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### Discovering Belonging Through Unconformity

Within the novels *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C. Pam Zhang and *Outlawed* by Anna North social pressures bear a heavy weight on the characters, and they feel as though they must conform in order to belong. This overwhelming desire to discover a place to call home is a constant looming presence within each of the books, and it is the main manipulator of every decision and action the characters make. Although conformity seems to be the rational answer to discovering this form of belonging, the books develop the idea that these two concepts are not necessarily linked. Instead, the characters are led to break down society's mold of who a person should be and how they should present themselves in order to find their own place in the world. In the essay on "Society" from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Glenn Hendler addresses that when social pressures are inflicted upon individuals, they are given the choice of either succumbing to it or resisting it. One fearsome aspect of society is that a majority of individuals submit to everything society offers without pausing to question its contents. People become comfortable with what they have been accustomed to and then it becomes more difficult to change. Specifically within *Outlawed* Ada is a character who is initially attempting to conform, but it is only because she physically cannot she is motivated to try and change society's expectations of women. In *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, Lucy only later understands that she does not want to conform to society when she begins to live in Sweetwater. She does not feel at home in the town even though she initially expected it to be the place she was searching for. Although the settings for each of these novels are gravely different, *Outlawed* being an alternate

history and *How Much of These Hills is Gold* being historical fiction they each portray characters that challenge the constraints of conformity as well as the societal structures of gender, family, and ideology in order to reach a state of belonging and acceptance.

In the novel *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, the societal structure of gender is challenged and reformed into a process that is not set in stone, but instead, fluid and transformative. In the beginning, the author intentionally avoids the pronouns of the character Sam. Sam aspires to be the son that Ba never had, and at an early age they alter the traditional notions of masculinity in order to please their father. In the coal mines, men earn a higher wage, so Sam begins to wear boys' clothing and through this, they begin to find that this new identity suits them. Although the story is told through Lucy's eyes, and the readers lack Sam's perspective, there are still pivotal moments within the text where readers watch Sam emerge and discover their gender identity through the years. Zhang's intentional narrative choice could exemplify that the stories we tell and the ways in which we depict other people around us will always be partial and incomplete. The absence of representation for Sam's part of the story could potentially allude to the fact that gender nonconformity can sometimes be voiceless in society, and queer groups can be underrepresented. One instance in the novel in which gender nonconformity pours through the pages is when Sam is in the schoolyard and cuts off their hair. Zhang writes, "'You can have it,' Sam is saying, 'It's just dumb hair'" (Zhang 115). The symbolism of hair could be seen as an expression of femininity and the societal constructs of defining gender. Through the action of cutting it off and calling it "dumb," Sam immediately discards society's expectations of who they are supposed to be and how they are expected to present themselves. Hair is just hair, and by proving that it is meaningless Sam challenges the constraints of conformity and finds belonging in their own identity.

In the novel, *Outlawed* the characters challenge the societal structure of gender by questioning the expectations of women in their society. In Ada's town, there is a heavy emphasis on childbearing and that a woman must have children in order to be accepted into society. If a woman is unable to conceive a child the public immediately blames them for witchcraft, and they are either imprisoned or hanged for what the town believes to be a crime. The overpowering force of conformity is so deeply ingrained into their society that the people do not question this method, and the children are raised believing that witchcraft is the answer. North writes, "They said we were not women, we were witches sent by the Devil to corrupt their minds. I saw how quickly the children believed them" (North 43). This portrays that in their society the young are manipulated, and false knowledge is imprinted upon them as a way to maintain control. Societal scapegoating is implemented into their community and forces women to be stripped of their own humanity and voice. Rather than embracing science and knowledge, humanity swiftly subjugates women, exposing the gender bias, and the alarming speed at which the public believes false reasoning. When Ada leaves the convent after being accused of witchcraft she joins a group of outlaws who were thrown out of their communities because of their barrenness or their fluid sexuality. Although the narrator Ada identifies as a woman and is heterosexual, the author depicts the ways other people in her society challenge gender conformity and resist labels. In the "Society" essay Hendler states that, "society produces 'conformity' by enforcing conventional 'names and customs'" (Hendler para. 2). By resisting gender naming and encouraging gender fluidity the characters are nonconforming to society's constraining categories that limit who a person can be. The leader of the gang who calls themselves the Kid does not use pronouns and is only referred to by name. The Kid desires to create a safe haven and is depicted as someone who is capable of creating a life for themselves even if they never have children and do not align with

what is expected of them. The Kid states, ““I knew that we would build a nation of the dispossessed, where we would be not barren women, but kings”” (North 87) By calling them “kings,” the Kid empowers the group, endowing them with the strength to unite and uplift them in a society that does not accept them. The Kid also decides that their group is “dispossessed” and free from the restraints of the law. Through the gang's openness and inclusivity Ada begins to feel a sense of belonging in this unconformity and is elevated by the ways in which they live outside of society's expectations of women.

