



Zachary Ostraff

The Lyric Essay as a Form of Counterpoetics

In 1981, Maxine Hong Kingston's book, *China Men*, won the National Book Award for Nonfiction, and yet, many scholars argue that it isn't nonfiction. Many of her critics argue that the use of fictional techniques led her writing beyond the reality of fact and into the realm of fiction. This debate stems from a singular approach to what creative nonfiction entails; all too often the assumption of a nonfiction text is that it is entirely provable and includes only identifiable facts. However, I want to make the case that Kingston used the lyric essay and its techniques, which, in the case of *China Men*, allows the writing to become a sort of counterpoetic to the mainstream ideas of Chinese immigrant history in America.

Generally, the term counterpoetic is used to describe a text or literature that works to redefine or reevaluate conventional ideas towards history. In many cases, counterpoetics have become a tool for decolonial writers to address the reality of facing a flood of canonized Western philosophies. Too often history is painted from a Euro-centric position that limits the reality of time, place, and experience felt by minority groups. So, when I refer to a "counterpoetic," I am referencing a tool that is used to redefine, reframe, and build perspectives that encompass a broader vision of history. In many ways this is similar to the way counter-narratives function.

The beauty of the lyric essay is that it clearly inhabits a zone between the hard facts of reality, and the truth of a story; its liminality lends itself to writing from the margins of society. By borrowing techniques from other genres the lyric essay doesn't become fiction or poetry, but it does show that there is truth beyond the lines of general nonfiction. The lyric essay's liminality, then, not only can act as a counterpoetic to experience, but also as a counterpoetic within nonfiction. It does this by opening up the

genre of nonfiction to diversity of voice and experience; instead of holding to strict lines of genre—this belongs here, that goes there—it takes particular techniques that would normally be associated with other genres and brings them into nonfiction as way of recontextualizing the truth of experience.

In order to be a counterpoetic, and not simply a lyric essay, a text must reorient perspectives and conversations about the pre-existing perspectives of history. Most of the time, this reorienting is subtle and hidden within the family mythology of *China Men*. This reorienting of perspective also most often comes in brief snippets enmeshed in the experiences of Kingston's forefathers, rather than being large moments of focus. For example, the grandfather who immigrated to find wealth and build the railroad in California, often refers to white men as demons (128). At the same time, this grandfather is full of character and wit, and goes from moment to moment fully embodied as an individual. This dehumanizing of white people by calling them demons, and the characterization of the grandfather is a reversal of American Imperialistic practices. Most often, when referring to the historical significance of the railroads being laid across the country, it is the thousands of Chinese migratory workers that were overlooked, dehumanized, and grouped together as a faceless and disembodied people. The reversal, or reorientation, then, creates a counterpoetic in the sense that it scrutinizes the usual way that the Chinese workers were overlooked. Yunte Huang first introduces the concept of counterpoetics, in regard to transpacific literature, in his book "Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics." He focuses on the idea that counterpoetic literature shifts the perspective of history and temporality away from the "imperial visions that always claim some version of historical teleology as their *raison d'être*, such poetics hovers between the literal and the metaphoric, the historical and the mimetic" (4), which fits nicely into the reality of how *China Men* is functioning as a text: Kingston uses the example of her family (specifically the men, particularly her father), time and place, mythology, textualization of laws, and personal experience to speak about the reality of Chinese immigration to the United States in contrast to the picture of immigration that is standardized history.

The argument towards *China Men* fitting into the lyric essay form and acting as a counterpoetic hinges on two distinctions: first, that the lyric essay lies on the fringe of the mainstream canonical interpretations of the nonfiction genre; second, because the lyric essay lies on the fringe of the genre, it allows for alternative voices and approaches to the genre. By its very nature, a lyric essay bends the expectations of nonfiction. This liminality, and application of genre-bending techniques allows the lyric essay to act as a form of *counterpoetics*, which in turn, allows the lyric essay to function as a natural expression of marginalized viewpoints by minority groups. Yunte Huang writes in “The Transpacific as a Critical Space,” “I use counterpoetics to describe a host of marginalized poetic/historiographical practices: antiquarianism, collection, local history, anecdotes, family genealogy, travel writing, graffiti, correspondence, fantasies, and hoaxes” (4). Many of these “marginalized practices” are found among the techniques that the lyric essay implements to create its liminality. In this sense, the lyric essay itself becomes a kind of counterpoetic to the genre of nonfiction writing, as well as a tool to be used to shift historical perspective. By applying this lens of the lyric essay acting as counterpoetic to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Letters to Memory* it becomes apparent how each of these texts use a variety of methods to shift the genre of nonfiction toward alternative perspectives on mainstream American history.

