

---

*The Prose of Countersovereignty*

IN AUGUST OF 1877, AS Central Pacific Railroad construction moved into Paiute territory a month after Chinese workers went on strike, Central Pacific employment of Chinese labor dropped precipitously, never to reach the same giddy heights as those required during the slog through the Sierra Nevada summit wall. According to Charles Crocker, director of construction for the Central Pacific, Chinese workers heeded fantastical stories spread by Paiutes. He wrote to his associate:

The most tremendous yarns have been circulated among them and we have lost about 1000 through fear of moving out on the desert. They have been told there are Snakes fifty feet long that swallow Chinamen whole and Indians 25 feet high that eat men and women and five of them will eat a Chinaman for breakfast and hundreds of other equally as ridiculous stories.<sup>1</sup>

It was their irrational fear, stoked by the stories told by Native people, Crocker suggested, that limited the employment of Chinese workers for the railroad. The ultimate controlling factor for employment rates was, in his telling, neither the needs of capital nor the demands of labor, but rather the imperial interaction: the encounter of Paiutes with the agents of colonialism in the form of railroad workers and managers. To explain the unfolding of negotiations over production between Central Pacific directors and Chinese workers, Crocker resorted to a third party, the people whose territory the railroad was built over and through. There is an anxiety that shows its face here, about the ongoing, unfinished nature of a colonial process that must confront the simple fact of Paiute survival and continuity, and about the incomplete sanctity and integrity of the capital that emerges from continental imperialism, which grounds its claim in an assertion of countersovereignty.

My invocation of “countersovereignty” proceeds, first, from a sense that settler invocations of sovereignty require recognition of Indigenous modes of relationship, however muted or displaced, in order to maintain any semblance of stability or coherence. This can be seen in the land grants that fueled Central Pacific Railroad production. Underlying any stability and coherence of Central Pacific claims of exclusive land ownership was recognition of the prior Paiute, and other Indigenous, claims on that same land. Barring any such recognition, however displaced or muted, Central Pacific claims to land would themselves be vulnerable to the same relations of conquest, whether through market terms or through force, that established and sustained a colonial order over Paiute territory. Countersovereignty, as visible in Central Pacific land grants and elsewhere, was a project of balancing the chaos and violence of colonialism on one side of the ledger—that of the (implicitly recognized) Indigenous sovereign—in order to establish political and economic space for the settler sovereign.

Colonial sovereignty is always necessarily a reactive claim: it is accurately considered a claim of countersovereignty. Recognition of Indigenous sovereignty takes form through fact and empiricism, capital and value. While prior sovereignties of Paiutes haunted Central Pacific colonialism, the railroad also relied on an imported labor force managed under conditions of racial violence. Chinese workers were integral to the Central Pacific’s construction process, and decidedly not as enfranchised members of Nevada settler society. The possibility of Chinese claims to full participation in countersovereignty threatened the colonial economy. Chinese labor (disciplined by Chinese merchant capital) sustained and expanded the production of capital in the colonial political economy, and by doing so, sustained and expanded colonialism over Paiute lives and territory. The possibility of Chinese workers engaging of their own accord with Paiutes threatened the political economy of countersovereignty. Claiming a status of fact for that countersovereignty, such possibilities of alien and Native interactions were cast as rumors. Was Central Pacific Railroad capital, which derived from federal land grants and the surplus produced by railroad laborers, vulnerable to being slowed by a rumor? The location of Crocker’s story was, itself, set in place at a crossroads of federal Indian and railroad policy. The secretaries of the interior and treasury communicated over the path of the railroad, and of land grants, “fixing a point at the Western base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, through which the main line of the Pacific Rail Road shall pass.”<sup>2</sup>

For a historian working in the Central Pacific Railroad archives, Crocker's story raises questions rather than answering them, and begins a line of inquiry rather than providing an exotic sidebar. This, after all, may be the only mention of Chinese and Paiute interactions in the archive of Central Pacific Railroad production. To find more, we must turn elsewhere. Lalla Scott, for example, recorded a story of a Chinese railroad work gang who shared food with a group of Paiutes living near their work camps during one segment of railroad construction near Humboldt Lake, in Nevada Territory.<sup>3</sup> Interactions between Chinese and Paiutes are recorded as rumors in the archives of Nevada settlement and colonization. These interactions open possibilities of a history in which colonial claims to legitimacy and authority are seen as properly peripheral, coercive, and reliant, ultimately, on violence.

Following the strategies of railroad capitalists, attempts to write a history of Chinese and Paiute interactions in the nineteenth century rely on speculation as a method. While capitalists speculate on ways to maximize future profits, historical speculation looks to the past to mine objects, rumors, and tangles of contracts in order to map a field of possible interactions between Chinese migrants and Paiutes. Casting shadows back onto the behemoth of expanding capital, these histories underscore the speculative enterprise of a history of U.S. expansion under the banner of abstract universal Capital, moving from a Newtonian universe of colonial justification to a quantum field of historical and political probability. The history of countersovereignty is part of the rumor community of continental imperialism, constantly repeated in the present, a testament of faith in colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Speculation, grounded only in the power to end the prospect of life and its reproduction—this is the limit of history.

