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“yellow crowfoot in the pond, not lotus, not lily”: Mapping the River, Mapping Voices

by Pamela J. Rader

In the eponymous poem from Marilyn Chin’s collection, *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* (1994), the speakers’ and river’s movements trace the histories of ancestors across landscapes of time and space. The voice acts as a kind of emigrant between various “I” personas, geographical and historical references, and human and non-human agents. Throughout this poem, different voices narrate the human body’s movements to mimic the meandering flow of rivers and non-human agents which also speak. Chin’s poem invites readers to consider how, the human presence does not anthropomorphize, but imitates the non-human. In teaching this poem to undergraduates, in an Asian American literature course, I examine how an ecocritical lens offers an alternative, yet enriching, reading of this lyrical landscape poem. Timothy Clark’s primer on “literature and the environment” reminds us that the ecocritical lens “challenges inherited modes of thought and analysis” and raises questions about humans’ relationship to nature (4). In the classroom, I challenge my students to consider poetry’s sonorous qualities to include the non-human.

In their criticism of this poem, several scholars examine the multilayered, hybrid “I.” For instance, John Gery in his 2001 article, “‘Mocking my own ripeness’: Authenticity, Heritage, and Self-erasure in the Poetry of Marilyn Chin,” reads Chin in light of Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s ideas of self-erasure, where the “I” of Chin’s poems expresses multiple identities. While the importance of the self as both text and subject engaged in acts of translation (and transgressions) from body to page is not refuted, the ecocritical lens, or environmental criticism, allows for another aperture for reading the culturally-shaped self in an alternatively more universal light. Conscious of the societal and cultural worlds of race, ethnicity, gender, language, and class we inhabit, humans might lose sight that we share our natural environments with other non-human beings. Citing Calvin Bedient’s December 1998 interview with Marilyn Chin in *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Gery highlights the poet’s ideas that “[t]he ‘I’ in

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[her] poems has multiple layers; the 'I' always represents something greater than the self" and "is a direct rebellion against what [Chin] has learned in the workshop days" (qtd. in Gery 29). Furthermore, in her 2006 book, *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry*, which builds on her 2002 article, Xiojing Zhou expounds on the poet's idea of the "self as a frontier [...] [which] must involve reinventing the lyric I and rearticulating a self-other relationship that shapes the poetic voice and form" (76). While Gery's readings focus on the multilayered speaker's self-effacement and Zhou's study grants attention to what she calls "hybridizing Eurocentric lyric traditions with Asian and African elements" (76) of the I, this reader argues that more than the posited self-effacing and transformed American lyric, Chin's many "I-s" incorporate the non-human elements of time, ancestral legacies, and the organic world. So, if the culturally shaped human voices in Chin's poem enter in unique dialogues with the natural world, this approach explores Clark's notion that ecocriticism "does not take the human cultural sphere as its sole point of reference and context" (6).

Indisputable are Chin's diverse canonical influences and the prominence of the lyrical I. Zhou reads the poem's first I as the voice of an imperial consort whose feet are bound and must cautiously make her way down garden steps. Yet while rooted in a time when feet are bound, the woman describes the garden's landmarks and asks questions women, specifically emigrant or Asian American women, might still ask today. However, studies of this poem, specifically its opening lines, have not given adequate consideration to the scaffolding of those influences, which mirrors the terraced landscapes of imperial gardens. First, "the phoenix gone, the terrace empty" originates in the writing of Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Bai/LiPo; and the title reappears in the poem's final quatrain. In the interstitial space, between the poem's title and the poem itself, a line appears in Chinese subtitled with Chin's English translation to read: "The river flows without ceasing." While we know that the original text alludes to a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) gardener's notes Chin read at the Tai-Chung University library in Taiwan, the gardener's notation emphasizes continuance, which counters the absence and emptiness of the preceding line, the Li Po title. The title in translation and the bilingual epigraph set up the poem's cultural and literary inheritances across dynasties (human time), translation acts, social class, and the Pacific Ocean. To complicate matters further, I read the influence of the African American call and response tradition in the poem's title, epigraph, and first line, "Shallow river, shallow river." Following this dialogic tradition, Chin's opening line posits a response to the imperial gardener's note, or call, about the nature of rivers and their sustained movement and ever-changing depths.

The paradox of movement is expressed throughout the poem's eleven strophes. The river is mentioned in the poem's opening line, "Shallow river, shallow river," and seemingly disappears until the pond is announced in the second to last line by the enigmatic "yellow crowfoot in the pond" (Chin 51). While the shallow river at the poem's invocation might recede into the background, the river's presence is reinstated throughout the poem in the undulating rhythms, which echo the flow of a river. Others have argued the multi-layered voices of the lyrical I map the poem's movement, but less notice has been given to the bodily language of living beings. Here, I turn to David Abram who draws on Merleau-Ponty's ideas about language and challenges the notion that language "remains the special provenance of the human species" (78). In his seminal and controversial text, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram contends that "[a]s we ourselves dwell and move within language, so, ultimately, do the other animals and animate things of the world; if we do not notice them there, it is only because language has forgotten its expressive depths" (85). I propose to read the poem's prosody as an affective, polyvocal, inter-specie song.