In the novel *How Much of These Hills is Gold* the characters challenge the conformative depictions of family as well as the stereotypical ways the home is organized and exhibited in society. The social unit of the nuclear family is often looked upon as the typical design of what a family and home should look like. This unit consists of the mother, the father, and the children, resulting in a rigid system that assigns roles and identities to those in the group. This systematic family, however, is not a fixed system, and in the novel, there is a shift in what family can be defined by. The story begins with the death of Lucy and Sam's father, leaving them without a parental figure in their life and leading to an instant shift in what family means to them. Their mother left them when Sam and Lucy were young, so the concept of family has never been stable in their eyes. Lucy believes that she has lost all means of a family when she states, “A dog can't stand on two legs and neither can a family” (Zhang 35). The author metaphorically compares their family to a two-legged dog, portraying that Lucy feels as though she cannot keep her family standing with just her and Sam. Due to this, Lucy has also struggled with the concept of home and has never truly understood what it meant or what it is that she has been looking for. Ba's relentless desire for gold forced Lucy and Sam to live in a constant state of movement, and they were never given the chance to settle down in a permanent space. Because Lucy dreams to

acquire this sense of permanency, she decides to live in the town of Sweetwater, in the hopes that she would be able to define what the word home could possibly mean. But without Sam, she comes to realize that a home is not a home without a family, and soon enough she dreams of returning to the life of travel that she is familiar with. She reflects on her time in the town stating, “For five years Lucy let more and more of herself be buried. Sank into Sweetwater’s slow life like a mule in quicksand, too stupid to notice till it was half-drowned. While Sam wandering only grew more into Sam” (Zhang 276). The author incorporates a metaphor to compare Lucy’s loss of identity in the town to a mule sinking in quicksand. The line reflects Lucy’s journey of self-loss in her quest to discover the societal ideal of home that demands conformity from individuals. In comparison to Sam, who found belonging while resisting societal customs and living outside of civilization, Lucy fell into her friend Anna’s shadow and over the years began to forget the person she was.

Within *Outlawed*, the societal vision of family is primarily focused on the children. If a family does not contain a mother and her children then it is no longer considered a family. In the “Society” essay the author discusses that the concept of the family could be in fact societal made, as opposed to something that may feel like a personal choice. He states, “The social is reduced to individual and familial interactions that seem to be independent and autonomous but are actually structured by the market and the state” (Hendler para. 10). In Fairchild, each family was severely monitored, and the structure of the family system was born from societal laws and the fear of being named a witch. Although Ada was married at the beginning of the book, she was unable to have children, so she was immediately cast out. Only through this rejection and inability to conform Ada was forced to pave a new life for herself and search for a place to belong and a true family to be a part of. Similar to Lucy in *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, Ada lacks a

permanent home and is constantly moving around to flee from society's expectations of her. When Ada reflects on her two homes—Fairchild and Hole in the Wall she states, "The two were only connected by my body, and the failing within it that had made the old life impossible and ushered the new one in" (North 224). She views her two homes as not homes, but rather two completely different lives she has lived. She also notes that it is only because of the "failing" of her body that she was forced to find this new home, and she would not have escaped the conformity of her town unless she had reason to. This exposes the fact that Ada is still unconsciously rooted in society's perspective of women even if she understands it is wrong. However, despite the fact she interprets this new life as something that was required of her, she does begin to feel as though she is part of a family within the gang. This structure of family is highly unconventional, but there is still a sense of protection that she feels by being with the others. Ada also resorts to the role of the protector due to her healing capabilities and medical background. By defying the need for children and freeing themselves from the constant observation of the public, the gang challenges the traditional family structure and creates a haven for themselves through a nonconformist lifestyle.