Historians often seek access to the voice of the colonized, the voice of the people, through rumors. Dim echoes sounding through the caverns of colonial archives, these rumors appear at a remove from their community of meaning and interpretation. This remove, a gulf between a living, supple rumor and its cold reduction into fact, is one of those chasms productively shaping the historiography of colonialism, reaching across the social and subjective constraints of the colonial historian's institutional location.<sup>5</sup> To dismiss rumors as problematic sources misses the point that rumors indelibly shape the historiography of colonialism.

In the analysis of rumors, questions of their origins and causes are often irrelevant. Rumors veer away from the metaphysics of colonial knowledge and justification, which carry neatly ordered sequences that flatter colonizers'

or elites' pretensions to power. Instead they focus historians' attention on the social reproduction of meaning, the repetition and transformation of "local knowledge," and on the social effects of those processes.<sup>6</sup> The community of a living rumor—its authors and audience—outlines its boundaries as it echoes through times. To speak, hear, and repeat such messages is to participate in a rumor's community: the rumor of the colonized is an inclusive, democratic form of communication.

A rumor does more, though, than create a community of shared knowledge. It also breathes life into a community of interpretation, a particular vantage point on a colonial situation.<sup>7</sup> Implicit within rumor is a distrust of colonizers and local elites. Instead, the community of interpretation called into motion by rumor grounds itself within shared experiences, interpreted through a common repertoire, maintained and nurtured as a basis for navigating the collisions, collusions, and traumas of colonialism. In this way, rumors can provide historians access to an anticolonial politics, whose organizational forms emerge from the daily life of colonized people.<sup>8</sup>

Rumors as they appear in colonial archives often share more than a critique of colonial power; they also outline a field of possible responses. Here, again, the boundaries of a rumor's community become significant.<sup>9</sup> Shared knowledge and planned response must be guarded and policed, lest they fall into the hands of those who collude with the agents of colonial coercion. Hence, the repeated appearances of rumors in the archives of colonialism, in which colonial bureaucrats and corporate and military authorities see their work as rooting out rumors and preempting assaults on their power and reason. Rumors appear in the colonial archive laden with fear and anxiety, with the awareness that the antiseptic face of colonial authority is only maintained through a constant escalation of violence, an overtly aggressive and nervous stance.<sup>10</sup>

Rumors in settler colonial situations are distinct from the sweeping outline rendered above. Rumor is usually taken to provide access to the voices of the colonized, the people, or the masses; in settler colonial situations, rumors may have played an important function in delineating and substantiating the claims and contours of a colonialist identity, speaking to the historian of settler nationalism with a sort of ancestral voice.<sup>11</sup> In nineteenth-century Nevada Territory, rumors played just such a role. These were communities that took their founding impulse in rumors of precious metals, information shared through informal networks alongside government reports and mass media. Until the development and expansion of a continental telegraph network, information about Indians, in particular, passed through newspaper

exchanges that reprinted information without attribution, often contradictory, and couched in speculation and rumor.<sup>12</sup> Terry Knopf described functional interpretations of rumors: “Rumors . . . explain what is not clear, provide details, answer questions, aid in decision-making and, above all, relieve collective tension.”<sup>13</sup> These rumors were, at the same time, important circuits for the reproduction of paranoid fantasies of racial supplantation, whether by Indigenous nations, racial aliens, or others.<sup>14</sup> Rumor was the flame that heated the melting pot.<sup>15</sup>

To claim membership in the nascent community of late nineteenth-century Nevada was to claim participation as audience and co-author of the constitutive rumors of the community. Across language, cultures, and histories of migration and settlement, rumors forged a community of interpretation among those who came to call themselves “Nevadans” and “Americans.” The rumors that spread within this community, preserved in its archives, record the perspectives shared in the community, and its interpretation of a common situation. We might follow Tamotsu Shibutani’s analysis of rumor as a collective transaction, one involving a division of labor that works to settle on a shared interpretation of events, “a collective formation that arises in the collaboration of many.”<sup>16</sup> This community of interpretation has an afterlife in the historiography of continental imperialism that covers rumor’s ideological birthmarks in the costume of dispassionate fact.<sup>17</sup> Gary Fine and Patricia Turner remind us: “What people believe is true reflects how they perceive themselves, their associates, and the conditions under which they live.”<sup>18</sup> With no particular point of origin, spreading through official and informal means, elaborated upon and improvised through repetition and reinterpretation, the rumors that grounded Nevadan settlers in place lent themselves to a sort of democratic possibility, a shared claim to ownership that could simultaneously allow for and preserve hierarchy and social difference within the community, while delineating boundaries and borders for who was included. Ralph Rosnow and Gary Fine argued that rumors are most often fueled by “a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure.”<sup>19</sup>