First, music is often described in movements and tempo; human language often describes or evokes the musicality of both human and non-human agents. The poem's form foregrounds, as Zhou notes, movement through the consort's walking and the river's flow; it does allude to the natural world sustained by the water, but controlled by humans. For instance, I find that terraced gardens and the tradition of imperial gardens can be read contrapuntally with the tradition of foot binding. In both practices humans seek to change natural inclinations—of the landscape and of human foot growth. The movement "past" these landmarks of the "courtyard," "mulberries," "Bodhi tree," and "Buddha" is possible in the repetition of three lines that open with "past the" to simulate a movement from the terrace stairs and courtyards of human inhabitants to the middle ground of the mulberries and pilgrims' pathways to Buddha's shrine. Words mimic steps. Twice, the speaking consort employs "gingerly" coupled with "quietly" and "softly" to describe her walking the stairs through the garden, lending credence to her feet as bound. Yet, the first strophe concludes with the implied, affectionate contact between the feet and the level stones and in the softer, repeated "s" and "t" sounds:

In the rock garden
 the flagstones
 caress my feet,
 kiss them tenderly. (Chin 46)

I read the controlled environment of the terrace gardens as an interstitial space between the manicured, controlled gardens and the wildness of the speaker to imagine the bare feet kissed by smoothed stone. The lines move from steps of caution and care to an intimate, gentle caress from the natural world affected through sounds.

While sounds and syntax collaborate to encourage language and its human significance in conveying meaning, in the realm of poetry, affective language can be vocative and imitative. For example, Chin's poem's eleven rhetorical questions reinforce again the imagined audience and listeners. Three questions comprise the second stanza and are most likely posed by the foot-bound persona of the opening strophe. Unanswered, these inquiries and challenges call attention to the inadequacies of human language to create meaning and to draw attention to the non-human agents' affective languages. Furthermore, as read in the second strophe, the questions' inflections mimic the river's undulations and the tiered garden stairs.

In employing a rhetoric of music, the poem's refrains carry the movement of the water and the feet across intergenerational time and terrains. The poem's opening line is a repetition that forecasts the refrains to come in italics. In the third strophe, "*They shall come, they shall come, for our tithes*" points to the parents' class-related fears of not having the funds to cover the taxes and suggests the financial burden of daughters (47-48). While the "they" of the lines is an ambiguous entity, it is clear that "they" represent an outside, societal presence that interrupts the familial space. For the strophe moves away from the "water-bison" parents who discuss the girl's future in "a fulcrum/ of angry gestures" and toward the poet-persona's grandparents. The purported fearful chants of the parents migrate to the grandmother's "lullaby/in an ancient falsetto" (48). The grand-mother's shrill voice echoes a tradition of ancient song not unlike birdsong. But, instead of lulling the speaker to sleep, readers then imagine the elder's voice in falsetto as a disquieting, alarming blue jay that aims to teach the granddaughter the skies' lesson and warning, "*In the east, a pink sash, a girl has run away from her mother*" (48). Here, the skies dictate a fear of keeping daughters chaste and close by. Proverbs and epigrams are cross-culturally rooted in the natural world and reveal the human desire for meaning and order through interpreting the perceived signs, or rather the perceived language of the natural world.

The fifth strophe follows the narrative about a daughter's judgment on her gambler father, which is countered by the aunt's sympathetic depiction of the father as a beaten, miserable ox-like figure. Reverberating with the chants and prayer to Buddha, critics like Zhou read the lines that follow as an absolution,

Amaduofu, amaduofu—
 child, child
 they cried
 “Ten thousand years of history and you have come to this.
 Four thousand years of tutelage and you have come to this!” (50)

“They” are the ancestors who express disappointment in the emigrant female speaker and in her father by underscoring human time and the timelessness of the older generation’s expectations. However, the poet’s use of repetition not only reinforces the lyrical I and its larger depiction of self, but it underscores the prosody of the affective language; Abram’s reading of language underscores the corporeal, “[o]nly if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world” (Abram 89, original in italics).

Diction creates vocative movements between the poem’s non-human and human bodies. For instance, the second stanza celebrates the melodious, softer “L” sound in the line breaks used in its second question:

Whose silence
 undulates
 a millennium
 of bells
 in which
 all of history
 shall wallow? (Chin 47)

The poem’s short line breaks highlight the euphony and softness of the “L” sound, mimicking the bells. The undulations of silence take form, and, in Chin’s poem, take on a sonorous quality to evoke wave-like movement of water that surges and swells. The river that seems absent is suggested in the poet’s wave-like euphonic inquiry. Next, history, compared to a mammal, shall wallow in the silence of clarion. The action of wallowing is one linked to non-human behavior; animals roll in mud or water, even dust, for comfort. In that same strophe, when the speaker’s “slow-moving” parents discuss her future, they are compared to mugwort plants, but then the speaker self-corrects and proclaims they are water bison (47). Through wading and rolling, wallowing mammals do not move to make progress in human terms but to gain relief or satisfaction. The human speaker, at this juncture, joins the amorphous past, or history and its legacies, with the flora and fauna whose existence is not value laden, but at once in and out of time.

