

TRANSCENDING “ECCENTRICITY”? TOPPLING THE MYTH OF WHITE  
EXCLUSIVITY IN FOUNDING THE NATION – MAXINE HONG  
KINGSTON’S *CHINA MEN*

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ABSTRACT

In *China men* (1980) Kingston undermines the long-persisting myth of white Americans as sole founders and pioneers of the United States of America. The ethos of a white Anglo-Saxon man as a sole originating and sustaining force behind the creation and development of the country is one more manifestation of white exclusivity and its propensity towards exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities. By illuminating the significant contributions of her Chinese American ancestors to the building of the nation, Kingston reconstructs the official version of American history and recenters her Chinese immigrant forebears from the margins to the center. Still, any recentralization carries its own pitfalls, entailing the danger of replicating some of the dominant structures of power that one tries to undermine. I look at Kingston’s undermining of the white centered American historical narrative and her recentering of Chinese American immigrants through the prism of space studies, politics of location, politics of translation, whiteness studies and broader multiethnic studies. I also place the discussion of the recentering of Chinese Americans in Kingston’s *China Men* in the discourse of margin-center metaphor, shedding light on potential pitfalls of recentering, pitfalls which Kingston mostly manages to avoid.

Key words: Maxine Hong Kingston, *China men*, history, center, margin, recentering, Chinese American immigrants, power, map, whiteness.

After tunneling into granite for about three years, Ah Goong understood the immovability of the earth. Men change, men die, weather changes, but the mountain is the same as permanence and time. This mountain would have taken no new shape for centuries, ten thousand centuries, the world a still, still place, time unmoving. He worked in the tunnel so long, he learned to

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see many colors in black. When he stumbled out, he tried to talk about time. 'I felt time,' he said. 'I saw time. I saw world ... I saw what's real. I saw time, and it doesn't move. If we break through the mountain, hollow it, time won't have moved anyway. You translators ought to tell the foreigners that.'

(*China Men* 132)

The opening epigraph of *China men* (1980), in which the narrator's grandfather Ah Goong reflects on the "immovability" of time, situates Maxine Hong Kingston's narrative within her broader intervention in American historiography. Traditional American historiography has often presented the nation's history as a linear Anglo-Saxon conquest of the North American continent epitomized, for example, by the ideology of the Manifest Destiny and its vision of inexorable progress. By contrast, representatives of American ethnic literatures and cultures tend to conceive of history in more circular and recursive terms, recovering the input of marginalized racial and ethnic groups previously erased from the national narrative. Ah Goong's reflections on time, made while tunneling inside the Sierra Nevada Mountains, correspond closely to those made by the eponymous protagonist of Richard Wright's "Man who lived underground" in Richard Wright's narrative and the subterranean retreat of the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible man*.<sup>2</sup>

Confronted with their own figurative marginality and physical displacement from American society, all three protagonists ponder on the circularity of time – its seeming immobility and recurrence. The immovability of time which Ah

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<sup>2</sup> In the *Invisible man* the narrator imagines history and participation in history in terms of movement across vertical and horizontal lines. Before his illumination he fails to see that such positions are culturally determined. Upon attaining self-consciousness, the Invisible Man reappraises the marginalized figures of African American history, acknowledging their subversive reinscription of history's vectors:

And wasn't that old slave a scientist... even when he stood with hat in hand, bowing and scraping in senile and obscene servility? My God what possibilities existed! ... And that lie that success was a rising *upward*. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by. Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up *and* down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle. (Ellison 1972 [1952]: 385)

Ultimately the Invisible Man also enacts this multidirectional movement himself: he travels downward, descending underground before announcing his reemergence in the final pages of the narrative. Robert Butler argues that Ellison embraces Henri Bergson's concept of time and self—an understanding of consciousness as "able to experience the past, present and the future as an organic continuum" (1990: 261). In a similar vein, Marc Singer reads Ellison's vision of time as palimpsestic. The palimpsest appears here as a "synchronous conflation or superimposition of multiple historical periods upon the present" (Singer 2003: 389), a "simultaneous copresence and conflation of multiple periods" (Singer 2003: 392). Only after the Invisible Man recognizes all these temporal layers of his experience, does he achieve a sense of coherence.