To participate in the political trappings of Nevadan society—to vote, to claim rights in property or in court—is, then, to participate in the rumor of countersovereignty, the absurd claim that has to be continually repeated in order to enfold itself in a shroud of legitimacy, beyond the threat of violence which lingers in the silence following its utterance. Rumor manifests here as a form of collective problem-solving, the problems being: the prior occupancy and ongoing existence of Indigenous communities, and the social reproduction

of imported labor.<sup>20</sup> In Paiute histories, this threat was often realized in catastrophic violence inflicted by whites upon Paiute communities, and settlers' rumors of countersovereignty played a part in this.<sup>21</sup> This repetition, moreover, is about much more than an interpretation or a story. It is the foundation of a set of policies, of a way of acting, couched in invasion and occupation.<sup>22</sup> Rumor thrives in situations of war and politics, those constitutive elements of countersovereignty.<sup>23</sup> What Knopf described, of rumor's function in another context, is applicable here: "rumors are not only a refinement and crystallization of hostile beliefs, but a realization of them as well—a confirmation by 'reality'—reality as perceived by the group of people involved."<sup>24</sup>

A critical historiography of continental imperialism would necessarily participate in rumor control rather than rumor interpretation—rumor control that is grounded in the authority, not of the empirical fact of the colonial expert, but of Indigenous nations. This critical historiography would refuse its function as part of the communication channels and institutional channels of the rumor community.<sup>25</sup> It would turn away from the standards of evidence that shape the rumor community.<sup>26</sup>

An anticolonial approach to U. S. history calls for rumor control as one of its contributions. Rumors of countersovereignty, themselves, emerge at the very intersection of colonialism and historiography.<sup>27</sup> Like all rumors, they are couched in nonnormative evidence. Claims of countersovereignty made through the repetition and dispersion of rumors, masquerading as empirical fact, deviate from the experiential memories of Paiutes who controlled their territory.<sup>28</sup> Rumors raise questions of the competence and trustworthiness of sources, questions central to empiricist approaches to telling history, which often mask the violence patchily recorded and enacted in archives of countersovereignty.<sup>29</sup> Hence, in the folklore of the settler community, we see moments of origin in contact, fantasies of Indigenous disappearance, and paranoia about invasion and displacement from the South or the West, from those who cannot share entirely in the authorship or reception of the rumor of countersovereignty.

Rumor takes its place, in the Nevada / U. S. colonial order, as part of a speculative counterpoint, trumpeting its melody amidst the euphonic pap of colonial society. This was a community, after all, founded in speculation, in the feverish futurity of gold rush. Colonists arrived in the region and scanned riverbeds and ledges, imagining likely sites to tap a vein, strike a lode. Theirs was an extractive social order. The landscape, and the people on it, were insignificant or irrelevant to their dreams and plans. Stories circulated about what

kind of place was more likely to produce gold or silver, or about poor miners who struck it rich, fueling a shared community, directing and shaping desires, cohering into collective speculations on the possibilities contained in the land. In the speculative milieu of Nevada mining society, rumors were an example of talk that had actual value.<sup>30</sup>

Speculation also arose through relations and management of risk among the colonists' community, and the Paiutes it sought to displace. In the months following the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859, the white population in the vicinity swelled from 200 to 6,000.<sup>31</sup> Because of the nature of the gold and silver deposits in the region, mining relied on mechanization, which lent itself to concentration of production in mining corporations, and reliance on financial investments from San Francisco and New York.<sup>32</sup> The risks that the colonists faced were spread unevenly across their community, and these risks were often displaced onto Paiutes and other Native communities in the area, where they took material form as impoverishment, hunger, and violence.

Paying so little heed to Paiutes' productive work that created and nurtured the necessities for life, the colonialist community of rumor turned ravenously on the landscape, pulling out stands of trees, diverting streams, hunting and fishing the waters and land clean of fish and game animals.<sup>33</sup> The community of rumor radically reshaped the landscape of Paiute life. Those trees were vital sources of piñons, those streams and hills sources of meat and fish.<sup>34</sup> Risks arising from industrial development were socialized outward, displaced onto Indigenous nations, and settler survival was ensured by the increasing precariousness of Paiute individual and collective life.

Indian Bureau census records of Paiutes themselves read as speculative estimates of population by gender, age group, and willingness to work for wages, alongside estimates of commodities, which list items by kind, dimensions, and number. Although colonizers obsessed over census-making in order to collect, organize, and deploy "facts" toward extending and maintaining colonial rule, these records are based less on empirical fact than on conjecture. The availability of commodities at certain prices, at specific times, mirrors conjectures about the size and makeup of Paiute communities, fixing them in time and place, and recording their receptiveness to capital. Interest in wage labor and "industriousness" were key forms of information recorded on these census forms.<sup>35</sup> The political economy of colonialist rumor in Nevada has shaped the historiography of the region, producing empiricist history grounded in rumors masquerading as facts. This is especially the case when it comes to seeming knowledge and expertise about Native peoples.

