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HISTORIES OF DUST AND BONE: MYTHOLOGIZING THE CHINESE AMERICAN PAST IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN FICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

HISTORIES OF DUST AND BONE: MYTHOLOGIZING THE CHINESE AMERICAN PAST IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN FICTIONS

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This paper examines the role of the landscape of the American West, both literal and literary, in relocating a mythical Chinese American past in two recent novels, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C Pam Zhang and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* by Tom Lin. Though the two novels differ from each other radically in many ways, their uses and subversions of the conventions and expectations of the Western genre create an expansive literary space of discovery and invention. In rejecting colonial narratives of places and their histories, these historical fictions forge new pathways for Asian American identity formation and posit a theory of embodied geographical belonging that resists the dehumanization of normative modes of identity definition. Through a comparative analysis of Zhang's and Lin's works within the frameworks of Asian American and Western genre literary criticism, this project uncovers the interdependency of language, history, and identity, and their embodiment within the unnarratable relation between landscape and its inhabitants.

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Introduction

Imagine a cowboy. Or, for that matter, his horse, and the desert they traverse. Regardless of the particularities of each character, the imagination reaches for familiar images, as a wind-worn horse rider gallops across the sunset orange desert of the mind. To separate one from the other, indeed, is nearly impossible. Each disparate piece of the image coalesces into a whole so smoothly as to be indistinguishable as individual components. Furthermore, woven throughout the picture are the words themselves; cowboy, horse, gallop, desert, sun. History, in this sense, is a composite of untraceable influences expressed through the vehicle of language, forming the topographical foundation of embodied reality and the identities of people living in it.

A cowboy may seem an outdated figure to focus on, given the significant decline in popularity of Western literature, but the past few years have seen a reemergence of historical fictions about the American West. *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* (2021) by Tom Lin and *How Much of These Hills is Gold* (2020) by C Pam Zhang, confront the problems and embrace the possibilities of the Western genre in order to reposition a Chinese American past in its territory, both geographically and metaphorically. Zhang's novel follows two young siblings, Lucy and Sam, as they traverse the dry hills of California in the mid-19th century, on a journey to bury their recently deceased father and establish themselves in an often-hostile world. It is structurally a coming of age story, but the characters exist in the cultural legacy of the Western and encounter the harmful ideologies it participates in perpetuating. Lin's novel, on the other hand, is about the eponymous antihero Ming Tsu on a mission of revenge against his wife's supposed kidnappers, who conscripted him to hard labor on the Central Pacific Railroad. Unlike Lucy and Sam, Ming is not an emergent subject but a fully grown man, armed and scarred by the harmful social forces the novels seek to unravel.

Despite their radically different protagonists and formal structures, both Lin and Zhang similarly reimagine the West and the landscape of Western fiction as the geographic and literary origin point of Chinese American identity formation. As such, they also both exist in the legacy of Asian

American literature and literary criticism. What constitutes an Asian American identity is different across the two works, and indeed across most fictional narratives of Asian America. Scholars have disagreed regarding the amount of significance that should be attributed to the American settler state, diasporic descent, transnational politics of power, queer and gender theory, and Freudian psychoanalysis, to name a few, in the formation of contemporary and historic Asian American identities. To different extents and with different understandings of the core concepts, Lin and Zhang renegotiate what it means to be American through the introduction of minoritarian perspectives as Patricia Chu argues for in *Assimilating Asians* (Chu qtd. in Hong, 914).

In *How Much of These Hills*, the words "China" and "Asia" are never said, and the only allusions to the characters' ancestry are found in Ma's truncated recollections of her unnamed homeland, the untranslated Chinese romanizations that pepper Ma and Ba's speech, and the hateful epithets launched at the young protagonists. The operative definition of Asian American identity in Zhang's novel, and in Lin's as well, appears to be material and diasporic, based on the matrilinear reproductive capacity of an Asian mother in an immigrant or diasporic context (Eng qtd. in Li, 611). Thus the imaginary homeland is feminized, and female Asian American bodies become the vessels that sustain it as depicted, for example, in the metaphorical "Chinascapes" materially symbolized by the maternal figures of Amy Tan's novels *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *the Kitchen God's Wife* (Amato, 179-183). In *How Much of These Hills is Gold* in particular, the land of diasporic descent, itself a metaphorical "Chinascape" rather than a deterministically bounded nation, is abstract and untethered to the experiences of Lucy, only bearing upon her life through its embodiment in Ma herself. Lucy, unlike Sam, ultimately chooses not to venture to the phantasmic homeland of their mother, finding a truer sense of belonging and embeddedness within the symbolic geography of the American West.

However, Ming Tsu has no relation to such a maternal figure, having been abandoned as an infant in California and raised by a white crime boss, Silas Root. Thus, his identification with his

Chinese American identity is not based on matrilineal descent, but rather through a communal social positionality, especially in the unequal domains of law and labor (Eng qtd. in Li, 611). Ming negotiates a historically illegible identity, being persistently confronted with the structural barriers of perceived foreignness despite his American national and linguistic identity, much like the Korean-American native English speaking characters of Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (Corley, 78). Lacking the familial cultural inheritance that Lucy and Sam must reckon with and denied the national cultural inheritance of the white characters around him, Ming's socially illegible body exposes the multiple fractures in the linguistic, literary, and historical structures of identity formation within the paradigm of the American nation state.

For the most part, Ming rejects any association between himself and other characters of Chinese descent, due to the systems of immutable binaries associated with a racialized Asian identity. Emerging from a sociohistorical environment that denies the validity of Chinese Americanness, the dissonance of Ming's literary character dislocates the nation state from the center of discourse on Asian American identity (Cruz, 97).

At the surface, the differences between the two works can be read as analogous to Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston's disagreement in the 1980s with regards to the intersections of race and gender, and politics and literature. *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* positions a Chinese American man in a role typically reserved for white men, that of the cowboy antihero, and follows his hypermasculine and heterosexual exploits. The novel, in this interpretation, exposes the problems that Rachel C. Lee discusses in *The Americas of Asian American Literature* with regards to theories of identity formation that foreground the nation state as the basis for Asian Americanness. In vindicating Ming Tsu, a heterosexual Chinese American man raised exclusively in white society, the novel arguably adopts the same nativist, misogynistic, and heteronormative rhetoric of the society that dehumanized Ming in the first place (Lee qtd. in Hong, 914-915).

On the other hand, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* explores the intrafamilial tensions that result from Ma's immigration and weaponized femininity, Ba's racialized labor and violence, and the isolation and abuse the family suffers at the hands of a racist American society. Thus, the novel examines racial identity as a site of confluence of multiple axes of disempowerment, namely transnational migration and its restructuring of gender and labor dynamics (Le Espiritu, 5). However, to compare the novels thusly ignores the complexities of their arguments and stories.

Though it can be argued that Ming Tsu is the culmination of Frank Chin's dream of Asian American machismo, he can also be interpreted using David L. Eng's framework of queer diaspora presented in *Racial Castrations.* His sexual and romantic engagements are limited to white women in the novel, and his vengeful behavior and ultimate murder of Ada, his wife, can be read as a manifestation of the "male hysteric" exemplified in David Wong Louie's short fiction (Li, 611). Ostensibly, the character is heterosexual, but his social positionality and the perception of his racial otherness precludes him from benefitting from heteropatriarchy, such that he becomes a queer subject regardless of his individual desires and attractions, an "internal exile" or "Asian abject" as David Leiwei Li calls it (Li, 611). Furthermore, neither novel truly foregrounds the nation state in their formulation of an Asian American identity; rather, they establish a fundamental connection between an embodied minoritarian identity and the living landscape of the West, forging a relationship of historical exchange and generation built on the medium of language.

Equally as important in this equation, it should be noted, is silence. As King Kok Cheung argues in *Articulate Silences,* to dismiss the absence of speech as a submission to dominant hierarchies is to dismiss the resistant capacity of uncategorizable and thus inherently non-normative forms of communication and connection (Cheung qtd. in Wong, 350). The intimate association between landscape and its inhabitants is, indeed, what grounds the Chinese American identities of Zhang's and Lin's characters in the literary history of the United States without valorizing the modes of cultural supremacy advocated therein. Landscape, as a literal and literary phenomenon, is the mechanism

through which history, identity, and language execute themselves, operating as a repository of expansive and discursive footprints of the still-living past. The setting of the Western can be thus reimagined as a body in perpetual dialogue with the bodies of its inhabitants, creating a space of embodied belonging that resists normative colonial narrations of history and identity by evading imposed categorical definitions and generating meaning in liminality and the expansiveness of embedded historical and geographical existence.

How Much of These Hills is Gold and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* resist the subtractive logic of the Western and its prescriptive language of belonging and identity formation through recourse to the unnarratable relation between embodied selves and landscape as the site of authentic embodied integration into the geographical and historical space of the American West. The two novels posit a theory of self-aware fiction as the antidote to the dehumanizing characterizations of normative colonial narratives, disrupting the linear relation between language and its representations and thus clearing a space for inexhaustive self-generation. Thus, the full extent of the Chinese American identities of the novels' characters remains out of reach of the reductive colonial structures of history, literature, and language. Instead, the characters embody themselves as Chinese Americans in the infinitely expansive relation between linguistically irreducible embodied selfhoods and the landscapes they inhabit, inheriting the histories they belong to and transforming them through their own movement through time and space.

Literature Review

Through hard years of war, economic strife, ideological shifts, and all the other disasters and misfortunes that have plagued the United States since the turn of the twentieth century, there has always been the Western. Considered to be the most truly recognizable American genre of film and literature, it effectively rewrote the history of westward expansion and American racial and gender politics. At its core, the Western is a genre about land and who owns it, and who, therefore, has the right to

determine the nature and consequences of its fate. However, it is also unflinchingly symbolic and unabashedly formulaic, engaging almost exclusively with stock characters, repetitive themes, familiar visual motifs, and, as Steven Fore puts it in his analysis of Larry McMurtry's 1985 novel *Lonesome Dove*, the "same old others" (Fore: 1991).

Scholars of the Western are no stranger to the colonial values embedded in the genre's core, although it does not necessarily take advanced scholarship to understand that white supremacist patriarchy is one of its primary ingredients. Fore explains that from the beginning, the Western has implicitly been about race, and the racial politics of land ownership, though it has explicitly denounced and suppressed any murmurings of this foundational truth (Fore, 50). Through its glorification of rugged masculine individualism, the genre intentionally obscures the racial realities of the real historical period it represents, masking land theft with tales of Indigenous savagery and white heroism, John G Cawelti argues in *The Six Gun Mystique* (Cawelti, 55). However, as Barry Langford argues, the Western was never a historical product so much as a generic one, a self-conscious marching out of tropes, cliches, and stock characters before they were even established as such (Langford, 27). The Western, thus, as a genre of historical fiction, mythologizes itself as a historical fiction more than it mythologizes whatever nebulous past it ostensibly represents. Though, as Bruce A. Rosenberg notes, the process of mythologizing is not necessarily a retrospective one, and capital "H" History is not so different from legend and folklore anyways, at least in the Indo-European tradition (Rosenberg qtd. in E. Slotkin, 719). Most Westerns, in fact, are only historical fictions in the loosest sense, with made up characters, settings, and plots whose only claims to historicity are found in the vague and often somewhat inconsistent period details that constitute the stories' backdrops (Langford, 27). Nevertheless, there is a *sense* of history in the genre, even at its inception.

Ironically, this historical atmosphere and self-contained, self-expressing mythical aestheticism, as Daniel Bishop puts it, gives the Western a sense of eternity (Bishop, 62-63). Though the time is the post-Civil War 19th century and the place the plains and deserts west of the Mississippi, the actual

setting of a Western is all time everywhere. Or at least, such is the argument the novels and films of the genre seek to make. Cheryl Miller writes that Western writing is first and foremost about character, as in the character of the nation of the United States, and *not* the actual act of colonizing Indigenous land (Miller, 1). This universalizing of the particular creates an epistemology of ignorance, as John G. Cawelti explains, that renders the imperial and racial violence of westward expansion invisible, and naturalizes white supremacy and colonial patriarchy (Cawelti, 25).

The landscape, thus, becomes an extension of the white male protagonist's psychology, a desert of the mind that allows the taciturn hero to express himself freely upon the environment and its people without saying a word. One of the many ironies of the Western is the tension between the unliterary values of the genre and its existence as literary and filmographic media, often with a strong moral lesson, that necessarily relies upon language. Jane Thompkins argues in *West of Everything* that, as a medium, Westerns have to pretend they do not exist, because they use words and symbols to decry the meaninglessness of words and symbols (Thompkins, 51). Thus, though the Western hero himself may not literally speak very often, all of the story elements, including but not limited to the plot, the setting, and all the other characters, become his voice. Again, the Western is about dominance over the land, and since the land is essentially a psychological playground for masculine performance, it is also about control over the self. This means no compromising attachments, no weakness or vulnerability, and certainly no allowing anybody to project an understanding of the hero onto him. For Thompkins, the desire to control the self is indeed a desire not to *have* a self, to be as unreflective and reactive as the indominable, divine landscape itself. In Jean-Paul Sartre's terms, Western heroes seek to abandon being-for-itself in favor of being-in-itself—an unconscious existence in the world of objects (Thompkins, 57).