While I have focused on the human songs that resonate throughout the poem's landscape, I encourage students to reflect on how the bird's song can be linked to the narrating human voices. In Chin's poem, birds work with the human language to remind readers of their presence in metaphor, symbolic language, and myths. Akin to the plum blossoms as "stock signifiers," the birds, too, can be read as instruments for the self-reflexive voice of the poem's various speakers (47). As Chin scholars have noted, her influences include classical Asian and European traditions as well as American influences. Moreover, the poem ebbs between the poet persona's Hong Kong heritage and references to her family's Americanization process. In the third strophe, a transition from the parents to the grand-parents occurs and develops images of fire, which abound as the poet's persona invokes her grandparents. The narrator specifically links human-made fire to her "itinerant tinker" grandfather who resides in Wanchai, in the north of Hong Kong Island (48). The granddaughter persona describes the grandfather in the context of a village with words like "bellows," "ember," "a kerosene lamp," "charred sweetness," and "the hills ablaze/with mayflies/and night-blooming jasmine" (48). From these images of fire, ash must follow, even if imagined. And from the Western tradition, also Chin's heritage, the eponymous and mythical phoenix rises from the ashes. In Chinese tradition, the phoenix, a bird of virtue, acts as a foil to the less virtuous behavior of the gambler father whose history follows and the Wanchai grandfather's history in flames. Finally, the image of the scavenger bird is invoked by the raven-haired grandfather, the legendary bridge of magpies in the ninth stanza, and the crowfoot of the eleventh and final stanza. Although these birds lack narrative agency as speakers in the poem, they do speak in the poem's symbolic prosody. The poet's use of repetition in the aforementioned lines remind readers to be listeners of the non-human. I would argue that repetition suggests the chatter of birds, particularly this genus, and the way humans tune out each other when words (or phrases) are repeated.

Again, the interrogative feminine voice weaves a consistent, challenging vocal thread throughout this poem and reappears in the ninth stanza, where we might see a vocative connection between mythos, the tradition of foot binding, and the constraints of human language. Here, the speaker asks to reconsider the limitations of human, male-dominated narratives:

Oh dead prince, Oh hateful love,
 shall we meet again
 on the bridge of magpies?
 Will you kiss me tenderly
 where arch meets toe meets ankle,

where dried blood warbles? (51)

The speaker here might be a royal consort whose bound feet bleed, or it may be a more contemporary revisionist “I” who challenges the mythical tale of the star-crossed lovers, as I would argue. Adopting an ancestral-like voice with the more contemporary, politicized interrogation, the speaker gives the foot and its blood a kind of agency to “warble” or sing, connoting a songbird.

The enigmatic italicized tenth strophe reads: “*Little bird, little bird/something escaping,/something escaping...*” and concludes with the ellipsis, eliciting the poem’s unanswered questions in its open ending (51). When read aloud, the repetition echoes a bird call. An interpolated speaker, who does not sound like the imperial consort or poetess personas, hints at the mythical but absent (or “gone”) bird of the poem’s title and final quatrain:

*The phoenix gone, the terrace empty.
Look, Mei Ling.
yellow crowfoot in the pond,
not lotus, not lily. (51)*

Moreover, the vocative is used to identify the poet-persona, Mei Ling, and to align her with the crow’s splayed feet. The crowfoot in the pond is neither lotus nor lily, but we are not told what it is. Silence follows. What can the readers or auditors infer? The poem’s daughter-poet persona has not been subjected to the tradition of foot binding where the lotus flower became the aesthetic trope for measuring the bound and broken foot. Lotus and lily flowers evoke paradise and death, respectively. Yet the poem allows its new world emigrant daughter to live somewhere in between the silence of unanswered human questions: of what is, what Mei Ling is, and what she can be.

In close readings with the class, we might conclude that the poem leaves us thinking not about the human Mei Ling, but about the images of the color yellow, the pond, and the unidentified flora. Furthermore, Chin’s poem engages sights and songs from the natural world, and it reminds us of literary traditions where the speaker recognizes that its complex, constructed self is not the epicenter of life. The ecocritical approach prompts us to “loafe” and to observe as Walt Whitman’s “I” might and to listen to human silence for the music in the natural world around us. As an inter-specie song, Chin’s poem asks its readers to consider the polyphony of tamed and untamed landscapes, fire, various animals, and the human animal.

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