

Juncos, Sparrows, and Crows in the Transnational Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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“Singing” blackbirds, crows, woodpeckers, egrets, “[b]lue-winged” and western jays, and cuckoos fly through the works of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, particularly in her recent poems.¹ In one particular poem, “The Letter C,” Lim mentions “crows in Santa Barbara, [with] black bitter caws” that prey on smaller birds such as “nestlings, sparrows, juncos.”² Lim, who once compared herself to a singing blackbird in her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* (1996), keeps a protective eye out for those nestlings, sparrows, and juncos. She sometimes uses these depictions of birds as a means to extend a hand—or a wing—to those in need. Even in poems that might not focus on birds, Lim advocates self-empowerment so that nestlings can find their way out of the nest into a world full of individuals of every race, creed, and gender. The imagination and transnationalism in Lim’s poetry echo this sentiment. This article focuses on diverse ways in which Lim hints at this seizing of autonomy and how she strikes for inclusive efforts through the agency of her poetic imagination.

While Lim expresses her distaste for cawing crows, flying becomes a motif for her travels. Its pleasures encourage her to keep moving and singing when she is traversing in foreign territory and through environments brewing with racism, misogyny, or cultural trepidation for those who might look or act differently from the majority mainstream culture. Other poems, which focus on images and stories that range from alphabet letters to sandwiches eaten on small benches to reflections on job resignations, also explore ways in which the reader noisily can join the poet in flight.

Lim’s welcoming and encouraging trajectory emerges over a lifetime of writing, but the path forward sometimes recedes. Although this article—for the sake of space—largely considers Lim’s poems from 2014 onward, Lim’s early work often focuses on self-discovery and how she will posit herself as a transplanted individual. In

a recently discovered and published interview with Edwin Thumboo and Wimal Disanayke, which was initially completed in 1985, Lim heralded herself as a Malaysian writer. As Mohammad A. Quayum, editor of *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, explains, “at this point, Lim saw herself primarily as a Malaysian writer writing for a Malaysian audience [S]he consciously tried to draw ‘familiar images from the Malaysian culture’ and [to] embed her poems in the real experiences of Malaysian people and ‘their “real” metaphoric world.’ Malaysia was still her ‘native country,’ her ‘home.’”³ Despite Lim’s attachment to her homeland, by 1985 (16 years after Lim had left Malaysia), she was articulating a worldly and inclusive perspective.⁴ In the interview itself, she reflects on the importance of recognizing English as a language of empowerment and not just as the language that oppresses colonized subjects. She admonishes, “[I] reject the idea of ‘international’ literatures in English if by that term is meant all other literatures in English excepting British and American. As the English language increases in range and power to become a truly world language, it will become more and more difficult to distinguish ‘international’ from ‘mainstream.’”⁵

Lim channels the argument expressed by other transnational writers, including Lloyd Fernando, who note that the era of colonization and imperialism has passed—at least for Malaysia—although not without negative impact, but that the English language must continue to be upheld for its value in education and world communication. Marie Fernando, Lloyd Fernando’s wife, cites Fernando’s insistence that “[a] language does not just consist of words. It has a whole history [of ideas] and culture behind it And you can’t just clean that out. And the best way to master English and the globalisation that is taking place, is not to reject English or to use it merely as a utilitarian tool, but to understand its cultural roots and its creativity best experienced in its literature. In the same way, of course, ... people who live here [in Malaysia] ought to know the national language as well.”⁶ Although Lim focuses on national language policies in this context, her ideas about immersion and inclusion apply to other arenas of life. Diversity and inclusion must occur in every domain, and not just with regard to the use of language. For example, with inclusion, confidence in self-identification must emerge. Joe Upton, a postcolonial Anglophone scholar, recognizes that Lim is a “part of both inner and outer circles of language and experience,” and yet she is “a part of a globalizing world that is increasingly both more cross-border *and* more nationalist and exclusionary.”⁷

Such resolve, however, does not guarantee a smooth path forward in achieving self-identification for the individual who crisscrosses the Pacific and other oceans and lands. Lim keeps a firm eye on the horizon for internal and external occurrences that might impact her identity and that of others who also may encounter compulsory or even voluntary migration. Cultural studies frequently examine the academic and personal successes won by first and later generation migrants, but those migrants sometimes are examined through a static lens. What happens when the migrant wanders, claiming more than one adopted homeland? Lim uses Salman Rushdie as a case in

point: “Rushdie could have been born in a region in India that became part of Pakistan after the partition; then [he] immigrated and was read as a British author; and is now resident in the US.”⁸ I encountered a similar question posed by a student from Kurdistan, currently a province in Iraq.⁹ He wanted to know why he could not gain academic recognition or credit for Kurdish as his second language, credit denied in light of Kurdistan’s unrecognized status due to its lack of self-rule. This student is an example of a subject who struggles on multiple levels with the “in-betweenness of the transnation.”¹⁰ He is marginalized for being a person of color in the US, and he is even further marginalized, within and outside of his homeland, because he does not belong to a sovereign nation-state.