The Multi-Voiced Counterpoetic

Karen Tei Yamashita uses imagination in *Letters to Memory* differently than Kingston does in *China Men*; whereas Kingston uses imagination to speculate on a variety of possible immigration stories, Yamashita uses imagination to dive into the experience of her relatives during World War II through archival research and juxtaposition in order to create an essential dialogue that builds toward a counterpoetic. As Kingston draws on an oral storytelling experience—family stories being passed from one generation to the next—to portray her family’s immigration experience, Yamashita uses letters and photos to express the generational

impact trauma can have on a person and family. And in many ways these terms might be interchangeable. However, I see the counterpoetic functioning at the level of language and lyricism, moving beyond the narrative on the page in order to decolonize and reframe the discussion. Also note, when I refer to mainstream American history or American imperialism, I am referencing the false propaganda of westernized ideologies such as *Manifest Destiny*, and the Euro-centric view that America was settled, civilized and advanced by divine rights of freedom, and this right continues to this day.

Although there is fabrication and fictionalization present in Yamashita's *Letters to Memory*—which become symbols for a variety of ideologies—the experience of family trauma remains authentic. One of the roles of the lyric essay—which coincides with the purpose of counterpoetics—is to create a new way of looking at a topic. “...the lyric essay is a way to reinvent the wheel, so to speak—to put a new spin on a well-known part of life. They say we authors are always writing the same stories; we’re just personalizing it or framing it in different ways” (Livingston 49). This particular approach also creates a dialogue of perspective and memory and what is true. In the prologue, Yamashita, while speaking of the vast collection of archival materials, writes, “I have extracted a sliver of this record to ponder some questions. I admit mine is a different or particular way of reading and seeing our story, and I ask only for your curiosity and careful intelligence” (x). The implication here, is that there are many stories to be told. Many different experiences. Yamashita has collected and organized and addressed ideas according to her questions and memory. Does this make a false or inaccurate story? No.

Although Yamashita's correspondence is fictionalized—imagined—this format allows her to connect her family's experiences to build connection, draw a new picture, and create new meaning—which reinvents or shifts perspective in regard to Japanese American experiences in counterpoetical ways. For example, the first section is addressed to Homer—Homer of the *Illiad*, the Greek patriarch of literature and society—and by addressing Homer, the experience Yamashita talks about her family having, and the

ideas she discusses create a dialogue between Western society/civilization and the reality of putting citizens and innocent people into concentration camps:

Homer, your travels and research trace the deep history of families into tribes and tribes into nations. Some folks reach across a fence or an ocean and discover they are holding hands with the enemy. Some discover that they are on the wrong side of the fence and are the enemy themselves. Flags force everyone to flex their loyalty, but some refuse, and they are the enemy too. In this tale of the alleged traitor, all possible enemies pose a threat and must be safely imprisoned: propagandist, collaborators, apologists, aliens, non-alien citizens, renunciants, draft resisters, conscientious objectors, pacifists, expatriates, repatriates, extraordinary renditions. At the wars end, released to freedom, forgiveness is a radical idea, an impossibility that requires imagination. (14)

By addressing Homer as if he is in actual correspondence with her archival projects of family history, it allows for an interesting interplay of imagination and reality; of course, Homer is not an actual individual that Yamashita is interacting with but a representative of an ideology. But there is actual conversation taking place between the ideologies and experience because Yamashita is creating dialogue between herself and the history of Western society. This sort of imagination, where Yamashita addresses Homer as if he were physically in the bakery creates a lyrical confusion. Is he there? Is he a person or is he representative of something more? Of course, he was both.

