Chinese-American: A Reconstruction of the Creation of American Identity

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Chinese-American: A Reconstruction of the Creation of American Identity

[The Frontier was] the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be American.

- William Cronon “The Trouble With Wilderness”

The American West, the Frontier, is a scene entirely disparate from what scholars identify as Frontier Mythology. This recreation of history and identity was systematically impressed onto Americans, and integrated into the dominant culture through careful narrative. Taking various forms, the Settler Colonial Narrative was a prolific type of reconstructive story. The Settler Colonial Narrative told the fictional tales of the Pioneer, Cowboy, Indian, Outlaw, and life far flung from civilized society. Crafted was a screen memory of westward expansion. In “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” from the collection *China Men*, Maxine Hong-Kingston utilizes the Settler Colonial structure, but places a Chinese character as the center, crafting a careful counter narrative that critiques, reimagines, and adds to the mythology of the American West and identity. She weaves a careful trans-culturating story that lends a Chinese character agency and influence over the creation of American identity.

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. ‘I am fucking the world,’ he said. The world's vagina
was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (Hong-Kingston, 130)

Hong-Kingston places Ah Goong at the center of the story, giving him presence and influence over the greater narrative of American identity, changing the Mythology. The “primal scene” described by Veracini is the return to the landscape of the biblical characters of Adam and Eve, before human society and before humans defile it (95). The ‘virgin’ paradise predates society, and is an opportunity to guide civilization from the bottom up, with sex as a tool of power and domination. In context of order of events, and the scene, we can identify this scene as a primal scene, an untouched view of nature, pre-transformation. Here Ah Goong is at the forefront of American expansion, entering the wilderness. Placing Ah Goong in the primal scene centers the American landscape around him as he enters the Frontier. In the face of the white dominated Settler-Colonial narrative Hong-Kingston reminds the reader he is not white and defies the pattern of inequality.

In Frontier Mythology, nature is feminized through vocabulary such as ‘purity’ referring to the value placed on women's virginity. It is sexualized through phrases like ‘virgin landscape’ invoking the premise of taking virginity through sex. And it is shown to be something to dominate ‘defiling (sexually assaulting) the land.’ In this moment, however, Hong-Kingston uses sex to forge connection. “The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley” (Hong-Kingston 130). This identifies Ah Goong’s understanding of his insignificance, that he is no match for the power and scale of nature. The language “fucks the world” deliberately avoids references to defilement or domination and implies a give and take. Unique from Frontier Mythology, this scene relates Ah Goong to Nature with neither in domination. Though Ah Goong is in control he is tiny to Nature, able to “fuck” but not to dominate. Ah Goong ‘seeds’
the primal landscape, creating himself as part of the genealogy of the American West and cementing him as ‘The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.’

Through the Settler Colonial Narrative Hong-Kingston uses dual identity to reinforce the creation of an American story beneath a superficial one of immigration. Paralleling the trope of Settler Colonial Narratives, Ah Goong is a mythologically demigod-like figure and one uniquely human. Encapsulating this is a moment in which he witnesses the death of other workers, “Godlike he watched men whose faces he could not see and whose screams he did not hear roll and bounce and slide like a handful of sprinkled gravel” (Hong-Kingston 129-130). Ah Goong is described as aloof and separate from the death around him. Describing a handful of gravel implies tininess in the face of greater powers. Framing Ah Goong’s observation as a first person statement ‘a handful of sprinkled gravel’ falls from his hand, and the men whom he could not perceive fall from his fingers. However, he is simultaneously revealed to be innately human. In his perception of separation we can understand Ah Goong as dealing in human trauma. Relating the individuals falling to their death as both imperceivable, and gravel, he avoids their humanity and objectifies them. Ah Goong takes the only route he can to understand the mass death surrounding him for the sake of “demon’s” (white people) progress. Through this Hong-Kingston succinctly identifies, expresses, and balances the dichotomy of Mythology and humanity through a single moment. Hong-Kingston uses subtlety to her advantage, telling a necessarily American settler colonial narrative from the perspective of a decidedly Chinese character. Throughout the entire story Ah Goong continues to reference his Chinese culture and history, suggesting that side by side with his heritage, he can occupy the space of the American Settler Colonial Narrative. That the exclusivity of Frontier Mythology is inconsistent with the core concepts of the creation of an American identity.
From the beginning of the story Hong-Kingston pursues the notion of the creation of American identity. At the outset of Ah Goong’s story we can view the chopping of the sequoia tree with refreshed perspective. The felling is Ah Goong’s first American act, dominating an icon of the ‘virgin’ American landscape. The act of destruction in the face of a mythological or spiritual realm is the moment of domination that Frontier Mythology desires. In the scope of narratives this is an act of Americanization, the sprout of Ah Goong’s American-ness. Following this thread we watch as “a hundred [Chinese] men stood or sat on the trunk,” claiming the same moment, “then demons also had their photograph taken” suggesting a nexus of American identity flowing from this moment in his story and the need by many to claim it. Ah Goong’s solitary work indicated his place as a progenitor of American identity. The appropriation of the moment by other Chinese and whites suggests their recognition of Ah Goong as an apex of a hierarchy and font of American-ness, and that he had *become* American.

Confronted with what it means to be an American, Hong-Kingston identifies citizenship papers as flimsy and inconsistent with Settler Colonial Narrative and suggests a truer form of American identity. When Ah Goong receives what he believes to be documentation he remarks that “he was already a part of this new country, but now he had it in writing,” and that faced with adversity (often violence), “he would whip out his Citizenship Paper and show that he was an American” (Hong-Kingston 140-146). Recognized here is the belief that American identity is beyond a document, he was a part of this country, he would ‘show’ that he was American. Rather than the document being his reason to belong or his right to be in America it would force recognition of the fact that he was American and did belong. Expressed also is the observation that the majority of Americans valued physical representation. During the great San Francisco fire all documentation of Chinese Americans was burned up and “Every China Man was reborn
out of that fire a citizen” (Hong-Kingston 149). Hong-Kingston offers a moment of consideration for the reader at the finale of the essay. Literally interpreting ‘Every china man was reborn… a citizen,’ reveals through contradiction the dominant culture's conflation of identity and documentation. Burning the papers creates irony, showing the highly regarded citizenship, and return papers, were papers, flimsy and flammable. Hong-Kingston separates identity and documentation by implying that the lack of documents allowed a full realization of American identity, that documents restricted Chinese from being Americans.

Annette Kolodny describes transculturation as the process in which marginalized groups “select and invent from materials transmitted … by a dominant culture” (Kolodny 6). Artfully identifying and traversing transculturation, ‘The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada’ converses with the dominant culture through their expectations. It adds to and expands Frontier Mythology through familiar narrative structure, tropes, and character arcs. Achieved is a commentary on the Mythology by separating biases and core concepts through overlap. The essay utilizes the same hallmarks of any Settler-Colonial Narrative while reframing to omit exclusionary constructs (e.g. racism, eurocentrism). This counter-narrative structure augments a core concept of Frontier Mythology; free from restrictions “[The Frontier was] the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be American,” that American is something you become, that anyone can become (Cronon 7). Hong-Kingston’s reimagination reduces Frontier Mythology to its core, and adds Ah Goong to the diversity of American Mythology.