Recapitulating rumors as facts, historians and their audiences assume membership in the rumor community, breathing new life into the rumor of countersovereignty with each variation, with each retelling. What historical actors saw clearly as nakedly political claims, as stories of justification after the fact, subsequent readers take for facts, for the whole story. It is in this small way that rumors of Chinese and Paiute interactions recorded in the archives of nineteenth-century Nevada might take on a broader significance. These particular rumors expose the broader workings of the colonial archive, of the political claim trumpeted by the faceless reporters, territorial legislators, journalists, and corporate leaders who compiled these records in the heat of the moment, or with the ruminative remove of some months or years. This is the claim of countersovereignty. In these rumored interactions between Paiutes and Chinese people, the function of the colonial archive, and the historiography that proceeds from it, is the prose of countersovereignty.

In its form of address, its mode of authorship and transmission, and its content, the prose of countersovereignty orients itself toward delegitimizing Indigenous modes of relationship and solidifying a colonial sovereignty unmoored from them. Its genres are well known: Indigenous disappearance, social evolution, and the inevitability of the bourgeois political economic order. It works seductively, enticing listeners to participate in its founding fictions, to seek redress in the rights and recognition which it delegates, rights and recognition that, as they are based on a foundation of rumor, can be swiftly and capriciously revoked or amended once they are granted.

It is this prose of countersovereignty that is visible in the archival appearances of interactions between Paiutes and Chinese people in nineteenth-century Nevada Territory. It is the record of these groups embalmed in the pages of history, named as disappearing natives on the one hand, and threatening aliens on the other, that delineates the space in between: the rumor community of countersovereignty, the colonialists who naturalize their history and presence on the land. In the rumors that record interactions across these communities, this legitimacy, this presence that refuses to provide an explanation for itself, that scoffs at any request for an explanation, frays and unravels, underscoring the institutions and ideas of Nevada and the United States as not native, but alien; not natural, but reproduced through colonialism.

The rumor that began this essay—Charles Crocker reporting that Paiute stories dissuaded Chinese desires to work on the Central Pacific Railroad in Paiute territory—appears at a junction in the tracks of corporate and immigration policy, in questions of access to and control over racially marked land and

labor. The Central Pacific Railroad embodied the large-scale processes that brought Paiutes and Chinese workers into contact with each other. Responsible for the western leg of the transcontinental railroad, the Central Pacific held a charter from the state of California, and was fueled by Congressional land grants and railroad rights-of-way. Passing through the southern edge of the Pyramid Lake Reservation, for example, the Central Pacific augured a controversy over reservation boundaries that remained unresolved for over a decade.<sup>36</sup> Central Pacific directors struck an agreement (they referred to it as a “treaty”) with Paiutes that allowed them to ride atop trains and flatbed railcars, free of charge.<sup>37</sup> Paiutes adapted railroad mobility to meet their own needs, riding trains to places important to them, to seek wage labor, and to meet in social gatherings.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, this travel appears in Indian Bureau archives, in instances where agents attempted to control the movements of starving Paiutes and Shoshones seeking food in towns along the railroad line, or preventing the movement of people from the Walker River Reservation after a smallpox outbreak, in order to prevent the spread of the disease to nearby towns.<sup>39</sup>

As the Central Pacific moved incrementally through the Sierra Nevada, Chinese workers composed the majority of its workforce. The use of Chinese labor was integral to the business plans of the Central Pacific directors. This is consistently clear in the speculative plans that the directors laid for railroad production, in their ongoing efforts to recruit Chinese workers in California and in southern China, and especially in their responses to the Chinese workers’ strike of July 1867. For their part, railroad labor brought Chinese workers far from the established centers of the California Chinese community in San Francisco, Stockton, and Marysville. Chinese merchants followed workers, selling provisions, contracting, and managing work gangs.<sup>40</sup>

What to make of Crocker’s story? The story shifts attention from the abuses of the Central Pacific Railroad, which led the workers to strike. Moreover, it provides a convenient shift of attention away, a clearing of the conscience, from the brutal means of breaking the strike, when the Central Pacific managers colluded with Chinese merchants who supplied food to the work camps, to prevent food from going to the camps until the workers could be starved into submission. The Central Pacific would likely have been reluctant to hire Chinese workers in the same numbers after they struck once, and especially after the most grueling part of construction, the summit tunnel, was completed. Crocker provided this improbable explanation less than a year after he and his managers broke the strike. Did he invoke this story

rather than explain the construction managers' distaste for Chinese labor, now a liability after the most difficult terrain was traversed, after the cost of their labor increased? The bilious irony is that construction proceeded much more quickly and easily, with less loss of life and exposure to harsh winter conditions, once the summit tunnel was complete. Knowledge of these rumors drew its community into relations of insiderdom and control, carefully managed and concentrated, of the railroad production process.