Similarly, N. Scott Momaday's multiple voices in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is essential to his construction of a counterpoetic, particularly as he is addressing his history of Native trauma in the United States. In the foreword of his book, Momaday writes, "The stories in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are told in three voices. The first voice is the voice of my father, the ancestral voice, and the voice of the Kiowa oral tradition. The second is the voice of historical commentary. And the third is that of personal reminiscence, my own voice" (location 33). Through these three voices Momaday recontextualizes history to the perspective of the Kiowa people rather than the Euro-centric history that is propagated as part of

Manifest Destiny. In *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*, Indigenous writers discuss the way that the lyric essay lends itself to dealing with the trauma of colonization and decolonization. Bojan Louis writes:

Decolonization can be the recognition, the recoverings of a time between “filth and horror,” “disease and death of human history”; a bold way to say this would be, a time before Columbus, the slave trade, the sugar trade, Christianity, Thanksgiving, Manifest Destiny, massacres, forced walks, displacement, reservations, scorched earth campaigns, boarding schools, oil and coal companies, uranium, superpower, the Washington Redskins and Chief Wahoo, the KXL pipeline, the femicide of Indigenous women, and on and on and on. (60)

The trauma caused by colonization is something felt from generation to generation, and the act of decolonization is an attempt to look beyond or past the colonization itself. Although *China Men* is not specifically dealing with the concepts of colonization and decolonization, it does handle the stereotypes and causality of prejudice towards immigrants, and the loss of individual identity because of the shared narrative of imperialized ideologies.

The Counterpoetics of Myth-Making

Often the lyric essay becomes a battleground between the balance of “art” and “fact.” N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, intertwines myth, memory, and imagination to highlight his relationship to his grandmother, being Kiowa, and growing up American, in a way that creates a multi-layered counterpoetical response to American imperialism. However, unlike *China Men*, Momaday’s book doesn’t face the same backlash for the genre-breaking techniques he uses. Maybe the criticism of *China Men* comes from the more overt tones of restructuring history and imagination through assimilation of myth and story and imagination to create new meaning. Kingston even addressed the difficulties she thought readers would have with her writing in an interview:

When I finished...I was thinking that I had written a book that was so unusual, different from anything else that was done before that I probably could not get it published in the United States. I thought the American publishers would not understand, and that I would send it to Hong Kong and London and see whether they could understand me better there...I guess I was thinking that Hong Kong being a place that's between East and West, surely, they would understand. (Zagni)

Because of the transgression of genre lines, Jay Ellis argues that the lyric essay and creative nonfiction should be considered separate genres that are moving further and further apart. His argument stems from his understanding of what constitutes nonfiction: "Of course these [the lyric essay and creative nonfiction] overlap. Of course labels may be uselessly limiting. But it is not uselessly limiting to expect a reasonable amount of truth in advertising, as it were, when writers claim the word "nonfiction" (30). This statement implies that the lyric essay is gradually losing its "truth." Jay Ellis, however, doesn't leave this idea to implication: "The genre of the lyric essay (even if some of its practitioners prefer to avoid labels altogether) provides a space for all the creativity and none of the demand for adherence to truth" (30). This approach focuses on defining creative nonfiction through its provability or the capacity to fact-check a story. This definition, then, would rule out the use of mythmaking or folklore, or in the case of Kingston's *China Men*, the liberties she takes in telling her father's immigration story in four different and distinct ways because she didn't *know* the "truth" or the "reality" of how he arrived in the United States.

Of course, this is just one way of interpreting the lyric essay: as a transgression to the canonical norms of nonfiction. Joey Franklin quotes Judith Kitchen in his article, "The Beautiful, Untrue Things of the Lyric Essay," in an attempt to define the relationship between truth and creativity:

Judith Kitchen put it this way: "The job of the lyric essayist is to find the prosody of fact, finger the emotional instrument, play the intuitive and the intrinsic, but all in service to the music of the real. Even if it's an imagined actuality. The aim is to make of not up. The lyre, not the liar."

Consider what Kitchen is saying here: the heart of the lyric essay is not reality, not nature, but the music of reality, the music of nature as conceived in the mind of the essayist—the music of beautiful untrue things, which, as Wilde says, is the proper aim of art. (3)

So it isn't that the lyric essay doesn't adhere to the truth, as Jay Ellis argues. Instead, it is that the lyric essay holds to the truth and reality of the story rather than fact alone. This is actually what *China Men* is doing: not creating fiction but adhering to the truth of experience. As a result, *China Men* is an optimal example of the lyric essay acting as a counterpoetic: it addresses the concepts and definitions of (or the making sense of) transpacific dynamics, as well as mapping out the reality of her family's experience, even if part of this mapping has to be imagined. In an interview Kingston describes her own work, particularly her books *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as a “melting of fiction and non-fiction” (Zagni). It's no wonder, then, that *China Men* is often considered something other than pure nonfiction, even its author describes it as a blend of genres. However, later in the same interview she elaborates on what she means by melting fiction and non-fiction, Kingston says:

This [blending the genres] is because I was writing about actual people who had wild imaginations and the narrator herself had a wild imagination. She had to have an imagination, because nobody would tell her the truth, so she had to imagine the truth. In both books the people had dreams and they believed in their dreams. Dreams are fiction; I had to work in dreams-fiction with the reality of the people who had those dreams. (Zagni)

So even as Kingston describes her work as a blend of nonfiction and fiction, she is actually being true to the nature of imagination and her experience.