Furthermore, what happens when first- and second-generation migrants from multiple cultures create their own family units, as in the case of Vinh Chung, a Vietnamese of Chinese descent who migrated to the United States after escaping from communist Vietnam to marry a bride of his own choosing and of Korean descent?¹¹ How does Chung’s multicultural and multilingual family self-identify? Chung recognizes this challenge. He explains, “[o]ne of the values my parents tried hard to instill in us was to never forget where we came from. There is a Vietnamese expression for it: *Mát Góc* [pronounced Mutt Goch], which means ‘to lose root.’ Our language, our heritage, our traditions, our ethnicity—it was all part of our root ... Losing root was a risk for every refugee trying to adapt in America ... For my [childhood] family, ‘keeping root’ meant living in two worlds at the same time—learning to be American while at the same time trying to remain Chinese.”¹²

Lim, too, notes the complexities caused by her crisscrossings and her marriage to a man of another race and culture. She also surely recognizes her son’s own mixed-race and cultural status as child of a Malaysian mother with a Chinese-*Peranakan* heritage and of an American-born, Jewish father. How should her son self-identify? Is he considered a half-second generation migrant?¹³ What languages should and does her son know and speak? What cultural traditions should he learn and respect? How do these traditions and cultural behaviors become impacted by political and other larger social forces?

Chung, too, reflects on his observations on the acculturation and adaptation process:

I had a Vietnamese friend growing up whose parents decided to take the assimilation route. They changed their son’s Vietnamese birth name to David, and they abandoned their original language completely and spoke only English at home. As a result, ... David learned English quickly, but in the process he also forgot [the] Vietnamese [language] ... I envied boys like David at first because I desperately wanted to fit in, but as my brothers and sisters and I got older, we felt sorry for boys like him. [My brother] even came up with

a sympathetic name for Vietnamese kids who could no longer speak Vietnamese: lost gooks. They had lost part of their root, and in the process lost a sense of identity and direction.¹⁴

Despite this consternation about his and his family's identity, Chung, who shares his story in *Where the Wind Leads: A Refugee Family's Miraculous Story of Loss, Rescue, and Redemption*, strides forward with his decision to choose his bride and to create his own family unit in Colorado, away from his parents, who raised over a dozen children in Arkansas. Like Lim, Chung chooses to extend a hand, too; for example, royalties from his book benefit World Vision, and he surrounded himself with a Vietnamese church and culture during his American childhood.¹⁵ Yet, one may wonder what languages Chung, and Leisle, his wife, and children speak at home. What aspects of Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese and American cultures do they recognize and celebrate at home? How do they welcome and include others into their circle? Despite the struggles of doing so, they remain determined to continually construct their self-identities as they interact with others within their medical practice,¹⁶ community, and multigenerational family.

In his discussion of Lim's initial interview, Quayum, too, recognizes the ongoing challenges of transmigrations over time: "this view of who [Lim] is and who she writes for has undergone metamorphosis as her identity has become more tangled with time."¹⁷ Despite this entanglement, being meta-conscious of cultural differences and making an effort to retain "root," ultimately offer migrants like Lim a firmer grounding in the soil in which they are transplanted. Uprooting can and does happen, but conscious cultivation of one's identity—rather than mere rejection of one culture in favor of another—also offers a means for migrants to become inclusive and aware of challenges. According to scholar Boey Kim Cheng, who wrote the "Foreword" to Lim's *Ars Poetica for the Day*, "One could even argue that [Lim's] poems are spatial mappings that make up a complex cartography."¹⁸

Complexity does not necessarily equate confusion. Quayum argues that Lim's "mosaic, nomadic self ... becomes more evident in her subsequent writings"¹⁹ Lim observes the difficulty of pinpointing this moving target of self-identity, and yet she implies that she would rather aim for a utopian society,²⁰ than not in order to better reach for that goal. My student reaches for his constantly shifting Kurdish identity despite his recognition that he may remain in the US for some time; Chung, too, claims his own crosshatched familial and community identity as a refugee who must create a new US identity. In Lim's case, she writes to (re)identify herself even as borders and languages shift.

I do not have the space in this article to discuss thoroughly the influences on and uses of English by a postcolonial subject turned "transnational wanderer"²¹; as mentioned earlier, Lim herself, not to mention many other individuals, including Lloyd and Marie Fernando, have addressed the uses of English in a postcolonial society like

Malaysia.²² I must note that Lim's 1985 interview with Thumboo and Disanayke merely suggests her conscious efforts at embedding her work in literary craft, noting that these efforts parallel the ways that "Rushdie [used] techniques perfected in [Laurence Sterne's] *Tristram Shandy* and [V. S.] Naipaul learn[ed] from Charles Dickens" ²³ Lim's use of traditional stanzas or quatrains in conjunction with her distinct multicultural ideas and the particular influences on her imagination surfaces in her commentaries on the poetics she had crafted over time, a poetics that embodies a language of her own. In her 1985 interview, she remarks that "From [John] Cunningham I learned the importance of formal shaping," but observes later that now "I am willing to let the natural flow of thought and feeling carry the poem onward ... [F]orm is more natural when less restrictive" (239-40).