Goong describes corresponds to his own apparent immobility as a marginalized Chinese immigrant laboring in the Sierra Nevada tunnels for twenty years only to see himself expelled once the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad is completed and his role changes from that of “indispensable labor” to the status of the dispensable.<sup>3</sup>

In *China Men*<sup>4</sup> Kingston undermines the long-persisting myth of white Americans as sole founders and pioneers of the United States. The ethos of the white Anglo-Saxon man as a sole originating and sustaining force behind the country’s creation and development is one more manifestation of white exclusivity and its propensity towards exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities. By illuminating the significant contribution of her Chinese American ancestors to the building of the United States, Kingston seeks to reconstruct the official version of American history and reposition her Chinese immigrant forebears from the margins to the center. However, any recentering carries its own pitfalls, entailing the risk of replicating the very structures of power that one tries to subvert. In analyzing Kingston’s project of recentering Chinese Americans in *China Men*, I problematize the implications of this gesture in the conceptual framework of margin-center theory both within and beyond Asian American Studies. My analysis draws particularly on spatial studies (Edward Soja, Barbara Hooper), politics of location (Analouise Keating, Adrienne Rich), politics

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<sup>3</sup> In his book *Indispensable enemy* Alexander Saxton analyses anti-Chinese attitudes in the American labor movement from the post bellum period through the early 20th century, exploring the role that Chinese immigrants played as racialized “others” in the formation of national identity. Parallely, in *A forgetful nation*, Ali Bedhad reflects on the “role of xenophobia in the construction of national identity” (2005: 116). Tracing the emergence of xenophobia and nativism, Ali Bedhad cites chief nativist’s, Thomas Whitney distinction between “native” and “old” immigrants and “alien” and “new” immigrants (2005: 138). Even as nativist views intensified in the mid-nineteenth century, immigrants of the period were still viewed as political dissidents who threatened the ideological underpinnings of the republic. By the late nineteenth century, they came to be viewed as contaminants endangering the nation’s health by bringing in “dangerous germs and genes” (Bedhad 2005: 131). The figures of immigrants emerging from the anti-Asian legislation closely align with Julia Kristeva’s definition of the abject – the other side of the socially sanctified: “For abjection, when all is said and done, is the other side of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and “the breathing spells of societies” (Kristeva 1982: 209). Kelly Oliver, the editor of *The portable Kristeva* defines the abject as that which “calls into question borders and threatens identity. The abject is on the borderline, and as such it is both fascinating and terrifying” (2002: 225). The notion of abjection illuminates the contradictory stereotyping of Asian American immigrants as both model minority subjects and the “yellow peril.”

<sup>4</sup> David Eng draws our attention to Maxine Hong Kingston’s appropriation of the term Chinaman in her book *China Men* (2001: 69). Eng observes that Kingston pluralizes the term and inserts a space, capitalizing both nouns. In doing so, she accentuates their masculinity and makes them more visible, underlining their collective presence in the United States. By separating “Men” from “China,” she very effectively illustrates their actual separation from their homeland.

of translation (Judith Butler), whiteness studies (Cheryl Harris, David Roediger) and broader multiethnic discourse, notably African American Studies (bell hooks, Audre Lorde, W.E.B. Du Bois), with which Asian American scholars and activists often claim affinities<sup>5</sup> while historicizing the emergence of Asian American Studies.

On the very first pages of the narrative the narrator identifies Chinese Americans as “eccentric” people in the United States (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 9, original emphasis)<sup>6</sup>. As if trying to transcend this eccentricity, the narrator’s father inscribes each nook and cranny of their family laundry with the term *Center*. In the last section of the narrative, “The brother in Vietnam,” China (also known as the Middle Kingdom) is implicitly identified as center in relation to Taiwan, the place of “emigrants, rejects and misfits” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 302). China is also identified as center in a tale about an exiled Chinese poet, Li Sao, who had to leave the Center and “roam in the outer world” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 256). The Center signifies China, while the outer world stands for other countries or outer most territories of China ruled by barbarians. The subchapter on Li Sao, the exiled Chinese poet, is placed strategically at the end of the “The American father” section of the narrative, establishing a clear link between the modern day Chinese immigrant poet, the narrator’s father and China’s ancient, oldest poet. The last sentence of the Li Sao tale reads that he is remembered not only by the Chinese, but also by the Koreans, the Japanese, the Vietnamese, the Malaysians and the Americans, the nations among which either Li Sao or his fellow Chinese immigrant poets of the later day might have “roamed.”