The way we view time and space, the way we make sense of our surroundings and how we connect within those surroundings, is predicated on particular points of view. One problem with truth is that it focuses too much on a Westernized worldview to identify truth and lie. “Myth-making” is not a making-up but an orientation of worldviews and experience. Lyricism isn't ignoring facts of narrative but an opening

of meaning beyond the literal words into the truth of metaphor. It is for this reason that so many critics had a hard time orienting where *China Men* belonged as a text. It is a book that takes a complex look at what it means to be part of a Chinese immigrant family in a Euro-centric America, which makes the flexibility of the lyric essay the perfect form to express the cultural differences, starting with the perceived history of the Chinese immigrants. And because the story uses a unique, liminal form, like the lyric essay, it allows for *China Men* to become a form of counterpoetics responding to the mainstream stories being told about the same events. In the introduction to *Black Marks on the White Page*, a collection of writing by Pasifika and Oceanic writers, Tina Makareti and Witi Ihimaera write:

Is it fiction or non-fiction? Does it matter? Or, at least how much are they one and the same? We suspect that the collisions and intersections of contemporary Oceanic lives with literary techniques are enabling our writers to go into rooms hitherto unexplored...Perhaps the division between different forms—fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry—doesn't necessarily make sense to Indigenous Oceanic world views. (12)

As this statement indicates, the boundaries of genre don't always matter to the writer. Instead, genre, as a practice, is about orienting our reader's expectations of a text.

Even though much of the reorientation of perspective in *China Men* comes in subtle moments, the chapter "*The Laws*," really highlights and emphasizes a reorientation on imperialistic practices by sharing factual evidence (152). This chapter clearly magnifies the discrimination and injustices that Chinese immigrants suffered at the hands of the government in order to change the narrative surrounding the Chinese immigration by highlighting a chronological compilation of laws created and enforced by the United States government in order to discriminate against Chinese immigrants.. Kingston isn't fabricating a family mythology to tell an interesting story; she uses the organization of *China Men* to intermingle her personal experience, through childhood recollections and memories as an adult, with fables and folklore and the imagined experiences of her forefathers in America in order to emphasize the shared meaning of

a layered, and oftentimes, traumatic experience of losing and gain, and re-losing, and rebuilding identity in a new place.

In general, the role of imagination can play an integral part in the lyric essay acting as a counterpoetic, particularly as Kingston is using this technique to reorient what constitutes history. In *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, Sasha LaPointe writes about trauma, more specifically, how the body deals with trauma through imagination:

Dissociation in its mildest form can be described as a coping mechanism and often occurs in those who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. Our bodies are incredible and intelligent things. Of course they've wired in some sort of security system that allows us to check out when things get too scary. It's daydreaming. It's detachment. It's a way to go someplace else, away from the originating trauma. Fairy tales, located outside of our reality, take us to another world. What's interesting about the joining of these worlds, both fairy tale and trauma, is that the intersection resembles the very core of the experience of trauma itself. (65)

We can see this function in *China Men* when Kingston tells the story of her father's immigration to the United States in four different ways: smuggled illegally through Cuba, through Ellis Island, or through Angel Island with fake papers, or finally, legally. There can be confusion at which way was "true," which was her father's actual experience? Does it even matter? These hypothetical imaginations are not meant to show a singular experience, but to look at why and how these Chinese men would have come to America. It might be argued that this makes the book more of an ethnography that incorporates fictional tales to paint a picture, however, the authenticity of these immigration experiences highlights a complex and factual heritage; so, in a sense, Kingston's imagination explores the varied and multitudinous ways many Chinese men immigrated, and the authenticity of these experiences, whichever ones they are, creates a dialogue about "forefathers" and not only a "father." Nonfiction often imagines or speculates on what may have happened in a way that does not break the contract with the reader to tell the truth to best of the

author's ability, because that possibility might be true to the experience. This is what Kingston does. She might not know the actual, provable, reality of how her father came to America, but that doesn't matter so much as how it may have happened.

