



The Cartography of Memory and Belonging

Exploring the Concept of Home in Zhang's How Much of These Hills Is Gold

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Abstract : This study delves into the complexities of home, belonging, and memory in C.Pam Zhang's Booker-longlisted novel, *How Much of These Hills Is Gold*, set against the tumultuous backdrop of the American gold rush. By subverting traditional narratives of American history, Zhang poses a profound question: What does it mean to survive in a land that rejects your existence? This research seeks to answer a critical question: How do immigrants, particularly those from marginalized communities, conceptualize and construct a sense of home in the face of historical erasure, racism, and xenophobia?

Through a critical analysis of the novel, this study examines the ways in which Zhang's protagonists, Lucy and Sam, navigate the treacherous landscape of their Western mining town, confronting the intersecting challenges of race, gender, sexual identity, poverty, and adolescence. By exploring the cultural heritage and myths that immigrants bring with them, this research reveals the intricate ways in which memory, belonging, and home are intertwined. This study argues that Zhang's novel offers a powerful critique of the notion of home as a fixed, sentimentalized concept, instead revealing it to be a dynamic, contested, and deeply personal construct. By examining the ways in which Lucy and Sam's undocumented history informs their perception of home, this research sheds light on the ways in which immigrants resist, negotiate, and subvert dominant narratives of belonging.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Zhang's novel provides a nuanced and timely exploration of the complexities of home, belonging, and memory, offering a profound meditation on the human quest for a sense of place and identity in the face of adversity. This research contributes to ongoing conversations in literary studies, memory studies, and critical migration studies, offering new insights into the ways in which literature can help us better understand the intricate relationships between home, belonging, and memory.

Keywords: Home, Immigrant, Subversive, Gold-Rush, Erasure, Undocumented, Memory, Belonging, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The American gold rush of the mid-19th century was a pivotal event in the country's history, marked by the influx of thousands of immigrants seeking fortune and a new life. However, the experiences of Chinese immigrants, who played a crucial role in the development of the American West, have been largely erased from historical narratives. C.Pam Zhang's novel, *How Much of These Hills Is Gold*, offers a powerful corrective to this erasure, exploring the lives of two orphaned siblings, Lucy and Sam, as they navigate the treacherous landscape of the American West.

Through a nuanced and lyrical narrative, Zhang excavates the complex history of Chinese immigrants in America, revealing the ways in which they were marginalized, excluded, and erased from the dominant narratives of the American West. This study seeks to examine the ways in which Zhang's novel challenges these dominant narratives, offering a counter-narrative

that centers the experiences of Chinese immigrants and explores the complex intersections of identity, belonging, and memory. The novel's non-linear narrative structure, which jumps between past, present, and future, mirrors the fragmented and disjointed experiences of the protagonist, Lucy. Through Lucy's narrative, Zhang explores the complex relationships between memory, identity, and belonging, revealing the ways in which these concepts are intertwined and contested. The novel's focus on the experiences of Chinese immigrants in the American West offers a powerful critique of the dominant narratives of American history, which have traditionally erased or marginalized the experiences of non-white immigrants. Zhang's portrayal of the harsh realities faced by Chinese immigrants, including racism, xenophobia, and economic exploitation, serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the myth of the American dream.

Furthermore, the novel's exploration of the complex relationships between identity, belonging, and memory offers insights into the ways in which these concepts are constructed and contested. Through Lucy's narrative, Zhang reveals the ways in which memory can be both a source of comfort and a site of trauma, highlighting the complex and often fraught relationships between identity, belonging, and memory.

The novel's use of imagery and symbolism also serves to reinforce its exploration of the complex relationships between identity, belonging, and memory. The image of the tiger, which appears throughout the novel, serves as a symbol of the complex and often fraught relationships between identity, belonging, and memory. The tiger represents both the power and the vulnerability of the immigrant experience, highlighting the ways in which immigrants are often forced to navigate complex and treacherous landscapes in order to survive.