While Kingston’s first major work *The woman warrior* (1976) shows the narrator still looking for her “village,” *China Men* (1980) and *Trumpet Monkey* (1989) make a concerted effort to situate Chinese Americans within the framework of Americanness. In *China Men*, Kingston reverses the historical marginalization of Chinese Americans by asserting their integral role in the nation’s narrative and endowing her Chinese American ancestors with mythic, “Godlike” qualities. These ancestral pioneers who built the transcontinental railway through the Sierra Nevada Mountains are depicted as the figures who “enter the sky,” “change the face of the world” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 129) as well as “mark the land” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 136). Yet the act of marking is not achieved through traditional methods of cartography and territorial mapping; rather, it occurs by a tragic deposition of their dead along the railway’s

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<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of connections between African American and Asian American Studies see Gary Okihiro’s article “African American and Asian American Studies: A comparative analysis and commentary” (1991: 16–28).

<sup>6</sup> All *China Men* citations come from the above cited edition.

route, where numbered track sections serve as the only grave markers of the Transcontinental Railway casualties. The constructors of the railroad are cast as founders of the nation who "banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel, being the binding and building ancestors of this place" (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 144). The mythic great-grandfather Ah Goong emerges as a symbolic father of the nation, cradling in his arms the American children who gather around him during his lonely enforced trek across the United States after the expulsion begins. The narrator also speculates that he might have become a biological father in the United States, breaking anti-miscegenation ordinances and "father[ing] citizens" (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 149).

A parallel representation appears in the portrayal of the narrator's other great-grandfather, Bak Goong, who labors in the Sandalwood Mountains. Bak Goong and other China Men of the Sandalwood Mountains are depicted as pioneers – founding ancestors who wrestle the land from the wilderness, great explorers participating in geographical discoveries and men enticed to Hawaii by the spell of the faraway land. As the narrator catalogues successive generations of men travelling to the United States, she adopts the structure of the heroic epic in which the China Men are the driving forces behind both the making of America and the Chinese American presence within it. Yet the narrator makes it evident that each of her male ancestors forges his own way towards "winning" America.

Proactive plotting on the part of white Americans to create white spots in the history of the American nation and efface marginalized groups' contribution to the development of the country is the most conspicuous in the photograph commemorating the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. Only white men appear in the image, while China Men along with African Americans and Mexicans are strategically excised. The narrator of *China Men* claims that, of more than ten thousand Chinese immigrants who constructed the railroad, only seventy were allowed to ride it. While before and during the construction of the railroad, Chinese immigrants were deemed "indispensable labor" (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 138), afterward they became dispensable, subjected to expulsion and violence: "The Driving Out had begun" (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 143). Kingston constructs the railroad inauguration scene to invert these racial dynamics, aligning Chinese immigrants with the real and white Americans with the fake: "A white demon in top hat tap-tapped on the gold spike, and pulled it back out. Then one China Man held the real spike, the steel one, and another hammered it in" (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 143).

The photograph scene has been the subject of ample critical investigation. David Li very aptly comments on the exclusion of Chinese immigrants from the photograph by claiming that "the linking of the continent fails to make the hoped for connection between the Chinese and the American" ([1990](#): 491). Teresa Zackodnik points out that photography not only "record[s] the past,"

but also “invents it, lending authenticity and notability to its images” (1997: 5). According to Zackodnik, Kingston attaches too much importance to photography as a documentary form, thereby reinforcing its historical function as a “document in service of the corrupt regulation of information, identity, history and power that has refused to validate Chinese American experience” (1997: 5). Zackodnik juxtaposes Ah Goong’s excision from the photograph with Bak Goong’s visible presence in the annual communal portraits taken in a Hawaiian photo studio. Yet she overlooks the crucial difference: in Hawaii, Bak Goong and his fellow Chinese immigrants exercise agency in visually commemorating their presence, whereas in the case of Ah Goong, the power to document and commemorate the occasion rests with whites, not Chinese immigrants. The Hawaiian photographs are presumably exclusively Chinese, while the Transcontinental Railroad image, had it been more inclusive, would have represented the genuinely multiracial and multiethnic America, embracing Chinese Americans, African Americans and Hispanics.