Paiutes may have had their own reasons for circulating these stories among Chinese workers, as a calculated attempt to delay railroad construction through their territory, or perhaps in an attempt to open space for their own employment. They were, by this time, involved in the mining economy of the region as wage laborers. If this was the case, they may have improvised stories to the moment. Perhaps Paiutes fed these stories to Chinese workers in an effort to derail the smooth progress of railroad construction through their land. It is interesting to note that after the Donner Party passed through their land, Paiutes associated whites with cannibalism.<sup>41</sup>

The Chinese workers may have had their own reasons for telling such stories. Why fear giant cannibals elsewhere, when Chinese workers were already caught in the ravenous maws of the Central Pacific Railroad Company? Perhaps they concocted this story in order to leave difficult work conditions by subterfuge, after direct confrontation failed to succeed.<sup>42</sup> Facing the devastation of a broken strike, they may simply not have had the collective morale to continue working under such abusive and risky conditions. A reluctance to move further away from the Pacific Coast and its community institutions, further away from more direct connections to their home communities in Guangdong, might have provided another motive. Significantly, one of their strike demands was the right to leave work when they wished, and telling these stories, explaining or feigning the depth of their fears, might have been a way to wrest this right from their bosses, even after their strike was broken.

Ultimately, an empirical, settled explanation of this story is impossible for the historian. Working with these stories, the historian is drawn into the rumor community, which naturalizes exploitation of Chinese labor and expropriation of Paiute modes of relationship. As such, this record operates as the prose of countersovereignty. For an anticolonial historiography, this rumor is significant, not for revealing limits to the power of railroad capitalists, or those capitalists' ability to shift the blame for firing Chinese workers. Rather, this rumor underscores the ongoing process of displacing anxieties

about the unfinished and incomplete colonial project that underlays capitalism in North America. Crocker invoked a rumor that Paiutes may have passed through Chinese work camps near the Sierra Nevada summit tunnel in the spring and summer of 1867, and the two groups of people communicated with each other in language and idioms they both understood, to answer questions about railroad production and railroad profits.

In a second case, archaeologists have excavated what they identify as Chinese medicinal vials from a historic late nineteenth-century Paiute campsite in the Mono Basin.<sup>43</sup> This particular finding, so material and concrete in itself, raises questions about the objects, their use and meaning, and their distribution. Holding such a tangible object in hand, the scholar can only ask intelligent questions, and answer them with intangible, speculative answers. The historiography of continental imperialism follows the methodological boundary lines of archaeology in this instance.<sup>44</sup> These questions and answers, the meanings we ascribe to these objects, are the prose of countersovereignty.

This prose works by presenting presumptions as certainties, arriving at plausible stories that exclude other perspectives, other possible trajectories of power and authority, and flatter the coherence of a trajectory of countersovereignty. If the Mono Basin was not *terra nullius*, then it was perhaps a place without history. The spatial bias of archaeologists resonates in sympathy with the temporal bias of national (colonial) historians, scribes of countersovereignty who situate objects within cause-and-effect chains foreordained to end in the plenary power doctrine.<sup>45</sup> It is a short step from here to what Ranajit Guha has exposed as “geography by history.”<sup>46</sup>

Instead of telling a story, these vials raise a host of questions that cannot be answered. These unanswered questions animate the prose of countersovereignty. Paiutes interacted with Chinese workers whose work camps passed through their lands, and with Chinese workers and merchants in the towns and cities that were built through their lands. Some Paiutes, for example, bought opium from Chinese merchants to seek some relief from hard labor.<sup>47</sup> Glass collectors and archaeologists have narrowed down the particular qualities and identifying characteristics of the glass bottles typically used to store Chinese medicines, as a way to access the history of Chinese people in Virginia City.<sup>48</sup> However, we have no certainty that Paiutes received these bottles directly from Chinese people, nor about what was stored inside the bottles and what those materials were used for.<sup>49</sup>

What does this hint of interaction between these two communities—one bearing the full brunt of a virulent, violent process of colonization, the other

existing at the edge of labor importation, racist violence, and surveillance—tell us about the prose of countersovereignty, about the invention and justification of countersovereignty from the echoing fragments of a shabby melody? Can these objects help us understand the maintenance of that fiction standing as prose through the consolidation of colonial control in the region, from the late nineteenth century to the present?

These are unanswered questions, and the answers proffered draw their speakers and audience into the rumor community of countersovereignty. The unanswerability of these questions is itself a product of colonialism, and of the evasions that colonized and racialized communities necessarily made in order to sustain themselves. Indian Bureau authorities took a particularly strong stand against Paiute medical practices and practitioners, and attempted to supplant them with white nurses and doctors, a policy that only intensified in the early twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> Paiutes, themselves, turned to their own medicinal knowledge to treat smallpox, and other new diseases introduced by colonists.<sup>51</sup> Where the settler ear turns toward the objects and boundary lines that justify its claims to control, these medicinal vials are objects that speak other languages, intone other histories. The rumor community of countersovereignty is unable to hear these histories clearly. The colored glass of the vials refracts and distorts a history that looks clear at first glance.

Pointing neither to a pristine prehistory before the arrival of whites on Paiute land, nor to an unvarnished modernity organized under the gears of State and Market, these medicinal vials instead point to other possibilities, of material and cultural exchange that emerged out of histories of colonialism and capitalism, but that developed independently of it. Can colonizers acknowledge themselves as peripheral in their own stories, in their own rumors?