For the non-white, non-male inhabitants of the world of the Western, being reduced to an object without consciousness is not a far-off existential goal, but an oppressive reality of the genre. In *Indian Given*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo explains how Indigenous peoples are naturalized to the

landscapes of the American West, such that their individual cultural and historical identities are subsumed under an undifferentiated and dehumanized image of an Indigenous savage whose destruction is integral to the actualization of white masculinity. The landscape itself "embodies a muscular Indianness" (Saldaña-Portillo, 6-10), the defeat of which allows the Western hero to himself come closer to an idealized form of brute masculine activity. Indigeneity, as Cawelti argues in *The Six Gun Mystique,* is a metaphor much like the crumbling buildings and supernatural phenomena in Gothic literature, and not an actual lived-in identity (Cawelti, 34). Women—specifically white women—also cannot exist as fully realized characters in the Western according to Cawelti, and are often geographically static extensions of "civilized" American living. Unrestrained movement across the landscape is one of the Western hero's primary characteristics. The only meaningful bonds he can create are therefore with other (white) men, while (white) women are denied entry into this homosocial world of genuine connection and exist only as metaphors for civilization and sexual gratification (Cawelti, 43). Nevertheless, it is important that these beautiful, sexually viable white women remain in the story, because they often provide the moral justification for colonial violence.

Violence is, obviously, also a central element of the Western, but it is almost exclusively symbolic which, somewhat counterintuitively, conceals the reality of violent murder, displacement, and sexual violence that gave rise to the American West as a literary and historical place. *The Six Gun Mystique* claims that the kind of literary violence that exists in Westerns is highly moralized, such that the hero's murderous adventures represent his destruction of a moral threat to white society, whether it be greedy railroad barons, cruel Indigenous men, or thieving cattle rustlers. In other words, the hero is not really killing people, but their sick and twisted moralities (Cawelti, 55). According to Jodi A. Byrd's *Transit of Empire*, this technique of transforming people into inhuman manifestations of an ideology has been employed in particular against Indigenous peoples in order to dispossess them of their land (Byrd, 9-10). Furthermore, Justin Joyce adds in *Gunslinging Justice* that the particular mechanism of symbols in the Western, particularly that of the gun, displaces the responsibility for

violence off of the white male protagonist. He asserts his own superior value through his skill with a gun, but it is the gun itself that does the killing (Joyce, 92).

All of the discussed themes and motifs of the Western can be described as a mystification process, a smoke and mirrors show to distract from the material realities of colonial land theft and violence. The central elements of the various Western variations (Wright: 1975), whose similarities far outweigh their differences, create a national mythology that obscures and justifies environmental destruction, Indigenous displacement, violence against women, and more. The trouble with this kind of myth is that it is nearly impossible to disprove; challenges posed to its historical accuracy mean nothing when it acknowledges nothing but its own history (Langford, 27-28). In other words, it doesn't matter how many times the inaccuracy of Indigenous representation in the genre, for example, is pointed out, because the only Indigenous people that can exist according to the logic of the Western are the inhuman horsemen that haunt the virgin plains. The mythology is essentially untethered from reality, such that no amount of fact-checking or alternative historicizing can change the self-reliant symbolism of the Western. This typifies Jean Baudrillard's conception of the procession of the simulacra developed in his 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation.* In it he argues that the symbols and signs that give meaning to life in society and media are copies without originals, or simulacra, and that these nebulous symbols eventually supersede any other system of meaning making, becoming the de facto state of the world (Baudrillard: 1981).

Citing film scholar Rick Altman, Daniel Bishop notes that myth and its structural cousin, genre, are not merely semantic, but *syntactic* organizers of meaning in a story. This means that it is not just the horses, guns, cowboy hats, and dusty saloons that create the mythic atmosphere of the Western, but the more foundational themes of the confrontation between civilization and savagery, wilderness and domestication, masculinity and femininity, etc. After all, according to Will Wright, the Western is, at its core, a genre of dichotomies (Wright, 59). As such, even rehumanizing Indigenous characters and women requires doing so within the confines of the genre's mythic scaffolding, or risking a departure

from the identifiable aspects of the syntactic components of the genre entirely. Furthermore, Henri Bergson argues in *The Creative Mind* that *any* semantic representation constricts the existence of the represented thing, such that any representation in general is necessarily a misrepresentation (Bergson: 1934). Many scholars have argued that the overly self-conscious revisionist Westerns of the 1980s and 90s fell into this trap, stretching the genre past the point of recognition and therefore losing the relevance of their critiques. One of the most notorious examples of this in film is 1980's *Heaven's Gate*, whose contrived attempt at historical accuracy heralded the death of the genre, according to Langford (Langford, 27). On the other hand, there is the problem of losing the bite of critique by relying too heavily on the genre's preexisting syntax; 1990's highly successful *Dances with Wolves* was ostensibly a retelling of American colonialism, but ultimately continued the same narratives of white supremacy that it ostensibly sought to displace (Hoffman, 2). The Western, thus, is a frustratingly self-contained genre with little room for deviation from the established formulas (Wright: 1985), that has continued to define American national character and history for over a century, despite the many proclamations of its death.

Of course, an argument can—and has—been made for genre in general being a mythic and self-generating structure that is better equipped to defy itself than confirm its own existence. In Jacques Derrida's 1980 book *The Law of Genre*, the postmodern theorist and abuser of words argues that literary genre must simultaneously exist according to the characteristics of the works that compose it and give definition to these same works. In his words, this produces an invagination of meaning whereby the concept of disparate genres collapses inward under the weight of its own circular logic (Derrida, 59).

Thus, perhaps the problem with the Western is not the fact that it *has* an embedded structure but the staying-power of the particulars of this structure. As a genre, it covers a lot of ground, both literally and figuratively. In its denial of its own specificity as a literary or filmographic genre, its themes and story elements travel far, reoccurring in media that apparently has nothing in common with

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* or John Ford's *Stagecoach.* Clark Lee Mitchell goes so far as to argue that David Cronenberg's 2005 film *A History of Violence*, typically considered an action thriller, is a Western, because it exemplifies the genre's fascination with masculinity and the relationship between individual and society (Mitchell, 88). On the other hand, many scholars focus exclusively on media that contains the semantic elements of the genre, namely desert and plains landscapes, rugged horsemen, and lots of shooting. For a genre that is, as Langford claims, "highly atypical[lee] consistent" (Langford, 27), there is still significant debate over what *actually* defines it. This can be attributed to Derrida's theory of genre, but it also appears to be a particular feature of the Western.

The Western is full to the brim with racist depictions of minorities, but one demographic is conspicuously absent from the genre's extensive catalogue: people of Asian descent. Despite their well-documented presence in the 19th century West, almost no Asian or Asian American characters appear in any Westerns, regardless of subcategory. However, this is not to say that American media has treated Asian Americans well; Mary Couzelis, citing Traise Yamamoto's "Foreigner Within: An Introduction to Asian American Literature", explains the pervasive racist perception of Asian Americans as perpetually foreign "whose citizenship—either formal or cultural—is in question" (Yamamoto, 125, qtd. in Couzelis, 76). At the very core of Asian American racial formation is an imposed geographical identity that denies any claim to existing pathways of American belonging. Therefore Asian Americans do not even figure into the racial ideology of the Western, as a national identity origin mythology.

The misinterpretation of race as betraying an inescapable alienness is compounded by a conflation of all the nations and ethnicities of Asia as one single identity, such that, essentially, the only characteristic of Asian Americans in US media is precisely this nonspecific foreignness. As Amy Sueyoshi argues, though men of Japanese and Chinese descent were initially perceived very differently in the 19th century, with the former being seen as overly effeminate and the latter being depicted as barbarous, these racist ideas eventually merged by the century's close to form a single indistinct

grotesque character that formed the foundation of American Orientalism (Sueyoshi, 112). Philip P. Choy's, Lorraine Dong's, and Marlon K. Hom's book *Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* demonstrates the geographical liminality of the representations of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans through an analysis of political cartoons (Choy et. al., 1994) This liminality positions Asians and Asian Americans as an existential threat to white American life and values that seems to originate from a geographical nowhere.

Since the 19th century, American media has stoked fears of an "Asian invasion", whose primary threat was to the purity of the white race and labor market. Thus, one of the primary components of racist fearmongering involved making the sexualities and gender identities of Asian men and women monstrous and unnatural. Sueyoshi's previously mentioned book, *Discriminating Sex*, explores how white sexual desire in the mid-to-late-19th century commodified and demeaned the bodies and identities of Asian immigrants to the US, particularly from Japan and China. Fears of urban white women's burgeoning interest in sexual exploration and liberation were projected onto Chinese and Japanese women, who were branded as sex workers and often faced deportation and imprisonment (Sueyoshi, 75-76). Asian men, on the other hand, were depicted as sexually deviant, simultaneously emasculated and rendered barbarous (Sueyoshi, 94).

Many of the immigrants who arrived in the United States at this time came looking for work. According to Barbara L. Voss, the 10,000 to 12,000 Chinese railroad workers who built the Central Pacific Railroad were the largest corporate wage-labor force in the 19th century United States (Voss, 288). Furthermore, by 1870, Chinese migrants represented 25% of all miners in the United States (Rohe in Lee, 31). Due to the fact that many immigrants during this period intended to stay only temporarily for work, the ratio of men to women was very unequal, and this disparity only increased with the passage of the 1875 Page Law. Though the law ostensibly only banned the entrance of Chinese sex-workers, almost all Asian women were denied entry as a result (Le Espiritu, 21-22). Between 1875 and 1882—when the Chinese Exclusion Act, the only law of its kind, was passed—1,340 women

immigrated to the US compared to 100,000 men (Le Espiritu, 22). Yen Le Espiritu argues that this pattern of immigration, with laws targeting not only ethnicity but also gender and class, set the stage for very different gender and sex dynamics than those than existed among other ethnic and racial groups. Among other things, it necessitated alternative social arrangements that were not centered around the heterosexual nuclear family; queer domesticities, homosocial family situations, and single-sex communal living were not uncommon (Le Espiritu, 9). However, the US government's immigration restrictions and anti-miscegenation laws severely restricted the availability of heteronormative sexual relations for Asian men, which entrenched the stereotype of sexual impotency and deviancy in the racialization of Asian Americans.

This ideology of dehumanization persisted long after the 19th century and into the 20th and 21st, even after the passage of subsequent laws that abolished the Exclusion Act in 1965. The racist ideology that framed Asian men as asexual and Asian women as hypersexual and all Asian Americans as foreign remains a feature of many contemporary depictions of the community, and disproving these is therefore a central component of the project of many works of Asian American literature. Patricia Chu argues, in fact, that one of the purposes of Asian American writing is the construction of an Asian American subjectivity through an amendment of existing narratives of American belonging and identity. The taking up of generic styles such as the bildungsroman that narrate American national identity development by Asian American authors allows for the creation of a discursive literary identity that is both, not either, Asian *and* American (Chu qtd. in Hong, 914).

Liam Corley, in an analysis of Chang-Rae Lee's 1995 novel *Native Speaker,* argues that white ownership of Americanness is a linguistic performance that denies the legitimacy of non-white native English speakers, and thus loses its ideological validity as a mode of belonging that is hypothetically non-racialized. If American national identity can be established through the execution of a particular linguistic modality, than Lee's Korean-American English speaking characters should be able to claim Americanness as surely as his white characters. Instead, they are still treated as essentially

foreign, thus revealing the primacy of the visual in the construction of identity and the racialized interpretations of speech and bodies (Corley, 78).

However, this argument still foregrounds English, and particularly English as a native language, in the conversation of belonging, which excludes diasporic narratives and identities from Americanness. Transliteration, or the process of converting one script into another using predictable visual similarities between letters in different languages, is one means of repositioning linguistic belonging outside of normative American English. Myung Mi Kim's poetry, according to Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, reinterprets the interplay between languages during the acquisition of English by non-native speakers as itself a site of belonging rather than one of dislocation and exclusion. Kim rejects standardization as a practice in general, both in the romanization of Korean Hangul and of American English, thus allowing for identities with unclear definitions and relations to exist in a fluid and inclusive "America" (Jeon, 128). Normative American national identity as a category having collapsed, a variety of layered and interconnected spheres of belonging emerge, with participation in one or the other fluctuating depending on modalities of speech, literary genre, personal and communal history, and more. As such, America exists in the many mouths of her speakers, manifesting differently depending on the particularities of each individual.

Speech, language, and literary style are evidently extraordinarily important sites of discourse for Asian American literature, but King-Kok Cheung argues that silence, oft ignored, is equally as impactful. Many Western feminist scholars have decried feminine silence as an acquiescence to patriarchy, but this ignores the potentially subversive power of withholding speech, particularly for Asian and Asian American women. Not only is selective silence valued in Confucian-influenced cultures, it also expresses meaning and communicates across barriers that speech and writing can not always overcome. Furthermore, the dismissal of Asian women's silences as weak aligns with preconceived racist notions of their submissiveness and passivity. In the post-colonial context of contemporary American racial politics, dominated as they are by prescriptive structures of language

and representation, selective silence can be more powerful than constant noise. Asian American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Hisaye Yamamoto, according to Cheung, employ silence both on the level of dialogue and literary form, through double-voiced discourse, shifting narrative voices, and historiographical metafiction, a generic model that uses intertextual allusions and historiographical awareness to dismantle the linearity and normativity of normative colonial history (Cheung qtd. in Wong, 349-350).