In *Racial castration*, David Eng revisits the 1869 Promontory Summit photograph through the lens of “the influential status of the image and the ways in which visual representations significantly constitute our sense of everyday reality” (2001: 29). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Eng argues that Kingston “rework[s] dominant narratives of national history through an emphatic shifting of the visual image .... teach[ing] us how to resist what Lacan terms ‘the given-to-be-seen’ of the visual order so as to see something else,” a practice which he terms “vigilant looking” (2001: 30). Interestingly, Eng analyzes this mode of visual resistance in the works of two authors who usually found themselves at odds over various issues concerning Asian American literature and the Asian American community: Kingston’s *China Men* and Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* (1991: 30). He particularly highlights how the protagonist of *Donald Duk* corrects his history teacher Mr. Meanwright’s distorted version of history<sup>7</sup> during a classroom slide-show that excludes Chinese immigrants from the Promontory Summit celebration.

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<sup>7</sup> Maulana Karenga makes an interesting distinction between “history writers” and “historians”: the former “simply record what the people in power dictate”, whereas historians “write that which re-enforces our self-concept” (Karenga cited in Flowers 1996: 47).



Fig. 1 . Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869. Photo by Charles Roscoe Savage. [Public domain]<sup>8</sup>

As noted at the very outset, any act of recentering carries the danger of replicating structures of oppression and mimicking the dominant discourses since usually there are no centers without margins, to use Stephen Sumida’s term (1994: 808). This potential tension lies at the heart of Kingston’s project of recentering Chinese male immigrant ancestors in *China Men*. One might ask whether Kingston, in writing *China Men*, became overly concerned with the criticism directed at her first work *The Woman Warrior* and consequently risked falling into a trap of the nationalist ideology promoted by such Asian American cultural nationalists as Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong and Ben Tong. In the hope of fostering solidarity among Asian American people, those activists opted for the centrist approach aimed at debunking stereotypes that portrayed Asian Americans as aliens, spies and effeminate eunuchs. In doing so, however, they accentuated their American nativity, masculinity, and heterosexuality as markers of authenticity. Ironically, their struggle against discrimination led to the reproduction of discriminatory practices. Their model of authentic racial identity was based to a great extent on the exclusion of people

<sup>8</sup> Asian Americans reenacted Promontory Point celebrations in an inclusive, multicultural manner in 2009 and 2019.

who did not match their paradigm of an Asian American. As a result, fresh immigrants, women and homosexuals found themselves on the perimeter of Asian American identity. Thus, in an attempt to challenge white supremacy, Asian American nationalists paradoxically adopted many white ideological tenets. Patriarchy, apotheosis of masculinity and heterosexuality are as integral to whiteness as racial domination itself.

King-Kok Cheung identifies the ‘rhetoric of conquest’ in Ah Goong’s story (Cheung cited in Grobman [2001](#): 223). In a similar vein, Li traces in *China Men* the persistence of the American myth fuelled by “the right of discovery and the right of possession” ([1990](#): 484). Linda Ching Sledge, on the other hand, notes that like Walt Whitman, Kingston “raises private experience to the level of American myth” ([1997](#): 5). While Kingston anchors Chinese Americans within the sphere of Americanness and reappraises Chinese American men in *China Men*, she cannot be accused of marginalizing any of the groups excluded from the nationalist framework. Nor is it plausible to assume that she wrote *China Men* as a direct response to such nationalist critiques of *The Woman Warrior*, given her statement in an interview with Paula Rabinowitz that she originally intended *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to appear as one book ([1998](#): 69).<sup>9</sup>

The centrist orientation adopted by Asian American cultural nationalists has since invited ample criticism and generated alternative figurative models designed to reclaim the experience of marginalized groups without dismantling the “master’s house with the master’s tools” (Audre Lorde cited in [Moy](#) 1995: 191). Aware of the dangers involved in the creation of a single, monolith centre meant to encompass all members of a minority group, some scholars proposed the metaphor of multiple centres. Stephen Sumida envisions Asian American literature as composed of “centres without margins” characterized by “radiances rather than circles” ([1994](#): 808). Similarly, Barbara Hooper and Edward Soja advocate “a spatiality where radical subjectivities can multiply, connect and combine in polycentric communities of identity and resistance” ([1993](#): 192).