Another rumor of Paiute interactions with Chinese people on their lands finds its general location in cemeteries. These stories circulated, most often, through that exemplary genre of the rumor community, the settler memoir. It is striking that in these memoirs, Paiutes and Chinese are held aside from other social groups and social markings, organized under their own chapter headings, ethnographic asides from the telos of the main story. The two groups converge, most often in these memoirs, in cemetery scenes, which might constitute a stock pattern in the rumor of countersovereignty, so concerned with establishing its preeminence over what it has displaced, so anxious about what might displace it. In these cemeteries, spirits of the past and portents of the future haunt the prose of countersovereignty.

These stories are most often set in Chinese cemeteries. They begin with a break from the general narrative, often a coming-of-age story, or a narrative of migration and settlement, to provide some ethnographic details on Chinese burial practices and customs, which also provide details on Chinese communities in the area. These are some of the only places in these memoirs where Chinese people appear independent of their connections to whites.

It is when the portrayals turn to food, in conjunction with burials, that Paiutes enter the narrative, tricking superstitious Chinese mourners by feasting on the food left at graves.<sup>52</sup> The white narrator, and implicitly, the white audience, is here privy to the entire exchange from a position of amused detachment.<sup>53</sup> Insulated from the ravages of hunger caused by their colonial presence, on solid ground in their ability to command a hegemony of burial practices, of ways of relating to the dead, the rumor community establishes itself, in part, by looking at other people's dead, at other people's activities at cemeteries.<sup>54</sup> Portraying these interactions between Chinese mourners and Paiutes through comic vignettes, the rumor community also displaces other possibilities that could arise, of the recovery or production of a common sense of humanity through funerary ceremonies, of the sort that Vincent Brown described among Black mourners in Jamaican slave society.<sup>55</sup> Northern Paiute histories cut against these comic stories, with memories of white people robbing Paiute graves.<sup>56</sup> Chinese people are playing dead here, continuing to be foreign even after their death. The rice left on their graves, which Paiutes spit away in disgust, exemplifies their alienness to the landscape. Paiutes, on the other hand, figuratively eat the dead. Holdovers, relics from a time that pre-dates the rumor community, theirs is a prehistory that continues only at the margins of life and death.

At the same time, both Paiutes and Chinese people exemplify anxieties of the replacers being themselves replaced in the rumor community in these anecdotes. Chinese people, buried in the ground and building their own cemeteries, might supersede here the claims of whites, who populated the hills and valleys with their own dead as part of their process of staking a claim of control and ownership. In this way, the Chinese dead haunt white racial control of colonial space, for example, in regulations that restricted Chinese miners to specific places.<sup>57</sup> The structure of the rumor—its nervous repetition, its focus on comic details and displacement, its suggestion of the dispassionate observer—itsself records an anxiety about the sanctity of the colonial order.

Kalpana Sheshadri has written that “all comic stories about natives carry within them the anxious joke of Whiteness.” In her argument, comedy

functions in colonial contexts to veil anxieties and ambivalences of colonial whiteness.<sup>58</sup> This is apparent with the focus on Chinese spirits, whose graves are stark reminders of nightmare future possibilities of racial invasion and supplantation. Moreover, Paiute people continued to survive and maintain their collective lives against the violence of colonization. Unassimilated into the ceremonial mores of Christianity or the prerogatives of bourgeois rationality, they refused to be controlled by others. As Paiutes survived the advent of colonialism, they laid claim to the dead who were buried in their land. There is an anxiety about the coherence of the prose of countersovereignty in the face of these basic realities.

One more instance of Paiute and Chinese interactions recorded in the archive of continental imperialism outlines the possibility of a political encounter, the participation of Paiute men and women in anti-Chinese rallies in Nevada Territory during the 1870s and 1880s. Paiute and Chinese conflicts over the bottom rungs of the racial division of labor spilled into fuller archival view, providing some context to the larger political economy of Nevada society during this period, and the positions of Paiutes and Chinese people within it. Paiutes who marched in these rallies carried placards and signs that repeated the demands and slogans of anti-Chinese whites in the area. Namely, that Chinese workers drove down the wages of working men, and degraded the status and position of (working) women. Paiutes took up the slogans of white nativist politics. They decried Chinese workers for driving down wages and siphoning money to China. They participated in white protests that culminated in physical violence and threats of massacre.<sup>59</sup> Despite the appearance of repetition and engagement, these charges and accusations, as uttered by Paiutes, carried somewhat different meanings than those uttered by white townspeople and city dwellers.

Most of the Paiute conflicts with Chinese men were over access to resources and to waged labor. For example, a group of former Chinese railroad workers was allowed to live in the vicinity of Winnemucca Lake, sustaining themselves by fishing, until they started selling the fish to local whites, thereby undercutting the Paiute fish trade.<sup>60</sup> Paiute men competed with Chinese men during this period of Nevada history in two primary forms of waged work. The first was teamstering. Men from both communities competed to transport goods via wagon and mules. For Paiute men, this often involved working for the Indian Office.<sup>61</sup> The second was competition over lumber; specifically, the stumps of trees that had been felled by earlier rounds of settlement, which had been used up for construction material and heating fuel. After this round

of development, the hills had been largely stripped clean of trees.<sup>62</sup> Indian agents saw lumber as a key commodity, not only as a possible source of wage labor for Paiute men, but also as a necessary resource in building the physical plant of Paiute reservations: agency buildings and homes for reservation residents. This dovetailed neatly with the interests of Nevada settlers in economic development, using federal appropriations to Paiutes as a subsidy for colonial development. In 1863, James Nye, governor and superintendent of Indian affairs in Nevada, wrote to the secretary of the interior reporting on plans to use annuities to establish a sawmill and begin lumber production on the Truckee River Reserve, which would be available for settlers to use.<sup>63</sup>