In another of Cheung's books, *Chinese American Literature without Borders*, she expounds one of the common interpretative mistakes that many scholars make when approaching work by minority authors, which she terms the ethnographic fallacy. Cheung views it as detrimental to the project of individual authors to simply read their work as autobiographical or auto-ethnographical (Cheung, 3). Elda Tsou critiques the entire organizational framework of the Asian American literary canon by rejecting the documentarian approach to its construction. Instead, she argues, Asian American literary fiction can be unified through an investigation of rhetorical traditions and their capacity to define and unsettle historical racial categorizations (Tsou, 161). To return to Bergson and Baudrillard, it is important to consider the potential of literature to reify race and thus render it functionally real. Furthermore, to read race into a work simply because the author belongs to a particular identity group is reductive of the work itself; fictional narratives by Asian Americans internally deconstruct and redefine race and ethnicity theoretically and narratologically, rather than simply depicting racial identity as a given (Tsou: 2015) (Cheung: 2016).

David Leiwei Li argues in *The State and Subject of Asian American Criticism* that what defines "Asian American" as an identity is in constant flux, with scholars adopting and abandoning psychoanalytic, transnational, or aesthetic definitions at breakneck speed. Furthermore, Li points to the fact that the identity, though it certainly exists as a lived experience, is theoretically difficult to pin down because the component definitions, of "Asian" and "American", are themselves blurry (Li, 603). Rachel C. Lee indeed argues that defining an Asian American identity relying on the nation state is

reductive and can potentially lead to diverse forms of cultural nationalism and exclusionary politics (Lee qtd. in Hong, 914).

As many scholars have tirelessly pointed out, it is impossible to analyze race without considering its intersections, particularly gender and sexuality. With regards to Asian Americans, David L. Eng argues in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* that the particular historical conditions and evolving racist representations have essentially created queer subjects out of most—if not all—Asian American men, who are denied the privileges of heteropatriarchy that white men benefit from (Eng qtd in Chuh, 212). Lee's call to decentralize the nation state in discussions of Asian American identity and belonging relies fundamentally on a feminist critique of the state as organizing concept, and the ideologies of late capitalism and colonial exploitation that support its existence (Lee qtd in Hong, 914).

The conversation around gender in Asian American literature often comes back to the argument, so to speak, between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston in the 1970s around the time of the publication of the latter's *The Warrior Woman.* As Cheung explains, Chin's position can be reductively described as analogous to the machismo tradition of American culture—the kind of masculine heroism exemplified by the Western—but infused with elements of Chinese and Japanese folklore, illustrated in his collaborative anthology *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* published in 1974. The goal of Chin's publication was to remasculinize Asian American men through recourse to mythologies and stories from East Asia that he considered to be exemplary of the hypermasculine ideal of American culture. Kingston's novel, according to Chin, undermined this project by focusing so heavily on Asian American patriarchy. According to Cheung, Chin is a "self-styled Chinatown cowboy" (Cheung, 30) who rejected femininity and critiques of patriarchy within the community wholesale for fear of confirming Orientalist ideas about Chinese American men and Chinese culture. However, as Cheung argues, Kingston's novel is not a commentary on Chinese American patriarchy first and foremost, but rather on the xenophobic and racist conditions within the

US that solidified and transfigured gender relations in the first place (Cheung, 41-42). Furthermore, the glorification of white American hypermasculinity necessarily disenfranchises women, queer people, and many men, perpetuating the same biases and racist logics that oppress Asian Americans to begin with (Cheung, 45).

Though Chin's stories internally prioritize physical strength and patriarchal norms, their publication demonstrates the significance of storytelling and in this sense unites them with Kingston's novel (Cheung, 48). The act of resistant writing itself, therefore, becomes the central project of their œuvres, and through diverse rhetorical strategies they, and Zhang and Lin as well, create an evolving literary language of self-generation and mutable identity formation.

Chapter One: Re-narrativizing the Histories of the American West

Though *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* are both ostensibly historical fictions, both novels are so centrally concerned with disrupting the normative narrativization of history prescribed by imperialist dogma that to categorize them as such may be a betrayal of their intended purpose. The main antagonist of the two novels is colonial history, not simply because of its content but because of its very structure. By definition, the logic of this narrativizing of the past is normative and reductive, and necessarily erases any kind of history that lies outside of its own hierarchical and domineering account. Zhang's and Lin's stories, on the other hand, present a version of history that is composed of diverse forms of narrative, including mythologies and family stories. These histories, furthermore, are not merely sterile reports neatly contained in lifeless textbooks, like the one written by Lucy and Sam's white supremacist teacher, but the living prerequisite for being fully immersed in the world. In both novels, the most important deposit of history is within the landscape, which is itself embodied in the material and metaphysical bodies and identities of the characters themselves.

Rather than approach history through this objectifying colonial gaze, Zhang's novel instead addresses history as the process through which people become embedded in a shared reality mediated by landscape. There can be no single version of history, no matter what opportunistic teachers say; only a multitude of layered and diverse stories that collectively create a unique historical reality. This layering of possibly incongruous histories allows for the emergence of the unnarratable at the core of the self and its relation to language, history, culture, and social identity. Thus, the characters *How Much of These Hills is Gold* are able to escape the normative identities forced onto them by colonial history and instead create their own discursive identities that elude hierarchies and domination. Similarly, Tom Lin's *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* investigates the liminality of selfhood, particularly in regards to memory and its relation to identity.

Stories, for Sam and Lucy, are not embellishments or distortions of reality but the threads with which the tapestry of reality is weaved. These stories provide the language and the necessary interpretive tools to give meaning to a world designed against them—a world itself composed of imperialist stories that insist on their own nonexistence. Thus history exists as a communal embodied past rather than a narrative of victories and losses, and is embedded within the landscape itself.

As the siblings make their way haphazardly across the rough Western terrain, Lucy notices Sam stop with "one foot raised, head thrown back, hands on hips: Sam doesn't realize the image this calls up. Lucy's history books were filled with conquering men who stood this way. Flags waved behind them in land emptied of buffalo and Indians" (Zhang, 59). In this scene towards the beginning of the novel, Lucy reads her sibling's body like a textbook. Each disjointed piece of Sam's body, divided across three parallel sentence fragments, communicates meaning without Sam realizing, and thus without consent. As such, Sam is incorporated into a broader historical context of empire and conquest simply by emulating the movements and body language of that history's figures. History becomes, thus, an embodied conversation with other modes of interpretation and comprehension, rather than a static narrative definitively contained within a textbook and removed from lived

experience. However, according to Lucy, Sam does not intentionally wield the semantic elements of this history; rather, Lucy uses it to interpret her sibling's movements. Thus, the language and the history it represents exist as accessible features of the world, forming the groundwork of a collective extant reality.

History as a decentralized practice is necessarily a living corpus of stories with rituals and personas performed in the present by diverse bodies and voices. Sam and Lucy take up different stances with regards to history, but the inclusion of their dialogue within the larger structure of the novel renders both accounts equally real. Sam responds to Lucy's claim that "there's nothing [out here]. No people…Dead tigers. Dead buffalo" (59) with a story that begins with "once upon a time" (59), such that the fictional mythology passed on to the siblings by their father, Ba, becomes as legitimate a narrative of the land as Lucy's (hi)story of the death of the tigers and buffalo.

The story exists literally in Sam and Lucy, in their environment, and in their relationship. At the level of the novel itself, the parallelism in Lucy's speech points to the generative capacity of histories such as *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by paradoxically reviving the "dead tigers" and "dead buffalo" within the story. The emphasis on their death illustrates how the end of a life does not relegate a creature's existence to a separate realm of experience than the living; the dead form the historical landscape that the living exist within. They are thus made real as living pieces of the physical environment the characters occupy. Therefore, though Lucy adopts Teacher Leigh's stance that Ba's histories of tigers and buffalo are "pure sentiment", the "tiger's snarl [that] sits in Sam's mouth" (61) demonstrates that these stories are true because they are *made* true through the vessel of the siblings' interactions with the mythologized territory. The metaphor renders the "pretty little folktale" (61) real, foregrounding the significance of stories in the creation of the self and its engagements with the world.

The inclusion of Ba's entire history of the hills further illustrates the interconnectedness of character, literary and otherwise, environment, and the narratives that compose them. Though Sam introduces the story and is ostensibly the one telling it, there is no formal indication that a story is even

being told—the passage has a different margin than the rest of the narrative but no quotation marks, attributions of speech, or other structural suggestions that it is being recounted. Much like the novel itself, it simply begins and ends, with very little practical integration into the structure of the rest of the novel or the lives of the book's readers. The story breaks out of the confines of imagination, becoming real as the historical framework through which Sam and Lucy are able to engage with the landscape and its people.

How Much of These Hills is Gold intentionally blurs the line between what is real and what is not, particularly with regards to history, and therefore brings into question why and how these value judgements are passed. In *The Law of Genre*, Jacques Derrida describes how the logic of generic categories that separate novels from history collapses inwards and falls apart, which suggest that literature itself cannot be relegated to a definite position of unreality (Derrida; 1980). If stories cannot be effectively classified according to internally consistent and recognizable characteristics that make them different from one another, then they cannot be legitimately distinguished from historical reality either. As such, in the lives of Sam and Lucy as in the lives of all people, mythology, folktales, family superstitions, personal beliefs, etc. bear equally upon the world as normatively defined history. Consciousness, hungry for meaning, eats whatever it is given—stories, histories, truths, untruths—and digests it all in kind, producing a highly mediated and densely referential worldview that is singular to the individual consciousness.

As a young girl at the beginning of the novel, Lucy has not yet internalized all of the limitations of normative colonial history. The mention of Teacher Leigh in the previous scene hints at the source of most of her beliefs about history, particularly with regards to its institutionally inscribed character with its strict binaries of truth and untruth. Teacher Leigh is, unsurprisingly, Lucy and Sam's teacher at the small schoolhouse in their tiny Western mining town. He ingrains in Lucy a strong association between the possession of imperialist knowledge and power, which she so takes to heart that she attempts to rationalize the entire world according to its reductive wisdom. The first encounter between

Teacher Leigh and the siblings establishes immediately the microcosmic hierarchy of the classroom, which is itself contained in and justified by the history taught there. The logic through which this history asserts its own supremacy is circular; as Teacher Leigh himself states so pompously, "he who writes the past writes the future as well" (Zhang, 111). In other words, the correctness of normative history is established by the power and prestige of the people who write it, who justify their own power and prestige through recourse to the correctness of their colonialist history.

When Lucy and Sam arrive, the teacher, whose "boots [are] as polished as the planks" (110), launches into a speech that introduces them to the classroom as well as to the system that runs it: "I've heard of you two. I hoped to see you here one day. Welcome to my schoolhouse, which draws the borders of civilization a little farther West. You may call me Teacher Leigh. And where do you come from?" (110). The contrast between the teacher's dehumanizing interrogation of Lucy and Sam and his own introduction, which prioritizes his name and title, immediately establishes their hierarchical relationship before the siblings have even had the chance to speak. Furthermore, the use of the personal pronoun "my" in reference to the schoolhouse attributes power to the teacher through his ownership of the only institution of learning available to anyone in town, thereby implicitly positioning himself at the top of a colonial social structure. Though nothing that he says is phrased as a command, the entire speech operates as such, and the refusal to acknowledge it as one therefore renders invisible the coercive nature of the statement. His follow-up question "where are you *really* from, child" (110) also denies Lucy and Sam the belonging that should by rights be theirs, and infantilizes them to boot. Thus, in a single breath, knowing nothing about the siblings but what they look like, Teacher Leigh forces them to the bottom of a racial hierarchy without ever explicitly saying or doing anything overtly aggressive.

Lucy's craving for approval and her trust in other people ultimately compel her to respond to Teacher Leigh's question about their origins with "Our ma said we come from beyond the ocean" (110), her first instance of direct dialogue in the entire interaction. Though she does not genuinely

understand herself as coming from this unmapped space beyond the limits of her imagination she verbally associates herself with it because she guesses that it is what the teacher wants from her. Her submission to the authority of the teacher comes at the cost of her humanity, and she is essentially cornered into a liminal space of perpetual unbelonging, all while she pursues belonging through the school as an institution of prescriptive knowledge and thus social power. This coerced performance allows Lucy to "cross…into the sunshine that falls square on the first desk" (111) and therefore to access the highest rung of this hierarchy she was conscripted into participating in. Her ascent to the top is enabled by her acquiescence to Teacher Leigh *as well as* her own intelligence, such that, for her, the two things become synonymous.

However, Lucy's understanding of history is divergent from her teacher's at the beginning of their interaction, and it is precisely the overbearing, oppressive embrace of colonial history and the social system it is entangled with that transform her worldview. When Teacher Leigh first asks Lucy what it is she'd like to learn, her "mind stumbles with the enormity of [the question]" (111). Her thoughts, animated by a stumbling phantom body, reach for "the open hills, their endless wander…inside that neat, closed classroom" (111). What she eventually says in response to the teacher's question is "History" (111), but from this word spring two entirely different interpretations. For Lucy, the hills themselves contain history, and it is the wandering through and across them, the uncovering of pockets of the past still living in the landscape, that constitutes its study; for Teacher Leigh, history is about dominance, about "writ[ing] the past" in his "newest monograph" (111). Where Lucy sees her entrance *into* the world, Teacher Leigh sees his means of making himself its distant ruler. The divergence in their interpretations of the same word destabilizes the seemingly static relationship between a single word and a single definition.