Zhang's offers a powerful exploration of the complex relationships between identity, belonging, and memory, highlighting the ways in which these concepts are constructed and contested. Through its portrayal of the experiences of Chinese immigrants in the American West, the novel serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of American history, offering insights into the ways in which identity, belonging, and memory are intertwined and contested

THE IDEA OF HOME AND BELONGING IN AN ERASED HISTORY

The epigraph of the novel screams, "This land is not your land", and it's a reminder the siblings-Lucy and Sam hear over and over again, from other kids, from the miners, and the law, which denies their family the right to own the gold they find in the hills.. The author sets out to explore the question of where immigrants are allowed to belong and in the process, it becomes an exploration of race identity and gender. As the children of immigrants from China, Lucy and Sam, along with their parents, represent a portion of the American experience that history usually prefers to gloss over. Their vigorous attempt to bury their dead father is emblematic of their attempt to get rid of their history because it makes them feel 'other'. A history that has different connotations for Ma and Ba:

There's no one like us here, Ma said sadly and Ba proudly. We come from across the ocean, she said. We're the very first, he said. Special, he said. (Page 56).

They are met by the challenge of weaving a new sense of identity for they have already left the place of the culture and traditions of the home and indulge in a battle to survive. And the place that has now become home is surrounded by the issues of gender, race, and the wall of hostility and they will have to belong when both the land and its inhabitants are hostile to their presence. They are met by the challenge of weaving a new sense of identity for they have already left the place of the culture and traditions of the home and indulge in a battle to survive. And the place that has now become home is surrounded by the issues of gender, race, and the wall of hostility and they will have to belong when both the land and its inhabitants are hostile to their presence. Their search of two silver dollars to put on Ba's eyes before burying, lands them to thief a horse of their teacher and they set forth to find a home with their father's dead body and its falling limbs inside a wooden trunk strapped to the back of their stolen horse. The rotten corpse frightens the racist boys who are attacking Lucy and Sam and they end up dropping the coins the siblings need to perform the burial. As the narrative wends sinuously through the past and present, through Lucy and Sam's

experiences together and apart, through the mythic and the actual versions of the American dream, adolescent characters struggle to carve their unique adult selves out from under the weight of the past. Both Lucy and Sam forge their individual identities. Sam craves for adventure while Lucy wants stability. Sam to whose mind the shadow of a body is the true height, always wants to sail beyond limits:

‘‘When I’m a cowboy, When I’m an adventurer. When I’m famous outlaw. When I’m grown. Young enough to think desire alone shapes the world. (Zhang 7)

Lucy's perception of home is deeply influenced by her father Ba's stories and myths, which Sam believes unconditionally. However, Lucy is skeptical of these unwritten histories, preferring instead the written, documented accounts of their family's past (Zhang 21). This tension between oral and written histories is a recurring theme throughout the novel, highlighting the complex relationships between memory, identity, and belonging. Ba's stories, which Lucy initially dismisses as mere myths, serve as a way of passing down their family's history and cultural heritage. As Ba tells the children, "Family comes first" (Zhang 29), emphasizing the importance of their familial bonds in the face of adversity.

Ba's stories also serve as a way of resisting the dominant narratives of American history, which have traditionally erased or marginalized the experiences of non-white immigrants. As Ba notes, "All your life you heard people say the story starts in '48; and all your life when people told you this story, did you ever question why? They told it to shut you out. They told it to claim it; to make it theirs, not yours" (Zhang 250). This passage highlights the ways in which dominant narratives can be used to exclude and marginalize certain groups, and the importance of resisting these narratives through counter-stories and alternative histories.

