped to the ground with their faces over the edge of the hole” shouting their wishes to their loved ones in China, their frustrations, their hopes, their confessions: “They had dug an ear into the world, and [told] the earth their secrets” (1989, 117). Returning to her roots in Hawaii, the narrator observes that while the tassels of the cane were silent, the shape of fields, and the landscape told a more disturbing story: “the rows and the rows and fields, *organized like conveyor belts* hide murdered and raped bodies; this is a *dumping ground*. Old Filipino men die in abandoned sheds” (1989, 88, italics mine). Over a century after Bak Goong reached on the shores of Hawaii, describing it as a bountiful utopian paradise with fruit trees growing wild, the narrator arrives to find a landscape that has been forcefully transformed into a Fordist machine of efficacy that satiated the



Western world of their cravings for sugar, leaving the physical bodies of the dead behind “a dumping ground” (1989, 88).

In Kingston’s *China Men*, the silenced history of those who had labored on the land, who had shaped and transformed the landscape of America to the march beat of ‘progress,’ ‘civilization’ and riches, is inscribed on the pillaged landscape of America. Before turning away from the sugar cane fields, Bak Goong’s great granddaughter notices that, “[m]ushrooms and marijuana grow amidst the cane, irrigated by the arches of vaulting water” (1989, 88). The saprophytic nature of mushrooms, decomposing organic matter and returning nutrients to the soil, growing alongside the silent cane symbolizes the ecological and Taoist recalibration—the dead might have been silence, but their bodies, returned to the ground, replenishing the earth, the soil. It represents the cycle of life and death, yin and yang, body and earth, as life readjusts to the equilibrium of the universe. Marijuana, like the laborers, imported from all over Asia that was used to alleviate the pains of the broken bodies of laborers, survives them, like weed, invincible and sturdy and stubbornly adopts to the new environment and grows wild, forever changing the vegetation and landscape of Hawaii.

In the following chapter, “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” Kingston’s ‘talk story’ maps the life of Ah Goong and metaphorically, the lives of the estimated 20,000 Chinese laborers that were hired to build the Transcontinental Railroad.⁹

Like the previous chapter, nature is anthropomorphized in this account of the Sierra Nevadas. Ah Goong’s first task was to make a clearing through the redwood trees and he describes the trees as having limbs, arms, torsos, veins and muscles. Then in the next step, Chinese laborers began using dynamite to blow through the granite mountains to build tunnels. Ah Goong who was “light and thin” was appointed along with young boys to be “basketmen.” They were lowered in wicker baskets down cliffs and ravines to place and ignite dynamite to blast holes through mountains. Standing in his basket, he watched as “a chain of men working on the next mountain, men like ants changing the face of the earth, fell [...] Godlike, he watched men whose faces he could not see and whose screams he did not hear roll and bounce and slide like a handful of sprinkled gravel” (1989, 132). The comical absurdity of the situation—men like insects trying to reshape the mountain, men bouncing off cliffs—forced Ah Goong to face his own mortality and the invincibility of Nature and Time. He marveled at the “immovability of the earth:” “Men change, men die, weather changes, but a mountain is the same as permanence and time” (1989, 135). Unlike Bak Goong’s ability to connect himself to the land through songs, through secrets buried in the earth, Ah Goong’s only resolve in his state of powerlessness was to effeminize nature:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley [...] sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent down over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. “I am fucking the world,” he said. The world’s vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. (1989, 130)

Later, as nitroglycerin was introduced, he noticed that “the terrain changed immediately. Streams were diverted, rockscapes exposed. Ah Goong found it difficult to remember what land had looked like before an explosion” (1989, 136). The use of nitro glycerin accelerated the building process and the number of deaths and accidents increased leaving broken bodies of “China men” scattered across Sierra Nevada. While there are no records, historians have estimated that the death toll of Chinese workers building the Transcontinental Railroad amount up to a thousand. To the white contractors and rail bosses, the bodies of “China men” occupied the same hierarchical level as exploitable nature—“The demons don’t believe this is a human body. This is a chinaman’s body” (1989, 140). The 19th-century colonial settlement distinction between culture/civilization and nature/wilderness inscribed onto the bodies of Chinese laborers relegated them as disposable material in the wake of expansion, progress, and nation-building.