According to Bergson's argument, language necessarily constrains Lucy's meaning, because vocabulary in general is a limitation of the intricacy and idiosyncrasies of reality, rather than an expression of it (Bergson; 1934). Just as the standardization of history according to imperialist values

is a constrictive act that leaves much of the world unaccounted for, so is the regularizing of language. Teacher Leigh restricts Lucy's ability to communicate her true meaning by enforcing a particular and singular version of linguistic reality, assuming a linear association between a word and a definition without explicitly acknowledging the hierarchies of power embedded in this enforced relation.

Exposing the way that the language and history of colonialism obscure their own hierarchies of power is, ultimately, of central importance to *How Much of These Hills is Gold.* The novel does not simply critique, however; it also provides an alternative, in the form of fiction and its ability to make meaning in the indefinite gray areas ignored by normative history and language. *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* also emphasizes the importance of liminality at the borders of and in between definitions of identity and its connection to history. However, history in Lin's novel is mostly explored as an individual rather than collective experience, as memory rather than as shared stories. This is due in part to the formal divergences of the two novels, with one being a coming-of-age story and the other being a revenge Western.

Lucy's youth allows Zhang to interrogate the first moments of confrontation between a burgeoning self and a prejudiced society. Ming Tsu, the protagonist of Lin's novel, is already an adult at the beginning of his narrative, and has effectively internalized much of the racism directed against him over the course of his life. Furthermore, the novel is markedly a work of genre fiction, and interrogates the boundaries and consequences of the Western in ways that are reminiscent of Zhang's approach to history.

Ming Tsu's entire character arc can be summed up as an accumulation of abandonments; abandoning people he cares about, abandoning his revenge, and finally, abandoning the archetypal role of the rugged masculine hero. In some ways, Ming's arc of disillusionment is more troubled than Lucy's, because it involves confronting not only the damaging nature of society and its self-justified history, but his *own* role in perpetuating this cycle of violence as well. He also has more to lose in letting go of the values of normative history because of his masculinity, which he clings to with fervor.

The interaction of the social with the personal appears mostly under the guise of *memory*, rather than history, because the two are so tightly wound in Ming's adult mind.

Many of the characters in *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* are, in one way or another, superhuman. The miraculous abilities of the characters in the ringmaster's circus troupe point to the importance of the unknown and the liminal much like in *How Much of These Hills is Gold.* They trouble the divide between reality and unreality, often in a manner that explicitly invokes cycles and ritual repetition.

Notah, first introduced and repeatedly addressed as "Notah the Navajo" (Lin, 53), has the ability to erase people's memories. Or rather, "it was not quite erasing, Notah said. He merely separated memories from their kind, made them as dreams" (77). Significantly, Notah's speech is reported as indirect dialogue, though his previous responses to Ming in the same conversation were transcribed directly, such that, much like the memories, his words are "separated from their kind" and thus become dreamlike, floating through the narrative untethered. Essentially, he dislocates the memories just as his speech is dislocated from the conversation, which occurs in an ambiguous narratological space similarly to Ba's story of tigers and buffaloes.

As he goes on to explain, time as it is organized by a conscious mind is the key aspect that he disrupts: "Memories ached when they were remembered in time, he said, when they followed from the one before and laid out a bedroll for the one after. But memories cut free from time, from sequence? These became as dreams, wandering, incoherent, heavy with urgency and feeling but meaningless till the end" (77). The personification of memory, and furthermore of memory as a cohesive community of many animated parts, breaks apart the conception of self as a single discreet entity. Once a person's memories are given individual life and the agency to lay out a bedroll for the next, the person can no longer effectively be deemed their owner, and thus his relation to them becomes unfixed and cloudy. Also, the memories are not only alive and self-contained, but capable of "wandering". Thus they, like the person they live within, are defined, essentially, by movement, and given meaning by the

organization and direction of this movement. The long enumerative adjective clause in the last quoted sentence mirrors the wandering, impressionistic nature of the non-sequential dreamlike memories, as the adjectives accumulate but appear purely descriptive "till the end", when it is revealed that these qualities are, in fact, "meaningless". Thus the ordering of the embodied movement of memory becomes a syntactic one, operating along an axis of language as well as one of time.

However, this meaning is not *inherent* to the memories themselves, nor the subject who remembers; they exist first, and then are given an essence. Furthermore, as Notah goes on to say, "he did not make anyone forget. He only helped them cease to remember" (77). This distinction, minute as it may seem, establishes an important difference between the apparently meaninglessness and passivity of *having* a memory and the *act* of remembering which in itself imbues the memory with meaning. Notah does not remove anything from a person's archive of memories; rather, he alters the relation between the subconscious mind and the conscious one, such that the meaningful act of ordering and breathing life into the unfolding of memory as a single narrative is denied to the conscious self. Not only does this recontextualize memory as a repository of insubstantial impressions upon a malleable psyche, it also changes the relation between the self and the world. The world impresses itself upon some dark corner of the mind and leaves its indelible traces there to be read or not read by a conscious self, suggesting an ease of transference between the two that dislocates the boundary between internal self and external world. Notah himself indeed says that he "buried [the bodies of the men that Ming killed for the ringmaster]…In the earth and in the mind" (75). The parallelism of the last phrase builds a strong association between the mind and the earth, and establishes both as spaces where things—bodies, memories—can be buried. There is therefore no clear line between the body, the self, and the world as landscape, with each influencing the other and constructing a complex and layered whole. This also indicates perhaps the possibility of *un*burying memories and histories, dredging up unconscious beliefs and identities from deep within the earth and the psyche.

Though Notah *says* that the dream memories become meaningless, it is perhaps more accurate to say that they simply become less explicitly noticeable. Nevertheless, they remain in the psyche, particularly in the subconscious, and can therefore arguably have a meaningful impact on the waking actions of the person they inhabit. Ming indeed spends most of the novel forgetting his wife, Ada, and yet her ghost-like image and the blurred memory of their relationship and its end haunt him, and motivate most of his actions throughout. His impressions of her as beautiful and loving and his image of himself as masculinely heroic are "cut free" from their source and sequence, their relationship becoming a simulacrum of intimacy (Baudrillard: 1981). In operating according to the tenets of an ideology that has been so effectively internalized that the source can no longer be identified, Ming perpetuates the violence done unto him.

The permeable membrane of the mind creates many problems in *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, namely that Ming internalizes values and identities that are harmful to himself and others. Nevertheless, it is also precisely this particular quality that provides the tools for rejecting these damaging normative constructs. Lucy in *How Much of These Hills is Gold* never appears to incorporate the dominant, normative concepts she confronts into her person and self-conception to quite the same degree, though she also must overcome these in order to come to a new understanding of herself in the world. However, it may be more accurate to say that Lucy, for a variety of reasons, never reflects these ideologies back onto the world to the same degree as Ming. Of course, she is only eleven when the novel opens, and barely into young adulthood when it closes, so her reactions to the social inequalities she confronts are not systematized and automatic like Ming's are. In fact, developing a consistent and permanent ideological forcefield against oppressive systems that protects her independent selfhood is arguably her main arc. Her journey is one of coming of age and of learning, and she commits significantly fewer crimes than Ming "committer of one thousand crimes" Tsu. His journey, on the other hand, can be succinctly summed up as one of *un*learning. His story culminates not with his

coming into adulthood per se but with his letting go of a maladapted reactive ideology he adopted to get by in a hostile world.

These differences in generic approach give insight into different aspects of identity formation and execution, particularly with regards the cultural inheritance of different kinds of histories. While *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* effectively demonstrates the psychological discord of a thoroughly masculinized man whose relatively normative self-conception and presentation begin to collapse, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* tracks the collision between an inexperienced young person and the overbearing systems of definition that indifferently attempt to manipulate her identity. However, *both* novels are interested in the relationship between self and world and the historical imagination through which this is mediated, and both similarly integrate one into the other inextricably. To construct their embodied identities both Ming and Lucy must fully immerse themselves in the historical landscape they inhabit, and transform it through their own movement therein.

Therefore, in *How Much of These Hills is Gold,* in comprehending the world, a subject also becomes hopelessly enmired in it, a piece of the world as much as the world is a piece of the subject. The consumption metaphor is apt in this sense—you are, after all, what you eat. History, as a loose collection of stories that seek to explain past origins and developments, is essentially imbibed, and thus incorporated into the machination of the mind and its capacity to further understand the world and its histories. This metaphor operates literally in *How Much of These Hills is Gold,* in a scene of graphic consumption in the novel's first half, during which Sam and Lucy witness Ma eat what initially appears to be mud but is eventually revealed to be bone straight from the ground, an act that is later mirrored in Ba's feeding Ma bone broth for their unborn son.

Both instances of consumption take on a particular significance for Lucy, who wonders "how many years and centuries were swallowed with those bones? Enough, this night, to make it seem as if something else clambers out of Ma's throat. Something enormous, ungentle. *History*, Lucy thinks suddenly" (Zhang, 97). Ma's body becomes the vessel for history, which Lucy describes as

"enormous" and "ungentle", something cosmically terrifying in its immense incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, this "something…clambers out of Ma's throat", thus becoming animal and imbedded within the material, rather than a loose film of meaning floating somewhere above or beyond the realm of living things. Furthermore, this creature manifests itself through Ma's speech, curses specifically, being the other thing that emerges from her mouth. Thus, her body produces through language the unwieldy "History" that so terrifies Lucy. However, to say that Ma *produced* this history is somewhat inaccurate; to be more precise, she "swallowed [it] with those bones". In other words, history is the record of life upon the land, and in consuming the territory's ancient viscera, Ma imbeds herself in history and manifests it through her body.

Ma's feast of dirt and bone is not an act exclusive to her, and in fact is motivated, according to Ba, by a pregnancy. The chapter ends with Lucy's reflection that "hours of Ba's work, centuries of life, disappear…into the baby. *History,* Lucy thinks, and shivers" (99). Unlike in Ma's case, the imbibed history "disappear[s] into the baby", an as of yet unconscious recipient who has no language to express itself or this history with. In other words, the context into which the baby is born, the historically contingent body it will inhabit, the social structures it will inherit, are all formed prior to its consciousness. These threads of meaning weave together before its birth and create the conditions of its existence, functioning, essentially, as a kind of predetermined identity. History, therefore, can be understood as a form of fate, or a living grammar. It is also, however, a transformative process that can resist colonially imposed social identities by renegotiating the relation between a subject and the historical landscape they occupy.

Ma's "feast of the land's dank secrets" (95) can in this sense be interpreted as a reaction against the femininity she weaponizes as a defense against a patriarchal and racist society. Lucy describes seeing the "white stripe of Ma's neck, the wings of shoulder blades through fabric. Nothing else" (95). The partial and mediated view she has of Ma, concealed by clothing and ambiguously animal, is indicative of the broader limitations on her understanding of her mother as a full person. Ma

intentionally alienates herself from her daughter in order to instill in her the idea that feminine beauty and the appearance of gentility are weapons, which is necessarily a constriction of her embodied personhood. In this scene, however, Ma's "wings" emerge "through fabric", and all that Lucy sees is the collapsing façade of feminine performance and the animal hunger it conceals.

Lucy, confronted with her mother's unrecognizable animality, gives up on her efforts to reconcile this image with her mother's highly controlled femininity. Instead, "Lucy averts her eyes, not wanting to witness what else Ma might eat: earthworms, pebbles, ancient twigs, buried eggs and leaf mold, the scritch scratch of beetle legs" (95). The enumeration of dead organisms and their ancient corpses revives them in the narrative, much like the dead tigers and dead buffalo, such that the literary landscape becomes a catalogue of its own history—a history that is *alive* within the body of the earth. Furthermore, knowledge of this history is a participatory and all-consuming act, such that to understand history as it is expressed in the world is to be wholly immersed in it. Landscape can be understood as analogous in many ways to bodies, in the sense that both bear their traumas and histories within themselves. As Lucy later explains, "to move through this land and believe in Ba's tales is to see each hill as a burial mound with its own crown of bones" (144).

In *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* the landscape similarly bears its histories physically within itself. The unnamed blind prophet who guides Ming on his journey of revenge is able to read the landscape as if it were a written language with a fossilized catalogue of its histories contained within its body. He explains to Ming and the circus troupe travelling with them that "they were following the tracks of some antediluvian flood that had come through before there were men to tell of its coming" (Lin, 101). The ringmaster of the troupe, however, questions the source of his knowledge "if, as he said, there was no one to see that ancient flood" (101). However, the prophet's original claim syntactically positions the tracks of the ancient flood before the absent men to tell of its coming, such that the categorical impulse of the latter is eclipsed by the materiality of the former. Thus, the landscape becomes the active agent of history, rather than the men who prescribe meaning and value to it.

He goes on to claim that the history of the flood is "wrought into the earth itself, laid bare for all men to read" (101), which shifts the power away from the viewer and onto the landscape itself. The evidence for the flood, in other words, cannot be found in textbooks or the reductive accounts of hypothetical eyewitnesses, as the ringmaster seems to believe, but in the body of the land itself. This necessarily leaves far more room for interpretation, and thus perhaps *mis*interpretation, but this is only a problem under the assumption that history *should* be a single cohesive narrative. History becomes a decentralized practice in the novel that, though it may yield different particularities, is necessary to engage with the world as it actually exists. Furthermore, the embodied condition of history as it is represented here, resists the false objectivity of normative history by couching it firmly within the lived reality of the earth and its inhabitants.

The subversion of the ideology of history as a single narration by an objective observer is complicated, though, when the prophet later says "the land belonged to those who would remake it in their own image, who by crossing and recrossing its breadth would come to understand its contours, its character, what remained when the day was done" (217). Though the prophet appears to condone the systems according to which land ownership is determined according to who treats it the worst, the second half of the sentence reframes the preceding statement such that the ability to possess and redefine landscape is contingent upon understanding landscape on its own terms.