The very same techniques, then, that are used to argue that the lyric essay isn't a work of nonfiction—because imagined experiences rather than factual experiences are depicted—allow it to be a counterpoetic, as well as a lyric essay dealing with the trauma of imperialistic ideologies. It is important to note that I do not mean to say these are entirely forms of fiction, and that the perspective of Chinese immigration that Kingston is detailing is made up. In fact, Kingston uses these forms to disrupt the history and temporality of standard perception in order to create a sincere, and very real dialogue about the reality of life for immigrants, particularly through their family's experiences. Yunte Huang writes:

In contrast to the master narratives, these works of counterpoetics turn away from the meta-discourse on the transpacific; they move instead toward the enactment of poetic imagination as a means to alter memory and invoke minority survival in the deadly space between competing national, imperial interests and between authoritative regimes of epistemology serving those interests" (5).

Momaday, on the other hand, has a more subtle way of incorporating lyrical elements than Kingston, where he doesn't assimilate (although, I think the concept of assimilation is key to Kingston's point) other people's myths or identities, but focuses on developing his own identity through an evoked heritage of mythmaking common to the cultural understanding of Kiowa people. Ironically, this difference allows Momaday to be more open in creating and changing conversation around the imperialized history of events.

Not only does *The Way to Rainy Mountain* reorient the perspective of Euro-centric history through Momaday's layering of voices, but it also re-envisions the perspective of his Kiowa history in a way that acknowledges the intertwining truth of their histories. "By juxtaposing his thoughts, perceptions,

experiences, memories, and stories with those of members of his tribe, he revises his way of knowing the world and establishes new relationships with the Kiowa homeland” (Teuton 56). This reinventing or, as I refer to it, shifting of perspective occurs as Momaday plays with space and time and interweaves them throughout the narrative to create a fourth, new perspective. An example of this is when he mingles historical events with the personal perspective to retell how his grandmother (and later himself through their shared heritage) was affected:

In order to save themselves, they [a band of “renegade” Kiowa’s] surrendered to the soldiers at Fort Sill and were imprisoned in the old stone corral that now stands as a military museum. My grandmother was spared the humiliation of those high gray walls by eight or ten years, but she must have known from birth the affliction of defeat, the dark brooding of old warriors. (location 117)

It isn’t that the lyric essay can and should only function as a counterpoetic; it is that the form of the lyric essay creates an individualized approach to an experience that lends itself to marginalized viewpoints. It allows for a story to be retold and refocused in order to undercut the mainstream stories that are often limited and blind to other realities. Christopher Teuton in his book, *DEEP WATERS: the Textual Continuum in American Indian Literature*, describes how *The Way to Rainy Mountain* functions as a disruption to American imperialism, “Time and again the text intervenes in static cultural traditions, undercutting both Western and Native expectations regarding the function of and relationships between land, stories, and history” (Teuton 54). This sentiment echoes Louis’s point about colonized and decolonized individuals and why the lyric essay is such a natural tool for shifting perspectives: “A decolonized person seeks to shout, scream, relinquish their hurt and hatred, become the navigator of their self-image, obtain productive and healthy positions in and for the greater good of their communities; they look toward the future while continually waking up to the past” (Louis 53-54).

Conclusions

The lyric essay, with its liminality between genres, with its mixture of techniques and approaches, is a natural form for a counterpoetic. Not only does it shift the perspective of what is true, what is nonfiction, within the realm of genres, but it also can shift the perspective of the old story of American imperialism to a new story that allows for diversity of thought and experience based on real and authentic experiences. All three of these texts, *China Men*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and *Letters to Memory* work to create a new version—or at least a new perspective—on history (be that family history or cultural history); they do this by incorporating a variety of methods and sources, some of which are more commonly associated with other genres like poetry and fiction, without losing the authenticity of real experience. And by applying the form of the lyric essay to these three books each text functions as both an essay of truth and lyrical experience. This lens of lyricism explains how the genre of nonfiction becomes more inclusive toward experience(s) that are true but might generally lie outside genre boundary lines; the lyric essay creates space for speculation, a reorientation of worldviews, and draws connection between truth and imagination for the genre of nonfiction.

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