As one of the largest corporations in the area, the Central Pacific Railroad attempted to claim control of vital timber resources on Paiute land. The Central Pacific subcontracted with local concerns to provide wood for the railroad. For example, the company contracted with J. B. Chinn, a Nevada settler, for 150 cords of pinewood bolts in 1869.<sup>64</sup> It is unclear who cut and processed the wood, but this was the kind of wage labor—short-term piecework contracts for unskilled, strenuous labor—that Paiute men turned to for survival during these years. Once the railroad was built, groups of Paiutes built encampments near the tracks, and significant numbers of Paiute men found employment with the railroad company.<sup>65</sup>

Claims on Paiute lumber were important to Central Pacific Railroad Company business strategies. According to the surveyed line of the track, the Central Pacific would pass through the southern part of the reservation, which held most of the valuable timber and agricultural land within its boundaries. Railroad claims to Paiute timber were also part of Indian policy. As T. T. Dwight, superintendent of Indian affairs, explained to the commissioner of Indian affairs, “The rapid construction of the Pacific Railroad running as it will directly through these reservations, will necessarily consume the greater portion of the timber as well as scatter the Indians from their present locations.”<sup>66</sup> In 1868, the commissioner of Indian affairs notified the secretary of the interior of his support in opening the timber reserve on the Truckee River to Central Pacific grants.<sup>67</sup>

The railroad company and the Pyramid Lake Paiutes entered into a long-standing dispute on whose claim took legal precedence. The Central Pacific claimed lands on the Truckee River Reservation that gave access to the productive fisheries there, fisheries that were lucrative in the 1870s.<sup>68</sup> Land claims seamlessly blended with control over Chinese labor in the Central Pacific’s business plan. E. H. Derby, a booster for the Central Pacific, wrote in 1869,

“As respects ties, the line has great resources in the lumber of the Sierra Nevada. It can command Chinese labor and resort to the rolling mills of San Francisco, for the renewal of its rails.”<sup>69</sup> In this description, Chinese labor joined Paiute land as basic prerequisites for railroad construction. Paiutes, themselves, vanished from the company register and the historical record, buried in subcontracting schemes, or simply pushed aside in the seemingly bloodless conquest of private property.

Later railroad companies attempted to make their own claims on Paiute lands. Writing in support of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad Company’s application for a right-of-way through the Walker River Reservation in 1880, John Kincaid, then governor of Nevada, wrote:

The company desires the right of way through that reservation. I favor it for reasons above set forth and for the further reason that in my judgment, the Walker Lake reservation is productive of no especial benefit to the Indians.

You are aware that in our State the proportion of agricultural land is very limited. The Walker and Pyramid Lake reservations cover a very considerable portion of our available land in that direction. The close proximity of railroads make their reservations simply loafing places for the Indians. They go there when annuities are paid only, the balance of their time is spent in living upon the whites along the lines of railway, of course there are exceptions, a good many of the Piutes prefer to live as the whites do by farming, notably at Big Meadows, Humboldt Co, the proportion of this class to the whole tribe is small . . . I believe the entire system of Indian matters in this state should undergo a very thorough reformation . . .

The extension of the V. and T.R.R. south will certainly open up a very important mining region, besides bringing into market the product of Mason and other agricultural valleys contiguous to, and adjoining the Walker Lake Reservation, and I consider that any judicious aid rendered by the Government of our state will be wise policy.<sup>70</sup>

The railroad, according to the governor’s argument, enabled the modernization and tilling of Nevada soil for the fertile fruits of capital. Paiute sovereignty, as recognized by the federal government, stood as an impediment to this process, an impediment, in his logic, for both colonists and Paiutes alike. A few months later, James Spencer, the agent at Pyramid Lake, wrote to the commissioner of Indian affairs on behalf of Walker River Paiutes, inquiring after \$750 pledged by the railroad company in a contract made with the community. According to Spencer, “They distinctly understand that they are to have free rides for themselves, their fish, game, &c., and though it is not stated in the contract, being as I understand an after-thought, it was also

verbally agreed that all government supplies for the Indians should be transported free over that road.”<sup>71</sup> He wrote this during a period of rank destitution and struggle for food and shelter. Spencer had reported, just two months before, “There is now a great scarcity of food among these Indians and a greater scarcity yet to come.”<sup>72</sup>