The only way to claim the land is "by crossing and recrossing its breadth", such that the subject comes "to understand its contours, its character, what remained when the day was done" (217). Rather than mapping landscape from a position of false objectivity and claiming it as dominion from afar, the prophet argues that land has to be known to be owned, and this is only possible through direct engagement. In other words, in pursuit of land ownership, a subject must first give themselves to the land in order to understand "what remained when the day was done" (217). The repetition in "crossing and recrossing" followed by the alliterative parallelism "its contours, its character" furthermore highlights how language is embedded into the process of coming to know landscape. History, in other

words, is itself a crossing and recrossing of the landscape, and the division between history, history teller, and historical landscape is once again dissolved.

However, as *How Much of These Hills is Gold* makes evident through the character of Teacher Leigh, not all historians are willing to accept their embeddedness within the histories they create. In fact, ignoring this reality is at the heart of the colonial historical project, as Lucy discovers upon examining Elske's private library in the brothel where she works at the end of the novel:

> "History after history of other territories across other oceans: hills smeared with jungle, plateaus cold as ice, deserts, cities, ports, valleys, swamps, grasslands, peoples. Lands vast and distant—and all of them recorded by men like the one she knows. Even one history of this territory. A book thick with dust, clumsily written, name of a schoolteacher big across the front. She looks for a promised chapter but finds in those pages only a few lines, herself reduced to something crude and unrecognizable" (Zhang, 317).

The schoolteacher, evidently, is Teacher Leigh, and the book the one Lucy spent so much time helping him with. Ultimately, it is surprising to neither Lucy nor the reader that she has been thus erased, thus "reduced to something crude and unrecognizable" (317), but the sting is felt nevertheless. However, Lucy does get her comeuppance; in this passage, Teacher Leigh is himself essentially erased from the narrative of the novel, referred to only by the title of "schoolteacher" (317). Unlike Lucy's treatment in the history book, though, the novel does not exactly make Teacher Leigh unrecognizable, though his book is "thick with dust" and "clumsily written" (317). Even these jabs are not aimed at him, but at his work, such that he is acknowledged to live as an embodied whole outside of the confines of this depiction of him. Lucy, on the other hand, finds her entire person diminished and caricaturized. Teacher Leigh's history book claims all of existence as under its purview, attempting to categorize everything according to a single source of logic and value. Zhang's novel structurally rejects this narrow, normative history by reasserting the capacity of fiction to express the fundamental diversity of

ways of understanding the world. *How Much of These Hills is Gold* never rejects its condition as a subjective story but rather embraces the generative capacity of its fictionality, creating a historiographical metafiction rather than a prescriptive normative history (Cheung qtd. in Wong, 349-350).

On the other hand, the books in Elske's library are singularly focused on carving up the world into pieces and nations, and attributing value according to a skewed colonial hierarchy. These textbooks contain records of "lands vast and distant—and all of them recorded by men like the one she knows" (317). The two adjectives "vast" and "distant", joined by the conjunction "and", reduce the complex existences of the world's geographies to their their difference from the United States. Furthermore, the line is cut off by an em-dash, as the realities of the landscapes are subordinated to the men who recorded them. The library contains the entire world as it is imagined by colonizers, whose only intention in writing on these unknown territories is to force them into the hierarchy of colonialism and white supremacy, thereby subjugated the varied lands, peoples, and stories to exploitation and prescriptive delineation of meaning and value.

The books and the men who wrote them literally carve national identities into geographies and bodies, creating associations between the physical features of both and the values they hold. As such, the infinite possibilities of the world are whittled away by normative value impositions until everything fits neatly into tiny, immutable definitions. This process of mapping nations onto landscapes and peoples is a destructive one, and also, as Rachel C. Lee attests, a masculine one. Lucy's reckoning with the incompleteness of her knowledge of history, herself, the land around her involves a parallel reevaluation of gender. Essentially, the impulse to categorize is a dominating, normatively masculine drive, and Lucy therefore rejects the kind of femininity prescribed to her by the dominating, normatively masculine society she lives in. This particular rejection also entails the repudiation of the nation state as a determiner of selfhood along the same lines, as Rachel C. Lee argues for in *The Americas of Asian American Literature* (Lee qtd. in Hong, 914-915). Though it may seem like the

dissolution of such easily identifiable character markers as nationality, gender binaries, and colonial racial categories leaves no structure through which to construct an identity, both *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* explore how the profound connection between Chinese American bodies and the historical American West provides the basis for a limitless and open understanding of identity as a participatory practice rather than as a prescriptive demarcation.

Chapter Two: Negotiating the Bodies of Landscape and Identity

For Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, author of *Indian Given*, the obliteration of the distinction between a person and their geography is a tool of imperial domination and has been historically used to objectify Indigenous people and therefore justify colonial genocide (Saldaña-Portillo, 11). Racial mapping has similarly been weaponized against Asian Americans, whose bodies are mapped as perpetually foreign and other, as argued by Traise Yamamato in *Foreigners Within* (Yamamoto: 2009). However, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* present an alternative unity between bodies and geographies that subverts these dehumanizing tropes and repositions the relation between land and the people living upon it. Repositioning the relation between the landscape and its inhabitants allows for the territory of the Western to become the mythological focal point of a discursive Chinese American past. Not only does this reassert the fundamental belonging of Chinese Americans in the historical Western landscape, it also implicitly rejects the normative ideology of identity definition that alienated them in the first place.

In Zhang's and Lin's novels, the relation between the phenomenological experience of being a body and the socially contingent inhabitation of an identity is thus explored primarily in relation to landscape. Neither the geography of the West nor the identities of the novels' protagonists can be reductively explained according to essentialist colonial demarcations of social value. Instead, the body becomes a site of infinite possibility, engaging with the social world through various externally defined

identities but remaining essentially boundless. The landscape can therefore be metaphorically interpreted as a body in the two novels, vast and limitless.

Despite this significant similarity, the central questions of identity in *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* and *How Much of These Hills is Gold* are different, largely due to the differences between the two novels protagonists, Ming and Lucy, and their roles within their novels' respective genres. For one thing, Lucy is a young girl only just coming into an awareness of the perception of her body as an object of desire and possibly violence, while Ming is well acquainted with the violence that can be inflicted upon him and that he himself can inflict. Nevertheless, both novels invest heavily in unpacking the origins and processes of identity formation, exploring the connections and disconnects between bodies and their socially contingent identities, particularly those rendered nearly subhuman according to normative colonial master narratives.

The key to resisting dehumanizing tropes, in the *Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* is in divesting the body of ideology, and thus making room for interpersonal connection and authentic self-generation. The literary body in the novel is first and foremost a radical statement of intrinsic oneness and belonging to the world, and to the particular geography of the American West, both as a literal and literary landscape. It exists completely, regardless of how it is perceived, much like the landscape upon which it stands. Secondly, its existence in the world is predicated upon its fundamental materiality; though histories, memories, and stories all form an important dimension of reality, they are necessarily embodied and therefore contingent upon the materiality of the landscape and the body. Thus, in a sense, the body is both the limit and the potential of identity.

Throughout the novel, Ming and his travelling party encounter other characters of Chinese descent, and these interactionsd reveal how racial, ethnic, and national identity are conflated by the dominant Anglo-American culture. Over and over again, Ming must reassert that the only national culture he has ever known is an American one, having been orphaned as a child and raised by a white man, Silas Root, in Sacramento. As Liam Corley argues with regards to Chang-rae Lee's *Native*

Speaker, the visual appearance of Asianness is given primacy over the linguistic and cultural Americanness of the novels' characters (Corley, 63). Both Lee's and Lin's novels illustrate the difficulty in clearing a space for an integrated Asian American identity. Ming, for his part, often rejects any association between himself and other characters of Chinese descent in order to stake his claim to an American national identity. The prejudice of his society leaves no room for the existence of Chinese Americans; Ming must create that identity himself, both within the narrative and in the canon of the Western genre.

Ming straddles a difficult line merely by existing in the novel, frequently being confronted with the implicit reduction of his Chinese American identity into oppositional binaries by the Anglocentric culture around him. In the mining town of Dun Glen with the circus troupe, the ringmaster, as an avatar for the normative colonial ideology of the broader culture, projects a reductive schema of religious, national, and linguistic identities onto the "scores of Chinese miners passing wordless and exhausted through the town square" (Lin, 43), and onto Ming as well. In the opening words of the chapter, he proclaims to Ming that he "hasn't seen a Christian face since we got here…I reckon there's two, three hundred of your countrymen in this here town" (143). He reads the bodies of the passing miners according to prescriptive colonial categorizations and systematically denies them access to the conditions of belonging to the sociocultural territory they occupy. Furthermore, he categorizes Ming the same way, based on nothing but the suggestion of their similar appearances which he takes to be indicative of a more essential uniformity of identity. He ringmaster continues to wonder where the "good God-fearing men of these great United States…the whites indeed" (143), thus explicitly constructing a racial identity for the townspeople based on moral, religious, and national otherness. Furthermore, his insistence on the absence of "Christian face[s]" even in the presence of hundreds of Chinese miners reduces them to a position of liminality and abjection, rendering their existence less real than the nonexistence of hypothetical white townspeople.

The literary identities of the Chinese characters is limited by the language of the genre itself, which lacks the necessary structure to render them in their full humanity. They are "wordless and exhausted" in a double sense, being both narratively tired from hard labor and metatextually unaccountable for in the linguistic and literary structures of the Western. The limited repertoire of language afforded to them is immediately exhausted in the phrase "Chinese miners" itself, such that they "pass" out of the narrative silently while the white Christian Americans absorb all the humanity available in the genre.

The prophet goes on to explain to the ringmaster that the town was abandoned by white miners when all the silver was mined from the mountains, while the Chinese miners stayed to continue extracting stones. The ringmaster decides therefore to forego setting up the show tent and the audience chairs, instead calling to the miners gathered before him "you sittee…come look see look see" (145). His pidgin English further robs the characters of belonging even though the troupe are visitors in their town, linguistically alienating them based on an ungrounded assumption of foreignness.

The ringmaster, furthermore, assumes an association between the miners and Ming, asking him to "let them know we're having a show…Mr. Tsu" (144). When Ming repeats "we're having a show" (144), the ringmaster clarifies that he meant "in Chinese", to which Ming answers "I ain't speak a lick of that" (144). Not only does the ringmaster assume a common racial, ethnic, and national identity between Ming and the Nevadan miners, he also assumes that Ming speaks Chinese, though he has only spoken English throughout their entire acquaintance, with a noticeable Western dialect and accent. Moreover, the ringmaster does not initially ask Ming to say it in Chinese, expecting the latter to submit to the identity he projects onto him implicitly. The ringmaster profiles Ming and the miners and, based on the visual appearance of their bodies, assumes the contents of their entire characters, conscripting them into submission to his own dominating identity.

The difference between the colonial social identities of the ringmaster and of Ming and the miners is structural, with the former being defined by its active capacity to prescribe meaning and the

other being merely the passive recipient of these categorical definitions. At the very beginning of Ming's story, before he has encountered anyone in the narrative who would try to reductively define him, he experiences the cognitive dissonance—or perhaps more accurately the physiological dissonance—of his own consciousness recognizing the cracks in its own construction. He wanders across the Western desert as the narrator explains:

> "On these shifting flat's man's capacity for recognition functions only at scale: the look of a mountain range at distance, the hills and valleys swelling and receding, the painted sky. But the landscape drawn close to the body becomes vulgar and inane, hard and flat and full of consequence. Among the sun-scrawled shadows of sagebrush and saltgrass one finds all things eroding, even one's capacity for marking time. These geologies are older than breaths" (7-8).

Ming's masculinity emerges in this passage as a fundamental aspect of his character almost immediately. Not only is Ming gendered as male upon contact with the page, his masculinity is also universalized. The narrator declares that "a man must make his preparations" (4) on the second page, such that Ming's individual actions become a larger manifestation of proper manhood as a whole. This is significant in that the ability to navigate the antagonistic landscape of even this reimagined West is still restricted to men. However, manhood is contrasted with the experience of being a *body*—bodyhood, if you will—twice in the opening passage of the novel, revealing the internal tension within the genre and Ming himself between material and social existence. Though it is "*man* [with the] capacity for recognition", the landscape is "drawn close to the *body"* (8), such that the imperializing gaze of normative masculinity collapses when it collides with the physical reality of the body and its position in the world.

Much like how the distant perspective on the landscape enables a person to categorize and comprehend a mountain range as such, it is only from afar that a man can be assembled into one. From up close, when the "landscape is drawn close to the body" (7), it becomes "full of consequence" (8)

and thus undermines man's capacity for recognition. In this analogy, the masculine gaze reduces the historical landscape to a colonial map, prescribing meaning and value that are only applicable from the particular colonial male perspective. From up close, from the perspective of embodied reality, the discreet dehumanizing designations fall apart and the male body becomes embedded in the very world it sought to distance itself from through its objectifying gaze.