The character of Teacher Leigh serves as a foil to Ba's stories, representing the dominant narratives of American history that seek to erase or marginalize the experiences of non-white immigrants. As Leigh notes, "You may go... All the work we've done is useless now" (Zhang 123), highlighting the ways in which dominant narratives can be used to exclude and marginalize certain groups. Lucy's initial trust in Leigh's account of their family's history serves as a commentary on the ways in which dominant narratives can be internalized and perpetuated, even by those who are marginalized by them.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that the search for home and belonging is a complex and ongoing process, one that requires a critical examination of the dominant narratives that shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. As Ba notes, "You get lost again, you remember you belong to this place as much as anybody" (Zhang 24), emphasizing the importance of resisting dominant narratives and asserting one's own sense of belonging and identity.

The power dynamics of documentation and writing are underscored in the novel through Ma's meticulous attention to detail, which is passed down to Lucy. Lucy comes to realize the significance of writing in exerting legitimacy and control, particularly in the context of historical narratives. As she notes, "so much of it is false and erroneous" (Zhang), highlighting the ways in which written records can be used to distort or erase certain histories. This is exemplified in the contrast between the framed deeds to the Gold holdings of Anna's father in Sweetwater, and Ba's undocumented Gold findings. The former confers legitimacy and power, while the latter is relegated to the margins, resulting in vastly different fates for the two characters. Ba's death in poverty and destitution serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of being excluded from the dominant narrative. Lucy's own identity is deeply entangled with these issues of documentation and legitimacy. Following Ba's death, she is conferred with the family secrets and their distorted identities, leaving her feeling torn between love and hate. As she grapples with her family's tangled past, Lucy is forced to confront the ways in which her own desires and sense of belonging have been shaped by the dominant narrative. Her desire to fit in and belong is palpable, yet she is rendered incapable of tracing her own desires due to the rotting environment in which she grew up. The idea of home becomes increasingly complicated for Lucy as she is denied access to the land she grew up on due to her racial identity. Sam, Ba's false son, offers a more vehement critique of the notion of home, asserting "We can't survive out here. There's nothing. No people." "What 'd people ever do for us?" he asks, highlighting the tension between the desire for freedom and the need for connection and community (Zhang 49).

For Lucy, home is a place of stability and security, where she can escape the hardships and uncertainties of her nomadic existence. In her "fondest dream," Lucy imagines a life where she is "unnoticed in the crowd," where she can walk down the street

without being "paid...any mind at all" (Zhang 41). This desire for anonymity and belonging is rooted in her experiences as a Chinese immigrant in the American West, where she is constantly reminded of her Otherness.

In contrast, Sam's notion of home is more fluid and adventurous, shaped by Ba's stories of the Wild West and the promise of gold. Sam's desire to "face his reality" and "wander" is evident in his assertion that "if someone asks where we're from-we can say anything...We don't need any history at all" (Zhang 63). This rejection of traditional notions of home and identity is reflective of the fluidity of gender and identity in the novel, where Samantha turns Sam to please Ba, and where cross-dressing and queer identities are presented as a normative part of the Wild West experience.

The gender dynamics at play in the novel are also significant, particularly in the context of immigration and identity. Lucy's yearning for stability and security is contrasted with Sam's desire for adventure and freedom, highlighting the different expectations placed on women and men in the context of immigration. The wives of miners, who arrive in the West with "cheerful dresses that faded fast as their hopes" (Zhang 41), serve as a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by women immigrants in the pursuit of a better life.

The novel's exploration of the immigrant experience is also marked by a profound sense of disillusionment and disenchantment. Ba's obsession with gold, shared by Sam, is contrasted with Ma's anxiety and fear of the unknown. The family's experiences in the American West are marked by hardship, racism, and xenophobia, highlighting the ways in which the promise of America is often built on the erasure and exploitation of indigenous peoples and immigrant communities. As Zhang notes, America is a land of "missing things," where the "gold, its rivers, its buffalo, its Indians, its birds and its green and its living" have been robbed and erased (Zhang 123)

Zhang's novel masterfully blends magic realism with a nuanced portrayal of the American West, where the arid landscape is inhabited by symbolic tigers, emblematic of Chinese luck, yet also fearsome creatures. The narrative is punctuated by vivid descriptions of the natural world, evoking the harsh realities of traversing the barren land. Zhang's sweeping descriptions not only capture the grandeur of the landscape but also the human cost of chasing the elusive American dream. By subverting the traditional paradigm of the American West, Zhang offers a revisionist history that centers the experiences of marginalized communities.