One winter, Ah Goong and the workers emerged from the darkness of the tunnels into a snowy landscape that had “covered the gouged land, the broken tress, the tracks, the mud, the campfire ashes and the unburied dead” (1989, 137). The frostbitten, snow-blinded men labored on and “[t]he men who died slowly enough to

⁹ Due to the lack of records of Chinese employed by the Central Pacific Railroad (a form of erasure), historians can only estimate the number of Chinese laborers and have placed it between 10,000 and 20,000.



say last words said, ‘Don’t leave me frozen under the snow. Send my body home’” (1989, 138). While some of the men chided the dying for speaking of death and for asking for the impossible favor of bringing their remains back to their relatives, Ah Goong reassured them that they would not be lost or forgotten: “‘Aiya. To be buried here, nowhere.’ ‘But this is somewhere,’ Ah Goong promised. ‘This is the Gold Mountain. We’re marking the land now. The track sections are numbered, and your family will know where we leave you’” (1989, 138). After the completion of the railroad, dignitaries gathered at Promontory point to mark the meeting of the two tracks from the East and the West as the ‘Driving Out’ began. Ah Goong and the other surviving laborers began their perilous journeys across the continent avoiding bandits, mobs, and lynching. Over a century later, Ah Goong’s granddaughter growing up in Stockton by the railroad tracks, is reminded by adults that “Your grandfather built the railroad” (1989, 126). While the contributions of the Chinese in the building of one of the greatest feats of the 19th century was erased from American History, Ah Goong’s granddaughter recovers his story within the material history of the railroad itself: “Grandfather left a railroad for his message: we had to go somewhere difficult. Ride a train. Go somewhere important. In case of danger, the train was to be ready for us” (1989, 126). Even after the old tracks were stripped of the iron rails and the line discontinued, Ah Goong’s family salvaged all the remaining parts, repurposing them:

Our family dug up the square logs and rolled them downhill home. We collected the spikes too. We used the logs for benches, edged the yard with them, made bases for fences, embedded them in the ground for walkways. The spikes came in handy too, good for paperweights, levers, wedges, chisels. (1989, 126)

The respect the family showed towards the railroad ‘waste’ reflect their understanding of the stories that have been absorbed by redwood, and the iron that held in place, a railroad that changed the course of the nation. Kingston’s retelling of her ancestor’s stories transcends anthropocentric history, restoring agency to nature and material things, allowing them to speak for the lost histories of “China men.”

4. Conclusion

On a wall of the National Portrait Museum in Washington, D.C., a well-conserved, inconspicuous albumen print dating May 10, 1869 captures a group of about a hundred men crowding around two locomotives, Union Pacific engine No.119 and Central Pacific’s Jupiter, facing opposite each other on two parallel tracks. At the center, the Samuel S. Montague, chief engineer of the Central Pacific Railroad is shaking hands with Union Pacific Railroad’s executive General Greville M. Dodge. The men who flank them wear expressions of a mixture of pride and accomplishment. Two men, caught in motion as the shutter closed, George Booth and Sam Bradford, engineers of the two respective railroad companies who had climbed up the head of the tender, extend liquor bottles in a mid-air toast, the bottles of liquid contrasting the dry parched dessert of Promontory Point, Utah.¹⁰ Next to this iconic photograph, an exhibit label describes photographer Andrew J. Russell’s “most famous work [...] depict[ing] laborers who facilitated the joining of Union Pacific and Central Pacific lines.” The caption goes on to describe the “lengthy and dangerous” feat that was accomplished “[c]ollectively, [thanks to] the efforts of tens of thousands of laborers, many of them immigrants.” Both the picture and the description hanging next to it do not mention the contributions of the Chinese and the small number of African Americans who built the railroads. It serves to continue a legacy of erasure and whitewashing of imaginaries of the American landscape and the American West.

It is of great urgency—during a time when ethnic minorities in the United States and its unincorporated territories continue to experience environmental injustices, are dispossessed and dislocated, a time of severe environmental crises, and global inequities—that scholars of ecocriticism should work towards the recovering of lost stories in the piecing together of a planetary approach to the nature and the environment. Re-reading of Asian American writing from an ecocritical perspective enriches the theoretical genre that has for a long time excluded the writings of racialized minorities by fostering new paths of understanding and appreciating the American landscape beyond the limited scope of American environmentalism, challenging entrapping of a

¹⁰ See the Golden Spike National Historical Park’s website “A Moment in Time” for biographic details of Andrew J. Russell, and a legend of the people in the photograph. <https://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/a-moment-in-time.htm>.



singular, linear, anthropocentric, white, male narrative. Through diasporic narratives, Asian American literature connects the American landscape to a larger plane of planetary environmentalism, challenging the nativist perspective of American nationhood/American land(scape) and the founding myths of exceptionalism that continue to be used to justify the pillaging of not merely the natural resources within the geographical boundaries of United States but those of the global subaltern. Finally, re-reading Asian/Chinese American literature in light of its treatment of the environment, creates a new path within the field to challenge the identity politics that has largely been based on discursive contestations. It gives this struggle a material/ecological reality that, like the mushrooms in Kingston's *China Men*, breaks-down all humans, irrespective of color, nationality, or creed, to organic matter in an inextricably intertwined circle of life. In her search for her ancestors, Kingston traces her great grandfather's life—her beginnings—back to Hawaii, back to the land, the air, and the cane: "I have heard the land sing. I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air. I again search for my American ancestors by listening to the cane" (1989, 90).

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