Ming's body suffers the particular consequence of blindness at the hands of the landscape, which serves as a parable for the process of internalizing harmful colonial identities. As the narrator explains, "when he had first arrived in the Sierra Nevadas nearly two years ago he was struck snow-blind for nearly a week, his eyes scoured clean by sunlight. Here on these salt barrens a new snow blindness was forming" (8). Ming, though he identifies with the imperial masculine gaze, is not immune to the landscape; rather, he is violently reshaped by the landscape, formed into precisely the hardened man encountered at the beginning of the story. Interestingly, the part of the environment that is most harmful to him is the sun and its blinding light, which is described as a sterilizing force that "scoured clean" his eyes, and thus robbed him of his ability to see. His physical body is thus abused and repositioned to make room for the emergence of a normatively defined masculine hero.

The reoccurrence of blindness in two different environments, both of which are marked by their complete exposure and lack of protection, suggests that the process of character creation is a continual and repeated violence. In order to enact his revenge for the original betrayal of being conscripted to work on the railroad—a punishment that is an explicit reminder of the perception of his race—Ming also reenacts the same original violence against himself. Because it is the sun itself blinding him, the violence appears natural and inescapable. The sun illuminates the entire world and therefore allows him to see, thereby conscripting him into a particular identity and worldview through its violence.

The burning brightness of the sun causes Ming to "squint…into the west for a moment and as he began to walk once more he closed his eyes. On the insides of his eyelids he saw a ghostly

photonegative, black horizon pressed close to a gray white sky" (8). Though he closes his eyes against the sun, it penetrates to the core of his character and refashions it according to colonial values. The source of this blinding light is located cardinally to the west, which also happens to be the symbolic direction of Westerns and their ideology of manifest destiny. Thus Ming's own journey westward inflicts further pain upon him even as he embodies the characteristics of a male Western hero.

As Ming shuts his eyes against the blinding sun, he finds himself "wandering in memory" (8), recalling the chain of events that led up to the murder of Ambrose, one of the perpetrators of his violent separation from Ada, which is narrated in graphic detail. He thus enacts himself as externally restructured Western hero in memory, and it can be argued that the sun's reordering of the world is atemporal, in that the instance of its initial violence extends both indefinitely forward and indefinitely backwards. With regards to time, among other things, Ming occupies a liminal position, being conferred the title of "man out of bounds" (25) by the prophet. Literally speaking, this refers to the fact that the prophet cannot see the exact time of Ming's death, because he was supposed to have died when he escaped from the Central Pacific. Symbolically, his out of boundsness also refers to the liminal condition of his identity, which is simultaneously antagonistic to and an embodiment of colonial masculinity. Though he escapes the railroad, and thus the objectified position of Chinese laborer he was forced into by Ada's father and his goons, his vengeful journey westward keeps him within the orbit of the same system that dehumanized him to begin with. He is therefore a man out of bounds temporally as well as with regards to his identity, as he troubles the boundaries between binary categories under normative colonial ideology.

When Ming opens his eyes and returns to the geography before him, the "lucent landscape seared itself into his vision…He walked eyes shut for hours more, his mind in a state of deliberate emptiness, an excruciating not-thinking" (9). The landscape of memory and the physical landscape bleed together in his movement through them, and both remain present in the other even when he attempts to negate the two of them by not thinking. The debilitating sun burns through the

distinction between self and world, while his memory informs the way he literally moves through the world. Ming's attempt at deliberate emptiness is reminiscent of the traditional Western's response to existentialist angst; ignorance. Jane Thompkins argues that for a cowboy, the highest state of being is a complete lack of reflective capacity, which is arguably the function that makes someone human, such that he becomes one with the landscape as a rock or a butte is, and therefore experiences none of the psychological pains of alienation from the immediate (Thompkins, 57). Though this is similar to the unity promoted in *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* it differs in its conception of the landscape in general. In Lin's novel, the landscape as embodied vessel of history cannot be *used* as an object in order to attain the cowboy heaven of rockdom, as is typically the case in other Westerns. Instead, the geography of the genre must be confronted without the trappings of intervening colonial identities in order to gain access to its alternative repository of historical meaning.

Alienation from the self and from the world often go hand in hand, because, once again, there is an inherent relation of transferal between the two of them, with the self being a loose sieve that translates the experiences of the body into a cohesive identity. In *How Much of These Hills is Gold,* Lucy frequently has tripartite experiences, wherein the embodied condition of herself in the world is disrupted such that she becomes mind, body, and mind-body-in-world separately. Particularly in her younger years, the weight of all her social identities, as daughter, sister, young woman, student, racial other, etc. bear heavily on her psyche, and she carries a significant amount of guilt and a deep sense of responsibility that isolate her from her surroundings. This is ironic especially in relation to her family, and even more so with Sam, because her commitment to adequately performing a role she is not fully comfortable in alienates her from them, the opposite of its intended purpose.

Towards the beginning of the siblings' trek across the hills of California in pursuit of a land wild enough to bury Ba in, Lucy loses Sam and their stolen horse, Nellie, the first of many separations.

> "One night Lucy comes back dangling a squirrel, Sam's favorite. It was trying to scramble up a tree with a broken paw. Sam's nowhere to be found. Nor Nellie. Lucy spins, hands bloody,

> heart ticking and ticking. To match its rhythm she sings a song about two tigers playing hide-and-seek. It's been years since any stream in this territory ran deep enough to support a creature bigger than a jackal; the song comes from a lusher time. This is a song that Sam, if Sam is scared and hiding, won't mistake. Twice Lucy thinks she sees a stripe in the brush. *Little tiger little tiger,* she sings. Footfalls behind her. *Lai*" (Zhang, 17).

Lucy's guilt is a common theme throughout the entire novel, especially in relation to her sibling. In this early passage, the narrator describes her returning to camp "dangling a squirrel, Sam's favorite" (17) and finding Sam gone. In her panic, "Lucy spins, hands bloody, heart ticking and ticking" (17). Though her initial departure from their camp was for Sam's benefit, her already guilty conscience primes her for a new, fresh wave of self-reproach, as if she has been caught red handed—or squirrel-blood handed—in an act of betrayal. As her heartbeat speeds up in fear and worry, she "sings a song…to match its rhythm…about two tigers playing hide-and-seek" (17). The song, through its rhythmic connection to her own life-giving heartbeat, is naturalized to her body, as if the tune and the story of the tigers it conveys were a functional aspect of her physical self. However, Lucy sings "to match [her heartbeat's] rhythm", actively using the song as a tool to follow her pulse. As such, she is in fact alienated from her body at the same time that she is brought closer to the song and the family history it represents. In other words, the order of her connection to the song and her own bodily existence is reversed, such that the song and its cultural and personal history create the framework within which Lucy is able to attempt to understand her body.

Lucy understands her body not as forming the foundation of her identity or contributing significantly to her conception of self, but rather as profoundly unknown. The metonymy of the previously cited phrase divides Lucy into a spinning consciousness, bloody hands, and a ticking heart. The dependent noun clauses, separated syntactically by commas without any conjunctions, isolate her into pieces, with only the first one performing the action. Thus Lucy, as an autonomous agent, is

separate from her hands and her heart, which exist in the world seemingly without her control of them. The bloodiness of her hands, therefore, and the betrayal their appearance manifests, is also a betrayal of Lucy herself. Essentially, her hands reveal the injury she feels she has committed against Sam even while she herself, as a conscious person, attempts to adapt and atone for it by bringing the squirrel in the first place. The dynamic with the squirrel is also interesting because it reveals how, despite her disconnect from it, Lucy's body still functions expertly in the environment. Given the representation of the landscape in the canon of Western fiction as a test of personal fortitude and masculine strength (Thompkins, 73-74), it is notable that Lucy and Sam are able to survive so well upon it. They are, in practice, attuned to the requirements of living in the West, but in theory do not yet entirely know how to incorporate this knowledge into their self-conception.

Similarly to Ming Tsu, Lucy's inability to unify her experience of the world with her identity is largely due to the external perception of her body, and the intervention of prescriptive gender and racial categories. Unlike Ming, however, Lucy does not occupy the role of the prescriber, otherwise known as a man. Instead, she is forcibly confronted with the objectifying gaze of men who see her as nothing more than a sex object. When she and Sam meet a mountain man at the beginning of the novel, he says to them, "'it gets lonely out here. I'll take some of your salt and thank you for it. I could also use a girl.' His eyes spin toward Lucy like empty plates" (67). Though he does not literally force himself upon her, as men will later try to do, the man projects an understanding of Lucy's body onto her that she does not understand, because she is "too young to speak…the language of his looking" (67). Gender, in other words, is not only a historical precedent handed down through generations that imbues certain bodies with specific fates, nor a relation between socialized bodies, but a syntactic ordering of interaction. In other words, the man communicates his desire for Lucy's body overtly through his speech act, but erases her subjective being through "the language of his looking". His gaze forces itself upon Lucy's embodied reality and denies her a conscious presence in the world,

transforming her from a fellow traveler to an object to be consumed on the same level as partridge with salt, with both simply filling up his "empty plate".

This method of interpreting the world, as a sequence of objects destined for consumption, is distinctly masculine. Consumption, in this instance, takes on a very different meaning than in the case of Ma and her unborn baby, whose feast upon the land integrates the historical landscape indelibly into themselves and thus symbiotically fuses them into the fabric of the land and its history. The mountain man, however, does not become closer to Lucy or the land because he seeks to imbibe them, because he does allow his own selfhood to be brought into equal relation with them. As with Ming Tsu, what makes a man a man, according to normative Western values, is his distance from the world, and his insatiable appetite to violently break it down into hierarchical categories according to his will.

How Much of These Hills is Gold offers a version of masculinity that is not so destructive in the character of Sam, who is ambiguously gendered but masculine in presentation. When a storm sweeps through the valley the family lives in, it takes with it Ma, her baby, talk of gold, and Ba's hope. Lucy notes that they also "lose Sam's girlhood. Swept out, scoured clean…the washed-clean sun fierce off Sam's shorn head. One brother lost, another gained; that's the night Sam is born" (185-186). The insistence on the cleanliness of the whole affair transforms gender from something that is merely a projection of a historically significant identity onto an unwilling body into something that can be chosen willingly. In other words, Sam is able to positively identify with masculinity as an embodied existence in the world, rather than an alienating position of domination. Much like Ming Tsu, Sam's identity is "cleared out", but rather than this being a violent process of racialization that forcefully inserts a normative heteropatriarchal identity in his psyche, it makes space for a resistant and self-generative one. Furthermore, Sam's masculinity is not defined according to its ability to impose identities and ways of being in the world without consent; instead, it is about choice, presentation, and relation to the world and others. Furthermore, other than in very few instances, such as being called a

brother here, Sam is rarely explicitly gendered as male at all. No pronouns are used in reference to Sam after this scene of rebirth in the narrative, such that the gender presentation of the character remains, essentially, unexplained and therefore uncategorized.

In *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* the eponymous Ming only achieves awareness of the problems of masculinity at the very end of the novel, and only after murdering his wife in front of her infant child. The primary mechanism that leads to this discovery is memory, and the collapse of its inconsistent and harmful socialized logic. However, there are other characters who do not weaponize masculinity as Ming does, and have vastly different relations to the operation of memory. The prophet, an old man who Ming knows from his days working on the railroad, has the gift of foresight, but is unable to remember most things. Ming describes his face as "at once ancient and ageless. Though time had marked its hours and days upon the old man's sun-hardened visage it hadn't found any purchase there. He was as living stone and when he spoke the years vanished from the gaunt hollows of his cheeks and the sunken pits of his eyes, as flies rise from the back of a sleeping beast who has begun to stir. Here was a man unburdened by memory, a man for whom the unspun threads of the future were as bright and clear as the past was vague and frayed" (Lin, 24). The man's face, much like Ming's memory, can be read as a landscape.

Also like Ming, his identity as it manifests in his face is affected—or rather, unaffected—by the sun. Though it is "sun-hardened", this appearance does not penetrate beyond his skin. He is, instead, "as living stone", an oxymoronic simile that undermines the conception of the landscape as immutable and dead. The personification of time through the designation of the ability to "mark…its hours and days upon the old man's sun-hardened visage" as well as the particular use of the term "mark" turn aging into a process of external demarcation. Also, the word "purchase", though literally denoting time's inability to claim a stable hold on his face, carries the connotation of economics. This is especially relevant in the context of the prophet's and Ming's shared history as laborers. As discussed

earlier, the reduction of the Chinese railroad workers to a nameless mass of laborers is a repeated theme in the novel. Time, marked in days and hours, is also a unit of economy. As such, the marking of the old man's face by time is also a marking of its labor, and thus his resistance to the physical traces of age and work is also a resistance to the categorization of his person as a Chinese laborer.

Though he, like all of the other characters of Chinese descent in the novel other than Ming himself, has no name, he does have a title, and one that carries a particular weight in Western literature. The novel contains a number of Biblical allusions, such as the repetition of "antediluvian" to describe the Western desert, the description of Ming's coming down the mountain (8), and especially the prophet himself. Not only is he called the prophet, but he dies for Ming and is later reborn, in a notably Christ-like sequence of events. Thus he is defined primarily by his mythological position, and not by the violent imposition of a dehumanized social position, or a dehumanizing one.

He is also arguably the character who is most intimately connected to the landscape, frequently waxing poetic about its timelessness, its divinity, and its living memory—all characteristics that he himself also possesses. He is much like a landscape himself, bearing the traces of the external world's impact upon himself but retaining his embodied subjectivity. Instead of being scoured clean as Ming is by the sun, he is hardened, meaning there is no room for the insertion of a new system of understanding. He is instead made more real through his engagements with the world. Later, the narrator states that "it is in the prophet's character to speak in riddles" (25), which, aside from being a meta-reflection on the process of characterization in literature, affirms that the prophet expresses his being through his embodied use of language, rather than being reductively defined by it. That he speaks in riddles means that a portion of his meaning is known only to himself, such that his relationship to language is transformed to accommodate unformed and unnarratable aspects of his selfhood.