These propositions raise important questions: Are centres without margins equally powerful? Have they got at least a similar radiance and what is their relation to the external, still dominant centre? Do they pose any challenge to it? While the very notion of a “centre” and the act of claiming centrality can empower marginalized groups, they do not necessarily displace the entrenched

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<sup>9</sup> In the 1986 interview conducted by Paula Rabinowitz, Kingston reflected on the relationship between *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*: “At one time, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* were supposed to be one book. I had conceived of one huge book. However, part of the reason for one book is history. The women had their own time and place and their lives were coherent; there was a woman’s way of thinking. My men’s stories seemed to interfere. They were weakening the feminist point of view. So I took all the men’s stories out, and then I had *The Woman Warrior*” (Kingston & Rabinowitz [1986](#): 69).

dominance of the centre, which has little incentive to redefine itself as a centre without margins. However, conceiving a minority movement in terms of multiple centres definitely countervails essentialist impulses of those who replicate, rather than subvert, the logic of the dominant centre.

Some resist the impulse to move from the margins to the centre, instead drawing our attention to the potential dormant within the margin. bell hooks speaks of "the spaces that the margin opens," distinguishing between two kinds of marginality: "imposed by the dominant structure" and "marginality one chooses as site of resistance" (hooks cited in Hooper & Soja 1993: 191). Hooks's reasoning parallels the conclusions reached by David Palumbo-Liu in his introduction to *Ethnic canon*, where he argues that, once the minority discourse is relocated to the centre, it "loses its latitude as a counterdiscourse and its ability to designate a shifting open space outside the hegemonic" (1995: 17). Valuable as all these reappraisals of margins are, it is crucial not to romanticize marginality. Margins are a site of resistance only if they challenge existing power relations rather than settle for marginality.

An alternative to occupying either the centre or the margin is to inhabit the space in between. The liminal position resists dualistic thinking and destabilizes the margin-centre binary. Judith Butler speaks about a "language in between languages" that needs to be found (2000: 19)<sup>10</sup>. While Analouise Keating traces a similar oscillation towards a liminal space in the writings of Gloria Anzaldua and Trinh T. Minh-ha, she interprets their being "neither nor" as being "both" (1998: 36). The liminal space releases us from fixed positions, enabling a productive critical distance towards both the margin and the centre. From this vantage point, more inquisitive interrogation of both locations is possible. Furthermore, the liminal space disrupts binary logic itself. Binaries confine subjectivities to flat, oppositional space, whereas identity in its fullest sense, emerges within multidimensional and fluid spatial framework.<sup>11</sup>

Although Kingston largely avoids the pitfalls of centrism, critics still charge her with inadvertently replicating some of the dominant discourses. Lei Lani Nishime argues that Kingston's representations of gender and history may verge on essentialism, potentially leaving readers with an impression that "Americanness translates into masculinity" (76). Indeed, the book that makes a concerted effort to claim America for Chinese Americans is *China Men*,

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<sup>10</sup> The citation comes from the Butler authored section of the book written together with Laclau and Žižek. Hence collective entry in the list of references at the end of the article.

<sup>11</sup> To identify a genuine liminal space in literary studies of minority literature, it is also important to move beyond projects that juxtapose the experiences of one marginalized group with those of the dominant group. If we analyze authors from different racial backgrounds side by side, we dislodge whiteness from its self-proclaimed position of centrality. It is no longer the only point of reference but one among many.

not *The Woman Warrior*, in which she foregrounds the female perspective and the stories of Asian American women, but in which the narrator is still in the process of searching for her village. Nishime also claims that at certain points Kingston mimics “the writing about Western expansionism and the Frontier” (1995: 78). Parallely, David Leiwei Li detects allusions to Manifest Destiny in Kingston’s portrayals of the American West, arguing that Chinese constructors of the railway unwittingly contributed to the propagation of Manifest Destiny—the westward expansion in the United States and the subsequent colonization of Asian countries: “the Chinese ironically became accomplices in the exploitation of their ancient empire” (Li 1990: 490). Rachel Lee notes that *China Men* are implicated in the destruction of the land since claiming America entails various “physical harnessing acts performed upon the land” (Lee 1995: 148). Lee goes on to say that “[c]rossing boundaries to establish claims involves the violent restructuring of both settlers and the soil” (Lee 1995: 148).