For adult Paiutes, wage labor was an important means of ensuring the survival and maintenance of their communities. For Paiute men, digging up the roots of the old, massive trees, and cutting and stacking them into bundles of firewood, was an important source of income, especially because it was grueling, backbreaking work that few others were willing to do, except, that is, for Chinese men.<sup>73</sup> For Paiutes, this was partly a question of control over resources, with Chinese workers turning the refuse of colonization, such as the roots of piñons, which had provided a basic food source for Paiutes before colonists tore the trees down in their search for heating fuel, into commodities of some meager value. The conflict did not preclude other kinds of exchange, with Chinese merchants selling alcohol and opium to Paiutes, in an uncanny aftershock of the British opium trade.<sup>74</sup> The exchange drew the attention of local authorities, who attempted to manage and police both communities. In April of 1866, H. G. Parker, superintendent of Indian affairs in Nevada, wrote to the commissioner of Indian affairs about a growing trade in gunpowder between Chinese merchants near Nevada towns and Paiutes who sought to head off colonists’ violence toward them. This was, again, based in rumor, as was Parker’s response. As he reported,

I could not prove the charge against any one or more of them in particular, because they all look so much alike it is almost impossible to tell one from another. I think however, I have succeeded in stopping this trade in future, though I have secured the assistance of detectives in order to apprehend them, and shall punish them severely if possible, in case I find they continue the practice.<sup>75</sup>

Many Paiute women, for their part, sought employment in the forms of domestic work and laundry work, which again was work that few whites in the area were willing to do.<sup>76</sup> This was feminized work, and white women in these jobs could garner comparatively higher wages than in other places. Paiute women gained reputations for themselves among employers as good workers, appropriate to their employers’ own needs and desires of station and status.<sup>77</sup> Chinese men, as a group, were the only group of men to cross gender lines and compete for this work.<sup>78</sup> They were employed as domestic workers,

as well as cooks in restaurants.<sup>79</sup> Their washhouses were centralized sites for washing, especially for poorer settlers.<sup>80</sup> Conflicts between male Chinese workers and Paiute men and women over wage labor were profitable, driving down wages and pushing the limits of wage labor subsistence for both groups.

Paiute men and women marching in anti-Chinese parades were participating in the settler order, but they were not assimilating into whiteness as the fantasies of Indian policymakers of the era would have it. Their actions were born out of commitments to the continuity of their communities and desires to stay on their lands, and they worked out strategies that would allow them to do so. Paiute critiques of the role of Chinese workers in making the conditions of life more difficult for them, then, bore a double-edge in the context of the white nativist movement. For here, “native” whites’ anxieties about the possibility of invasion and supplantation by Chinese people was exposed as an anxiety about the function of whiteness itself, in relationship to Paiute and other Native people in the area. White nativism was exposed as a claim of colonial control. In Virginia City, for example, Mary McNair Mathews listed the local secret societies: the Knights of Pythias, the Order of the Red Men, and Anti-Chinamen.<sup>81</sup> As John Higham argued about racial nativism, “The concept that the United States belongs in some special sense to the Anglo-Saxon ‘race’ offered an interpretation of the source of national greatness.”<sup>82</sup> Paiutes’ presence in nativist marches belied this interpretation. If Paiutes carried posters charging that “The Chinese Must Go!” then what of the whites they marched with?

In capital, the figures of Native and Alien were enfolded into a process that enabled the maintenance of communities and cultures through invasion, occupation, and importation, underscoring unresolved tensions of conquest and slavery that fueled the expansion of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth-century United States. This is apparent in the directors of the Central Pacific Railroad: proud abolitionists, who decried violence against Indigenous people in Nevada and California, whose own business plans rested on the racial exploitation of Chinese labor and on corporate inroads on Paiute sovereignty.<sup>83</sup>

In this process, interactions between Chinese and Paiutes were reduced to rumors. Instead of the triumphal procession of capital, pushing back the frontier to strike a path toward the riches of China, here was the labor of China moving eastward, engaging Indigenous people whose autonomy survived the enclosure of their land and lives. This rumor is a nightmare for U. S. continental imperialism. It cannot be resolved into fact, leaving loose threads in any attempt to relegate the history of conquest safely to the past.

The prose of countersovereignty, which is the history of the United States as a nation, remains, essentially, an unanswered question. Rumors constantly repeat with subtle variations, only to be answered in increasingly frustrated terms. The historian crafting narrative through the prose of countersovereignty will remain on frustrated terrain. For no matter how polished the horn, the tune remains defiantly forlorn. It can find no proper resolution, only endless deferrals. Emil Billeb, for example, relayed a visit to his San Francisco office by Sam Leon, a Chinese migrant, his unnamed Paiute wife, and their children.<sup>84</sup> This kernel only raises more questions. What brought them together? What were their names? How did they experience the city? Where did they go next?

How to control and contain the prose of countersovereignty, with its countless tongues and countless mouths, its voice of iron? We are on grounds here that Sharon Holland previously traversed: “Memory must be animated so that it can subvert the effects of its manipulation by the nation.”<sup>85</sup> Moving from a common frame of history, with its fossilized pretensions to truth grounded in colonial authority, we might imagine histories that are transient, always at play in a field of changing politics, shifting emphasis from evidence to interpretation, from the historian who intones, to an audience that calls up and invokes histories in order to more fully critique their present, and imagine their future.