Interestingly, the prophet, unlike Ming, is permanently blind, and is also "unburdened by memory". Thus, since the sun finds purchase in Ming and not in the prophet, it would follow that what it affects is primarily these two things. Furthermore, the "years vanished from the gaunt hollows of his

cheeks and the sunken pits of his eyes" when the prophet speaks, indicating that the speech act itself is an active reconstruction of his own facial landscape. This reconstruction is compared to the way "flies rise from the back of a sleeping beast", with the prophet's face as living landscape being both the flies and the beast. Thus that the bodily landscape encapsulates both its movement, its change, and its being. Furthermore, the mirrored alliteration in "cheeks"/ "eyes" and "flies rise"/ "sleeping beast" unifies the features of the prophet's face with the flies and the beast, even as the latter agitates the former and causes them to fly away. The particular pairing of the sounds suggests an association between the prophet's eyes and the rising flies, and similarly his cheeks and the sleeping beast. In the simile, the years that vanish from his face are metaphorically represented by the flies, and thus time, too, is connected to the prophet's eyes. Though he cannot see in a literal sense, he has the gift of foresight, and his sight is thus, like the flies rising from the still sleeping beast, anticipatory rather than reactionary. Furthermore, the prophet's eyes are later described as being "salt-white" (25), which calls to mind Ming's own second blindness on the salt barrens. Again, rather than internalizing the violence of the reflected brightness, he himself projects it. As such, he cannot be burned by the whiteness, nor by the fire he gazes into with his unseeing, salt-colored eyes. Thus, it can be argued that the prophet possesses and projects himself as a self rather than having a colonially defined normative identity imposed upon him as Ming does.

In *How Much of These Hills is Gold,* Lucy, who does not have the gift of foresight nor the severely limited memory of the prophet, must learn to mediate between the various dimensions she embodies. Throughout the novel, she attempts again and again to perfectly embody whatever identity is expected of her in a desperate bid for safety and understanding, but eventually discovers that this has come at the expense of her own capacity to relate to her objectified body. At the end of the novel, the man who demanded she pay back Sam's debt for stealing gold offers to give her a gift after a year of prostituting her. Before answering, Lucy "lets herself look at last—no, see. The nose is strange to her, as the face is strange, thin and stilled…she checks over her shoulder, but no one stands there. The

white of her neck is her own. Her unblemished face, her own. No one can hurt her now" (Zhang, 318). Her alienation from her body is so complete that she "checks over her shoulder" to see if perhaps someone else's reflection is staring back at her. The repetition of "strange" also highlights the severity of her estrangement from her material body.

However, the syntactic separation of the first sentence by the em dash emphasis the difference between looking and seeing, and the fragmentary "no, see" furthermore transforms Lucy from grammatical subject and object of the action to the act of seeing itself. The parallelism of "the white of her neck is her own. Her unblemished face, her own" and especially the repetition of "her own" suggests that Lucy's selfhood is located in the act of reclaiming her body itself.

Though the oppressive conditions of colonial society have divorced Lucy's sense of self from her body, she is able to reposition her relation to it such that she maintains her expansive identity in the face of objectifying encounters. Lucy "wonders if she can ever die… Her body is immortal, or rather it's died so many deaths in so many men's stories that she fears no longer. She is a ghost, inhabiting this body" (318). Faced with men who see her only as an object, she has divorced her sense of selfhood entirely from her physical body, thinking of herself as a "ghost, inhabiting this body". However, the death of her body in so many men's stories has rendered it "immortal", such that every subsequent "death" does not register as a death of herself, but rather as merely a repetition of a reductive social relation based on prescriptive gender roles. Therefore, her body as the manifestation of her selfhood remains out of reach of men; they can only affect her body in so far as it exists in their severely limited conception of it as an iteration of a normatively defined female form. Her alienation from her body, thus, allows her to maintain her sense of self in the face of dehumanizing interactions with men who see her only as an exotic sex object.

This is far from an optimistic place for the protagonist of *How Much of These Hills is Gold* to end her story in. The dissonance between Lucy's experience of herself as an embodied subject does not align with how she is treated, and as she gets older, she must confront the cruelties of reductive

colonial society and develop the survival mechanisms to withstand its oppression. Explicating this dissonance without explicitly resolving it leaves room for the grief of living under colonial systems that are hostile to Asian American identity, as Denise Cruz argues (Cruz, 97). However, this does not mean that she accepts its prescriptive values as definitively true. In fact, dismantling the linguistic and literary structures that attempt to constrict her embodied subjectivity is the constitutive act of her identity. In both novels, rejecting definitions imposed upon expansive identities and landscapes through transformative literary language is a recreation of identity as an embodied whole itself.

Chapter Three: Literary Transformation as Self-Generation

How Much of These Hills is Gold and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* exist in oblique relation to preexisting narrative tropes and generic conventions, caught in the net of the Western genre, the bildungsroman, and the canons of Western philosophy and Asian American literature. Much like the landscapes contained within their pages, they too are catalogues of their own historied creations. The embedded condition of the two novels highlights the dilemma of representation: the inescapability of normative colonial narratological and historical structures means that in seeking increased visibility within, for example, dominant American history and the Western genre, minority voices are subjected to the violence of the ideologies and devices of these systems. As David L. Eng argues, "invisibility and visibility are not opposed but are two sides of one representational coin" (Eng qtd. in Parikh, 530). Thus, Zhang and Lin, in retelling the story of the West, must confront the structural failures of the extant linguistic and literary forms of this history, geography, and the identities and ideologies embedded therein. Repositioning Chinese American belonging in the West therefore involves not only altering the *content* of Western fiction and colonial American narratives of history, but dismantling from within the prescriptive ideologies of their own forms by using language and genre as metaphor rather than as the totality of embodied existence. In the absence of a language and literary structure that can adequately contain Asian American identity as an embodied whole, Lin and Zhang use their

fictions to gesture infinitely onwards, towards unnarratable belonging and community liberated from colonial normative constraints.

Silence, therefore, is of central importance to the novels' formal arguments. As King-Kok Cheung argues in *Articulate Silences,* to dismiss silence as a *lack* of substance and as a submission to authority is to accept that the reality of language and the systems it upholds are all there is (Cheung qtd. in Wong, 349)—that representation is as real as it gets. In *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* silence is not merely the negative, empty space that exists in the absence of language and genre, but a positive and generative space of embodied belonging. In other words, if language is a house, then what matters is not the walls or the stairs or the roof, but the space in between, where the living takes place.

The endings of both novels are ambiguous and inconclusive, and thus the stories of their characters' refuse to be contained within the delineations of extant linguistic and literary structures. The protagonists of both books exit their narratives with less than they entered with; Lucy has lost her whole family, and Ming has killed his wife and thus lost his original vengeful purpose. However, both characters arrive at a kind of tentative hope, despite their losses.

In the epilogue of *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* Ming waits at a train station to be taken back to Reno from Sacramento, towards Hazel and Hunter, retracing the steps of Manifest Destiny backwards and abandoning the persona of violent hypermasculinity behind—or at least attempting to. However, Ming is never referred to by name in the epilogue; he is only ever referred to as "the man" as in "the man stands with a leather pack slung low and close over his shoulder and watches the east with dark eyes" (Lin, 272). The reappearance of Ming's eyes, this time not as salt or snow-blind victims of the blazing Western sun but as "dark" and "watch[ing] the east", suggests that the protagonist's turning away from the values of Western white hypermasculinity allows for himself to occupy a literary space wherein his own body and identity can exist more expansively on their own terms. He becomes, finally, the embodiment of abstract masculinity he tried so hard to emulate only *after* he has seen its

violence through to the end and experienced first-hand the alienation from his own body it demands. Thus the shift in verb tense, from past to present, signifies his presence in his body in the world without the intervening mediation of a normative colonial identity that separates him from his environment. In a sense, Ming's narrative concludes positively, with the hero having found a new, more authentic purpose grounded in community rather than antagonism and allowing room for his full embodied selfhood. However, his new lease on life just so happens to coincide nicely with heteronormative values, as he heads east for Reno to find Hazel and Hunter, and thus his new epithet can be conversely interpreted as a symbol of his complete surrender to the social identity prescribed to him.

The story proper ends with Ming fulfilling his mission of revenge, murdering Ada, and leaving behind her infant son, "an orphan just like him" (271). The murder itself occurs off-stage, so to speak, as Ming "felt his movements smooth and sure and practiced, the same movements he had made countless times before, the body answering to the vagaries of an evaporating obligation, a gun bucking in a hand that seemed no longer his own" (270). Much like Lucy at the end of *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, Ming undergoes a process of profound self-alienation. For him, however, the problem lies not strictly in how he is perceived, but how he behaves in the world as well. The identity he internalized as a result of the dehumanizing treatment he suffered at the hands of normative society essentially commandeers his body even as he himself loses his ability to identify with that identity. The repetition of "movement" in the quoted phrase, the enumerated list conjoined with no punctuation, the synecdoches "a hand" and "the body", and the run-on structure of the sentence all contribute to the effect of alienation. Ming's body becomes diffuse across a winding syntax that the grammatical subject quickly loses control over. Furthermore, the identity that he loses, whatever *he* now is, is revealed to be primarily a linguistic and historical construction that intervenes at the level of the self to separate being from its embodiment in the world. In other words, Ming's hypermasculine persona reduces his body to a categorical object, rather than the material foundation of his existential self.

The linguistic and generic structuring of an otherwise undefinable selfhood is apparent in Ming's return journey to Reno as well. Though his overdue embrace of Hazel's unconditional acceptance of him *may* represent a divergence from his problematic attachment to Ada, the two women are explicitly compared so many times that his character's evolution is far from guaranteed. When he first sees Hazel, or "the fireproof woman" (48) as she is at that point called, he wonder if she "would understand if he told her how much she reminded him of his Ada, whose face he could not quite remember anymore anyway. Besides it was not that the two women looked alike, exactly, but rather that they seemed to be iterations on similar forms" (49). Ada, whose face he can no longer remember, and Hazel, who has been on fire for the entirety of their acquaintance, appear to Ming only as "iterations on similar forms". Their categorical identities as white women and the values ascribed to them as a result, namely beauty, social and sexual desirability, and domesticity, intervene more immediately in Ming's conception of them than even their bodies themselves.

The problems with an attachment built on normative colonial structures of relation are evident from the beginning in Ming and Ada's relationship. When they meet, in an opium den in Sacramento, both of them are trying to escape the confines of their own conscripted social identities. However, the others' respective identity is the conduit for the continuation of this freedom, and this is the basis of their entire marriage. For Ming, Ada *as* wealthy, beautiful, white woman is his escape from his own alienating social position. For Ada, Ming *as* lower class orphaned Chinese American is hers. Ming's vengeance, then, is less about Ada than it is about his own understanding of his role *in relation* to hers. She is his damsel in distress, and he is her knight in shining armor—discreet tropes that cannot withstand the reality of their embodied selves and are certainly not the grounds for authentic intimacy.

Ostensibly, Ming's relationship with Hazel is different, but the ending reveals that the issue lies in the forms themselves and not merely in individual iterations. The protagonist, having initially chosen the fulfillment of the arc of his internalized character, decides after suffering the consequences of this choice to return to his other love interest. Formally, though, Ming has spent the entire novel

forgetting about and questioning Ada, and falling deeper and deeper in love with Hazel. Thus, his return to Hazel is actually itself the realization of his character's narrative arc. Furthermore, his eastward journey towards her is symbolically representative of his moving on from Ada and his masculine vengeance. Her function in liberating him from his guilt is therefore more significant than her embodied subjectivity, and as long as she provides the escape from his past that he craves, he will not concern himself with the intricacies of her character. Given the significance of cycles and repetitions in the structure of the novel—the prophet dying and being reborn, the ringmaster dying and being reborn, the circular nature of history—it can be argued that "the man's" final decision to find "the woman and also the boy who is not her son but might as well be" is merely the repetition of the cycle of problematic heteronormative attachment rather than a deviation from it.

The ambiguity of the ending of *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* leaves room for a variety of interpretations by its very nature. Perhaps Ming is not falling back on old heteronormative habits in chasing after Hazel, and perhaps he is not even going to Reno to find Hazel after all. Nevertheless, the possibility remains, and the only sure thing about the ending is that it *ends.* The final line before the epilogue is "and then he turned, and in a moment he was gone" (271), which narratively refers to Ming's departure from the scene of Ada's murder but metatextually signifies the character's imminent exit from the narrative itself. Furthermore, in the epilogue, Ming "the man" Tsu is described as bearing a "strange expression and a weary smile" (273) in the penultimate line of the entire novel. He becomes unrecognizable along the axes of definition that have delineated his existence up to this point, right before he leaves the page forever. The inconclusiveness of the ending and the refusal to completely relegate Ming to a single identity disrupt the assumption that extant literary and linguistic structures are foolproof systems of representation, instead suggesting that the full selfhood of historically marginalized people extends beyond the reaches of normative colonial forms of identity and meaning making.