A different perspective emerges in Brook Thomas’s analysis, which distinguishes between the political and material making of the country. Thomas argues that *China Men* reframes the question “What makes an American” as “Who made America?” (1998: 709). Thomas further observes that the claiming of the land and *China Men* are reciprocal because *China Men* metaphorically claim the American land through their labor, while the land, in turn, figuratively claims them, commemorating their contribution with the whisper of the cane (Thomas 1998: 710).

The aesthetics employed by Kingston in *China Men* seems to indicate that she is aware of the pitfalls of the centrist approach. In his opium induced vision, Bak Goong sees “an amazing gold electric ring connecting every living being” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 92). All human beings in his vision appear to be located along the margins of the ring, leaving the core empty. Another unifying image featuring in Bak Goong’s vision is “a gold net or a light” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 92). These symbols provide an alternative to the centrist imagery and the discourses that valorize the center over the periphery. They anticipate Kingston’s later reappraisal of the margin proposed in her 2011 memoirs *I love a broad margin to my life*, and resonate with the alternative ways of imagining reality proposed by scholars of ethnic literature.

The marginality of Chinese American immigrants, as recovered by Kingston in *China Men*, exposes history as a vector of time and place. When “the driving out” begins after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese American immigrants need to literally become invisible in order to dodge the violence directed at them by white Americans. In doing so, at least to some extent, they situate themselves literally “off the map,” to use James Lee’s term (2002: 248). Ah Goong’s westward journey on foot after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, as he evades white hostility, further underscores

the effacement of Chinese American immigrants from American history. Adrienne Rich's observation that “a place on the map is also a place in history” (1986: 212) acquires a special poignancy here. Travelling West and assuming a protective mantle of literal invisibility, Ah Goong is “off the map” and, at the same time, everywhere upon it, covering the vast terrain of the American territory and exploring the very interior of the country that he helps to build. Ironically, his literal invisibility within American territory inverts the Althusserian proposition that what is inside the space is visible, whereas outside remains invisible (Althusser cited in Smith & Katz 1993: 69).

Even when not literally hiding from hostilities, Ah Goong experiences a more figurative invisibility in the United States, where Chinese American immigrants are largely unseen and unacknowledged. He portrays the United States as a place of crushing solitude for Chinese Americans, a place where they are barely noticed: “The Gold Mountain is lonely. You could get sick and almost die, and nobody come to visit. When you're well, you climb out of your basement again, and nobody has missed you” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 38). A similar vision of insensitivity on the part of white Americans and in particular the white apparatus of power emerges from the vignette devoted to the nameless Chinese American immigrant dubbed as “the Wild Man of the Green Swamp” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 224). The narrator first encounters this story as a child through the American media. Until the Wild Man is forcefully escorted outside the Florida swamp, he also remains geographically and figuratively very much “off the map.” Doubting the Wild Man's putative wildness, the narrator calls him the Man, while the white pursuers in her description are cast as “demons:” “He did not look very wild, being led by the posse out of the swamp. He did not look dirty, either. He wore a checkered shirt unbuttoned at the neck, where his white undershirt showed” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 224). Never threatening other people, the Wild Man is still hunted like an animal by a posse of hunters and a plane. The Wild Man's ability to survive in the wild terrain of the Green Swamp, Florida totally through his own resourcefulness contrasts sharply with white authorities' failure to communicate with him successfully. Despite mobilizing massive resources to capture and imprison him, they fail even with the aid of interpreters to understand his desire to go back to Taiwan rather than the communist China. This tragic miscommunication culminates in his penitentiary suicide, emphasizing the ultimate failure of the dominant culture to see and honor his humanity.

Whenever Asian Americans were visible in the public sphere, it was usually through acts of ostracism and propaganda. Asian American workers were scapegoated as threats to white labor—accused of stealing jobs and lowering wages. An example of such rhetoric appears in a 1906 petition drafted by the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League. The authors of the petition warn American citizens of the alleged danger posed by “hordes” of Mongolians

to the white race (in Ichigashi [1913](#): 274). The petition urges the extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act to the Japanese and Koreans, culminating in a xenophobic call: “Stop the Mongolian invasion” (Ichigashi [1913](#): 274).