In *How Much of These Hills is Gold* the characters strive to challenge societal ideology and the principles of their surrounding culture. The contrasting characters of Lucy and Anna in Sweetwater serve as the primary means of exhibiting this process. When Lucy moves to the town, she becomes friends with Anna whose father is a wealthy prospector, just as Ba desired to be. However, due to the law prohibiting individuals not native to the land from retaining the gold, Ba was unable to achieve this same means of prosperity. Even though he was a native-born American nobody believed him because of his Asian heritage. At the beginning of the novel, before the readers even meet the characters, Zhang writes, "This land is not your land" (Zhang).

This powerful twisting of words emphasizes that America exercises its ideals of freedom only while continuously subjugating disadvantaged groups. These groups are left without the same opportunities, without a voice, and without a space to call home. In *Sweetwater* Lucy begins to spend most of her time with Anna and she tries to hide her past by matching the behavior society has conformed Anna into becoming. She dresses like her and even wears shoes that will match her height. With the two girls side by side, the author is able to convey the naivety of Anna, while also showcasing the experiences Lucy has undergone in her life. When there are rumors of a tiger in the town, Anna asks Lucy, ““Don’t you think a tiger would make a lovely pet? I could train it to come when called. Maybe I should ask for one”” (Zhang 227). This question instantly reflects Anna’s sheltered upbringing and her limited exposure to the realities of life. Not only does it demonstrate her naivety, but it also depicts her wealth and ability to have anything she asks for. Later, once Sam and Lucy are reunited, Lucy has the epiphany that she does not feel at home here, and she should not have to change herself in a society that does not accept her. Zhang writes, “She feels cooler already, the air less heavy, inviting Anna to look and see: no longer the same, no longer Anna’s poorer reflection. Lucy herself, barefoot as the day she came to Sweetwater” (Zhang 266). As soon as she drops the mask of attempting to conform to societal expectations and acknowledges the fact the town will only try to mold her into something she is not, Lucy feels as though she can breathe again, and is able to recognize her own self staring back at her in the mirror.

In *Outlawed* the character Ada challenges societal ideologies by confronting the medical structure and the lack of factual evidence surrounding infertility. In the “Society” essay Hendler addresses that societal structures are used in order to, “shape action and limit resistance” (Hendler para. 2). In Ada’s town, the research is highly censored, and there are little to no books

that Ada can find to understand this issue. By controlling the information that circulates through the town, this society is able to restrict resistance and questioning. When Ada finally does discover the book titled, “Handbook of Feminine Complaints” there is only one copy, as opposed to the hundreds of copies of books that blame witchcraft and the supernatural. When she finally receives this book she thinks back to what her mother had taught her. The author states, “You couldn’t just take away something people believed in. You had to give them something in its place” (North 38). Because witchcraft is the only justification people funnel all of their problems into, it can not be taken away until Ada discovers the science behind it. In every home Ada stays with she is constantly hoping to meet with the author of this manuscript, Alice Schaeffer, in order to help her and change the ways in which society views barrenness. Her relentless commitment to conduct research and in turn rescue the lives of countless women leaves her in a perpetual state of unease within the gang or anywhere else she stays. As the novel draws to a close, Ada finally finds Schaeffer’s laboratory, however, Schaeffer is no longer there. With Schaeffer gone, Ada recognizes that the responsibility now lies in her hands, and she begins to work. By refusing to conform and accept what her society wishes her to believe, Ada ultimately discovers her purpose and with that her sense of belonging.

Overall, the novels *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C. Pam Zhang and *Outlawed* by Anna North each strive to create characters that defy the constraints of society as well as the dangers of conformity. At the end of *Outlawed* Ada is confident in her future and is certain of what she wants for herself, but at the end of *How Much of These Hills is Gold* Lucy stops herself mid-sentence, and the readers are never given her hopes for her future. However, Lucy does express that she wants *something*, and after the pain she has endured leaving this question open-ended and unrestrained signifies that she herself knows how to reach belonging, and it is



not something that needs to be shared with society. By resisting the confining societal structures of gender, family, and ideology Ada, the Kid, Sam, and Lucy each convey their strength in upholding their personal identities and paving a path to acceptance for themselves as well as for others who dare to challenge the norm.

### Works Cited

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