How Much of These Hills is Gold similarly dislocates normative language and generic structures as the definitive producers of meaning in the world, and asserts the importance of unnarratable spaces in the formation of an expansive and embodied Chinese American identity. The novel ends with Lucy's hopes of following Sam to China crushed by the men who frequented Elske's brothel, many of whom came from abroad but still treated her with the same lack of compassion and according to normatively defined gender and labor roles. Through her interactions with them, she determines that no place or people inherently possesses the ability to liberate her from normative social identity; rather, her own *relation* to landscape is the space through which she can redefine herself independently of prescriptive colonial definitions of identity. She explains that "there is claiming the land, which Ba wanted to do, which Sam refused—and then there is being claimed by it. The quiet way. A kind of gift in never knowing how much of these hills might be gold" (Zhang, 320). The syntactic separation of the first sentence by the em dash positions Lucy's understanding of "being claimed by [the land]" as inherently structurally different from Ba's "claiming the land" and Sam's refusal to do so. Lucy inverts the logic of ownership entirely, something that even Sam could not do, and relinquishes the idea that to define herself she must dominate, control, and structurally reduce something or someone else. Instead, she allows herself to be possessed by the territory itself, "because this land had gouged in [her] an animal's kind of claiming, senseless to words and laws" (320). The animalistic violence of the metaphor subverts the conception of the landscape as inert and objectified, and furthermore undermines the hierarchy of the human over the animal and the natural. Thus, Lucy, in giving herself over to the land, is able to reclaim herself as an embodied living self by disentangling her identity and relation to the landscape from alienated and objectified pathways of identification and belonging.

The final sentences of Zhang's novel transform language from a static and prescriptive structure that normatively delineates meaning and value into a fluid and expansive expression of possibility. The line "a kind of gift in never knowing how much of these hills might be gold" responds

to the question posed by the novel's title by reasserting the significance of the act of questioning itself. The meaning and value of the land, thus, cannot be definitively determined and delineated in maps and tables according to its imaginary boundaries or specific in quantities of gold. Similarly, a person cannot be evaluated and prescribed meaning, either. Instead, the embodied relation between people and landscape, liberated from the colonial impulse to dominate, generates the language of its own identity. The end of the very long run-on that begins with Lucy's "quiet way" of finding meaning and belonging in the land ends with the observation that "if you ran, you might hear on the wind, or welling up in your own parched mouth, something like and unlike an echo, coming from before or behind, the sound of a voice you've always known calling your name—" (320). The syntax mirrors the act of running described in the phrase, such that the language itself becomes embedded within the linguistic and literary body of the action's subject. Moreover, the speech act, described through paradoxical parallelisms, is produced by both the running human subject *and* the landscape itself. Both of these are, furthermore, historically contingent; the language they embody does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a historical network of meanings that is transformed through each exchange and carry this transformation indefinitely into the future. Language as an activity therefore becomes the mediator of the relationship between the landscape and its inhabitants, and the realm within which fluid and evolving identity self-generation occurs. The em-dash that terminates the sentence suggests, furthermore, that the content and form of identity as it exists in this embodied relation between landscape and its inhabitants will continue to evolve through language after the story itself ends.

Like *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, the end of *How Much of These Hills is Gold* is intentionally ambiguous. The final line of the novel, "she wants" (320), has no punctuation, and the transitive verb "want" has no object; the sentence never ends, even when the book as a material object does. Lucy's wanting, therefore, extends beyond the limits of the page, evolving along with the language she inherits and, through her embodied performance of it, transforming to encompass her expansive identity.

Language as an organism that mediates the mutable relation between landscape and people rather than a static tool of colonial domination appears specifically in the novel with regards to translation and transliteration across specific languages, notably American English and Mandarin Chinese. During Lucy and Sam's journey across the California desert, Lucy loses track of her sibling and tries to summon Sam back by singing a song they learned from their family. The words of the song that appear in the narration are "*Little tiger, little tiger…Lai*" (17). Later, when Ba posthumously tells Lucy the story of how he and Ma met, he calls the song the "tiger song. *Lao hu, lao hu*" (205). Sprinkled throughout the story, in the form of dialogue and narration, are various other romanized Chinese words. Lucy and her family, according to the strict definition of the term, are bilingual, speaking both English and Mandarin. However, Lucy herself does not know that the distinction between these two languages even exists until she is well into her adolescence, when she is given a book full of "strange drawings" and one "drawing she recognizes. Ma's tiger" (297) by Elske. For her, the English and Mandarin interspersed in her parents' speech is merely the language she inhabits, and the character for tiger that Ma writes in the dirt for protection is alive and mobile, "like a real tiger" (89). Though she may not be able to translate the definitions of the words of the tiger song literally, she uses the words functionally nevertheless and thus they do have *meaning*. Therefore, the normative colonial conception of language as a system of prescribed linear definitions rather than an organic inhabited space, wherein definitions change according to usage and meaning is produced on multiple levels of comprehension, falls apart.

The meaning of the song extends beyond the parameters of Lucy's family and individual context into geographic mythology in the line "it's been years since any stream in this territory ran deep enough to support a creature bigger than a jackal; the song comes from a lusher time" (17). Lucy is temporally blocked from the "lusher time", symbolized structurally by the semi-colon, and thus the origins of the song remain opaque to her. Though this does not undermine Lucy's own meaningful relation to the words, it does create another layer of meaning in addition to her embodiment of the performance of the song in the present. Through recourse to a mythology of the territory filled with

tigers, buffaloes, and rushing rivers, Lucy is able to embed herself not only in a relation to the landscape based on the present and its evolution into the future, but also its past. Zhang thus uses the language of mythology to relocate Chinese American identity in the American West, but without sacrificing the capacity of this language to evolve to accommodate the changing identities and contexts of its speakers. The fundamental difference between this mythology and Teacher Leigh's colonial version of history is that the latter claims itself to be the only truth available, whereas the former recognizes its own metaphorical relation to truth and thus leaves room for a multiplicity of accounts of the history of the West.

The language and function of mythology in *How Much of These Hills is Gold* is also different from the Western genre, though these both accept their own conditions as fictions. The mythologizing of the West as it transpires in the Western serves to manufacture an American national identity built on an impossible ontological sameness, a permanent and fully penetrating uniformity that restructures the very *being* of its adherents. Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community* that "until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community—one to be regained or reconstituted" (Nancy, 9). This retrospective orientation to belonging and identity-formation breeds antagonism between the members of the lost community and society as a whole, and often a slew of targeted Others. Thus, though individual Westerns are recognizably fictions, the genre as a whole establishes itself as representative of the true mythological belonging of white heteronormative Americans, who are construed as the opposite of Indigenous savages, thieving Mexican wranglers, conniving Chinese immigrants, haughty city women, and more. *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, on the other hand, locates belonging in language and landscape as mutable and malleable embodied realms of relation, with histories that extend beyond the immediate reality of its extant speakers. The mythology of Western tigers negates the stereotype of perpetual Chinese American foreignness, but does not manufacture another caricature to replace it. Rather, the nature of the embodied relational belonging and identity-formation presented in the novel creates a community of others, who are not united

through an illusory sameness but rather through the experience of the infinitely expansive selfhood of others in their multiple and evolving existences (Nancy, 15).

The reappearance of *lai* and other Chinese words throughout Lucy's story conveys precisely the importance of language's creative and malleable qualities. Much like landscape, language is a component of Lucy's living identity, being both the interpretive and expressive tool she engages with the world through. Her language, though it is composed of words with no context taken from English and Mandarin and colored by the accent and diction of the Western, is the embodied realm through which her identity is executed. The absence of translations of the Chinese words does not signify a lack or a limitation at all, and indeed does not mean that they do not have any *meaning*. Instead, they become as Lucy does, whole and self-contained without the need for a normative colonial definition of their use, value, and meaning relative to English.

The characters of *How Much of These Hills is Gold* use the liminal spaces of language to create their own identities, performing themselves as embodied and complex selves through the medium of language. It becomes, thus, an art rather than a science, with meanings and values created based on the lives and activities of its users rather than by a distant and uncaring dictionary. In this sense, the Chinese American identities of Lucy and her family, typically rejected by their colonial society as being an impossible composite when a person should be either/ or, become whole through their linguistic embodiment of them. Language in the identities of the novels' characters is therefore metaphorical rather than prescriptive, generative rather than delineating.

In *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu,* the "poetry of signs" performed by Hunter, one of the miracles in the ringmaster's troupe, similarly disrupts normative understandings of language. He unsettles the boundary between mind and body, particularly as they are connected through language, because of his ability to speak directly into other people's heads despite being deaf and mute. Ming watches him recite the Lord's Prayer in sign language, following along with a book called *On the Language of Signs*. The signed words are translated in the narrative, with Hunter's movements being

described and intercut with their meanings in written English in italics. The presentation on the page of so many words in italics, syntactically separated into fragments, as in "*Forgive.*" and "*Deliver us.*" (119) doubles the linguistic space of the story, such that two narratives exist simultaneously in parallel. Ming, who focalizes the exchange, cannot yet understand Hunter's embodied performative act on its own terms. The ringmaster also approaches sign language as a proxy for speech rather than a full language unto itself, murmuring "Amen" in response to Hunter's signed "*Amen*", and thus prescribing a value to the boy's embodied language. Hunter and Hazel, on the other hand, as the only two characters who actually communicate through sign language, *embody* the language literally. Their relation to each other as well as to the other characters therefore does not rely on the prescriptive colonial language of the Western. Because Ming focalizes the exchange but does not understand sign language, their words are translated, first as artistic acts of self-representation and then into truncated English phrases. The disjunction of this translation reveals the limitations of the prescriptive use of language. In describing the act of translating, Lin transforms language itself into an active and participatory practice that facilitates relation and belonging instead of an inert exchange along predetermined pathways of communication and meaning making.

How Much of These Hills is Gold and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, embedded as they are within the inescapable tapestry of extant American literature, language, and history, wield their cultural inheritance against itself. In doing so, they construct an alternative mode of belonging that relies not on the construction of the Other or a false uniformity of identity, but on the unnarratable spaces that mythologies and speculative histories metaphorically gesture towards (Nancy, 15) . The final silences and ambiguous conclusions of the novels open indefinitely towards the future, building an endless momentum of linguistic and literary transformation that becomes the site itself of Chinese American identity formation.

Conclusion

How Much of These Hills is Gold and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu* subvert normative colonial constructions of history, relocating the records of the past within the body of the landscape itself rather than in reductive textbooks or dusty libraries. The two novels' individual reflections on the nature of and relation between time, place, and personhood, elucidate the reality of history as an embodied practice that informs but does not limit the shape of identity. Thus the histories of a landscape, which inhabit the material body of the land, become a participatory cultural inheritance and, consequently, remain alive within the mutable selves of the people who dwell within it. Though the novels are far from identical, they share a dedication to re-narrativizing the normative colonial frameworks through which history is understood, and thus to reimagining the process of historically contingent identity formation. Zhang and Lin reject the prescriptive forms of identity forced onto complex and evolving bodies, instead situating the capacity for self-definition in the linguistically composed relation between the evolving embodied self and the land as the body of history. Instead of defining history and the identity categories it engenders according to a single reductive structure, the novels engage in historiographical metafiction, tearing apart and putting back together and tearing apart again the epistemological process of historical production (Cheung qtd. in Wong, 352).

Ultimately, the novels take on their own formal structures, transforming the mythologies and languages of the American canon to reveal its own failings and gesturing towards the generative spaces of unnarratable relationality, between people and people and people and land. Though the Western genre does not claim historical accuracy (Langford, 27), its dominance over conceptions of the Western landscape and the voracity with which it mythologizes the formation of American national identity have rendered it the de facto narrative of the particular time and place it represents. Thus the significance of locating Chinese American mythological origins in the territory of the genre is doubled; not only does it position the formation of identity in the fictional geographic heart of American cultural

ideology, it undermines the foundations of authenticity that have grounded exclusive colonial narrations there for over one hundred years. Zhang and Lin do not, therefore, legitimize the colonial nation state in their fictions, nor do they situate Chinese American belonging in the dominant normative conception of American identity, as Patricia Chu argues is the burden of all Asian American authors (Chu qtd. in Hong, 314). Instead, the landscape itself is revived and liberated from colonial domination, and becomes the site of discursive and transformative literary self-generation. Rewriting the Western landscape into embodied historical existence, therefore, is the practice of Chinese American identity in *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu.*

As Elda Tsou argues in *Unquiet Tropes* and King-Kok Cheung in *Chinese American Literature Without Borders*, conceptualizing of Asian American literature as a reification of the racial identity of the author is an ethnographic fallacy (Cheung, 35) that minimizes the simultaneous formation and unsettling of identity in Asian American literary projects (Tsou, 161). The transformation of literary language, in fact, is central to the novels' dismantling of racist structures and the reformation of generative possibilities. Language, in *How Much of These Hills is Gold* and *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, is an evolving organism that creates spaces of Asian American identity formation but does not consign them to a single essential quality or reductively delineate isolated meanings and values. The purpose of the historical fiction of Zhang's and Lin's novels is that it traces mythological Chinese American belonging to the American West, but remains in a contemporary historical horizon, locating modern racial inequities in a past that disrupts notions of linear progress and community building. They dwell, therefore, in the dissonance and fractures of literary form's representational capacity, forging new pathways of belonging that resist the static normativity of colonial structures (Cruz, 97). The theories of the novels do not restrict themselves to the books' two covers, but extend endlessly onwards, creating meaning in the momentum of self-generation through literary language itself. C. Pam Zhang and Tom Lin are not only concerned with relocating the mythological foundations of

Chinese American identities in the landscapes of the Western, but in using this mythology to produce a literary and linguistic belonging that will last long after their individual novels' conclusions.

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