The novel's use of retrospective narration allows Zhang to reconstruct the history of Ba's family, where exotic tigers and massive buffaloes roam free, symbolizing a sense of belonging and ownership. However, this sense of belonging is constantly thwarted by the harsh realities of racism, xenophobia, and economic exploitation. Lucy's journey is marked by a growing awareness of the difference between written and unwritten histories, as she comes to realize that the dominant narratives of American history are often built on the erasure of marginalized communities. As Lucy notes, "When Anna's father took gold from these hills, he kept it...He has deeds to prove his claim, and men who work under him" (Zhang 203), highlighting the ways in which written records can be used to legitimize and perpetuate systems of oppression.

Lucy's search for a sense of belonging and home is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Despite her desire to belong, Lucy is constantly reminded of her Otherness, and her agency is gradually eroded by the events of the novel. The sudden change in perspectives and the unwrapping of hostile erasure leave Lucy feeling haunted by herself, and she yearns more intensely to belong. Her nostalgia for the land and her desire for a sense of home are poignantly captured in her reminiscence of Ba, where she recalls the feeling of being almost home, "That feeling of knowing someone will call your name—that's the feeling I got when your ma met my eyes. I knew I was almost home" (Zhang 230). Lucy's perception of home undergoes a significant shift when she makes a sacrifice for Sam, leading her to understand that they belong to each other and to the hills, along with its wilderness (Zhang 272). This realization is accompanied by a sense of mourning for the loss of the land, regret for past arguments with Sam about stories versus history books, and a sense of disconnection from her own identity, as reflected in Leigh's monograph (Zhang 236). Lucy also expresses regret that no land is left wild and untouched, highlighting the tension between the natural world and human endeavors. Ultimately, she comes to understand that there is a fundamental difference between claiming the land and being claimed by it, a distinction that is both "a kind of gift" and a source of uncertainty (Zhang 272).

Through her journey, Lucy discovers a new sense of belonging, one that exists between the world Ba pursued and the world Ma wanted. This new understanding is reflected in her decision to chop her hair like Sam's, symbolizing a rejection of

traditional notions of identity and belonging (Zhang 236). As Lucy notes, this new place is "almost a new kind of land," one that is narrow and exclusive, yet also liberating. Ultimately, Lucy comes to realize that the wilderness is an integral part of herself, and that she cannot belong anywhere else. As she poignantly notes, "Though these dry yellow hills yielded nothing but pain and sweat and misplaced hope-she knows them. A part of her is buried in them, a part of her lost in them, a part of her found and born in them-so many parts belong to this land" (Zhang 245).

Thus Zhang's *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* offers a profound exploration of the concept of home and belonging, one that challenges traditional notions of identity, culture, and nationhood. Through Lucy's journey, Zhang masterfully weaves together the threads of memory, history, and mythology, creating a rich tapestry that reflects the complexities of the immigrant experience. The novel's use of magic realism, vivid imagery, and lyrical prose serves to underscore the idea that home is not just a physical place, but a state of mind, a sense of belonging that is rooted in the land, the people, and the memories that shape our lives.

The novel is a powerful corrective to the historical omission of immigrant experiences in the American West, offering a nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of the lives of Chinese immigrants during the gold rush era. The novel's exploration of the tensions between cultural identity, national belonging, and personal identity resonates deeply in our contemporary world, where immigrants continue to navigate the complexities of belonging and identity. Ultimately, *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* is a testament to the enduring power of memory, identity, and belonging. As Lucy's story comes to a close, we are left with a profound sense of the ways in which our lives are shaped by the land, the people, and the memories that we carry with us and feel home.

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