Beyond toppling the myth of whiteness as the exclusive cornerstone of American identity, Kingston also challenges the white-constructed fiction of the working class as exclusively white. In *Black reconstruction* ([1963 \[1935\]](#)), W.E.B. Du Bois notes that the American worker has been traditionally presented as white (711). Kingston dismantles this misperception by foregrounding Chinese immigrants’ labor in the Sandalwood Mountains of Hawaii and the mainland western United States, where they labored alongside African American, Mexican and white workers. Kingston also undermines the perception of Chinese American workers as obsequious, submissive and willing to work for next to nothing without any questioning. Both in “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains” and “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” the narrator recounts the moment when her ancestors initiated a protest against labor conditions and unsatisfactory remuneration. Bak Goong of the Sandalwood Mountains mentally revolts at slave-like wages he is offered upon arrival in Hawaii and, together with other China Men of the island, asserts their right to speak and sing during work. Perceiving themselves as “free men,” not “coolies,” Ah Goong and other China Men of the Sierra Nevada Mountains stage a strike against their insufficient wages and disproportionately long workdays. China Men fail to convince white workers to join the strike. Their reasoning—“eight hours a day good for white man, all the same good for China Man” (Kingston [1986 \[1980\]](#): 139) —fails to persuade white workers that they have mutual interests worth fighting for. White labor’s refusal to join the strike is the best exemplification in the narrative of Du Bois’s “compensatory wages of whiteness” (Du Bois [1963 \[1935\]](#)). Du Bois employs the term mainly in the context of labor relations between whites and African Americans, yet the same rule operates in the context of labor relations between whites and workers of other races and marginalized ethnicities. In *Black reconstruction*, Du Bois argues that the discrimination against black people not only gave members of the working class comparatively higher wages, but also offered a significant boost to their ego. Du Bois famously termed the phenomenon “compensatory wages of whiteness” (Du Bois [1963 \[1935\]](#): 700). White workers derived a considerable comfort from the fact that there was still someone lower in the hierarchy. Exposed to class oppression, white laborers were free of racial oppression, which apparently kept them from identifying and targeting those who were responsible for their exploitation and drew the largest dividends. This dynamic ensured that “the wages of both classes could be kept low, the whites fearing to be supplanted by Negro labor, the Negroes always being threatened by the substitution of white labor” (Du Bois [1963 \[1935\]](#): 701).

Cheryl Harris extends this logic, arguing that the white working class was much more likely to identify with the bourgeoisie than with fellow black workers, playing up their racial status over class solidarity (Harris 1993: 1741). Elaborating on Du Bois’s concept of compensatory wages of whiteness, David Roediger avers that “status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and as ‘not Blacks’” (Roediger 1991: 13). A parallel psychological wage operates during the railroad strike in *China Men*, when China Men’s plead with white workers to join the strike is dismissed with a racial slur: “Cheap John Chinaman” (Kingston 1986 [1980]: 139). Rather than choose class solidarity and strike out for higher wages, white workers assiduously cherish the color line and guard their racial separateness.<sup>12</sup>

Kingston’s critique of the myth of white exclusivity in the founding and developing of the United States complements *China Men*’s larger project of unraveling the paradox of whiteness—its simultaneous universality and exclusivity. The same contradiction underlies the myth of white exclusivity in the nation’s origin. On the one hand, whiteness universalizes the socio-historical narrative behind the creation and sustenance of the United States, while on the other, it once again builds this narrative on the exclusion of marginalized racial and ethnic groups. By reinserting Chinese Americans into the bland, white picture of the origins and growth of the United States, Kingston intervenes in the official version of the United States history, transforming Chinese Americans from figures of historical non-existence into central agents in the construction of the nation. While *China men*’s act of recentering involves inadvertent masculinization of Americanness and at least partial replication of the dominant discourse of colonization and settlement, Kingston largely succeeds in reclaiming the marginalized and avoiding the exclusionary logic that has often accompanied such redefinitions.

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<sup>12</sup> Similar charges were also directed against African American workers. Conflicts between white and black workers flared at various points of American history. Rather than blame the system and white employers, white workers often sought the source of their disfranchisement in the presence of black labor. White employers sometimes used black workers as a bargain card against the demands of white labor force. In his book *Genesis of the black working class in the American South, 1863–82*, Gerald Jaynes reports, for example, the practice of replacing white workers during a strike (1986: 268). Fearing competition from African Americans, white workers often targeted their black counterparts, for instance in 1858 and 1859, when whites attacked black caulkers in Baltimore shipyards. In 1865 they successfully lobbied for their complete exclusion. More examples of hostility against African American workers can be found in David Roediger’s *Wages of whiteness* (1991).

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