In several poems, Lim tips a hat to a poet's—often a British or an American—form or topic; yet, after the cursory hat-tipping, she strides quickly forward to create her unique reflections with her own poetic imagination and creation.²⁴ For example, she alludes to William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge in a poem and in an interview; other works reference Jane Austen and mention writings by American authors Langston Hughes and Tillie Olsen.²⁵ Lim's 2015 poem, "Teach the Free Man How to Praise"²⁶ present some of her meta-conscious, even facetious, efforts to claim her identity as a poet. The title, taken from the last lines of W. H. Auden's elegy to W. B. Yeats, demonstrates Lim's efforts to remain unrestrained by society's conventions. Auden warns of the mausoleum-like life a poet like Yeats must live. In the first section of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats: 1907-1973," Auden reflects, "The death of the poet was kept from his poems" and adds, "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."²⁷ The last lines of the poem conclude to reflect, "In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise" (Auden). In response, Lim's poem sketches a self-discovery, an upholding of freedom to channel and adapt the advice she—the poet²⁸—might receive on writing. The poet writes that "today's poems" can "color / the blank fabric / we fly / tomorrow."²⁹

But how can tomorrow's "blank fabric" (emphasis mine) be colored with yesterday's poems? The poem suggests a sort of deliberate erasure here, even perhaps a recognition of the lack of control to which Auden refers, but not due to society's demands, death, or the poems themselves, as Auden implies; the poet's commentary suggests that the poet is in control of what colors he or she flies. The poet claims the signified and ownership by questioning, again, how will those colors be interpreted tomorrow based on what occurs in today's transcultural world? Lim's poem claims ownership of the signified (the power of poetry) by questioning, again, the interpretation of those colors. Unlike Lim, Auden and Yeats did not experience the 1969 race riots in Malaysia, nor did they encounter white nudists in an alien wintry climate, nor did they spend semesters as Visiting Distinguished Professors at the City University of Hong Kong teaching Chinese students, nor did they observe Hong Kong's Umbrella Protests.³⁰ Lim's poems, coming out of her multiply layered and peripatetic cultural identities, together form a painstakingly, intentionally crafted and colorful tapestry.

Whereas Auden dedicates the second section of his elegy to “Mad Ireland,” which “hurt [Yeats] into poetry” (Auden), Lim does not mention any specific events in “Teach the Free Man How to Praise.”³¹ Instead, in her recent poetry collections, Lim examines colonial authors and contemporary events to construct her ideological and geopolitical platform. But that platform is unstable and shifts. Lim explains, “[w]hat writers mine for their writing changes as their bodies, locations, societies and times change.”³² She argues that politics and poetry cannot always separate along a seam: “politics cannot be manifested without poetics,” and yet she quickly adds, “none of my work to my mind is political.”³³

Despite the long-running violence and turmoil in Ireland, Yeats’s reflections about Ireland’s woes may seem circumscribed when compared to Lim’s observations of California, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Puget Sound, and Singapore, among other named geographical sites.³⁴ Although several of Lim’s Hong Kong poems focus on the Umbrella Movement, a political topic that I address in an earlier work,³⁵ Lim can target a specific image in a specific location—that is, in the words of J. M. Cameron, “the simple naming of a thing in a poem can make it an image.”³⁶ Several of these place-based poems appear in *The Irreversible Sun* (2015). For example, in the poem that bears the same title as her collection, she shares a moment in the California sunshine “where the Pacific and bluffs merge, faults / push up.”³⁷ The poem focuses on a “trail / smeared gray and black / with last year’s fire” in “Fire Season,” while a poem observes in Singapore “[n]ine Egrets, white elegance strolling.”³⁸

Just as “faults / push up,” even suddenly, causing earthquakes, so do the events that elbow their way into Lim’s poems. Her effort to recognize and mine these sudden self-discoveries in her journey as a poet demonstrates her ongoing efforts to theorize and frame transnationalism as a way to recognize disparate groups and beliefs. The poet may look at a “lone palm” or may express turmoil in “scrolling for news of a healthy earth” in the poem “National Day (Hong Kong, October 1st, 2014).”³⁹ Together, the poems underline her status as a bystander in the events in Hong Kong, as “old hands [hide] ... / in their machine.”⁴⁰ In these place poems, Lim opens a portal to her readers, so that they can view these physical scenes, and also so that they can visualize the mental turmoil of the poet and of other individuals.⁴¹

In such poems, Lim recognizes how adjustments to policies and borders might shape a specific culture. As author Barbara Jane Reyes writes, “[r]egarding my own apparent status as a poet from a transnational community, my interest is in that space between nations and homes, and how nation and home aren’t always geographical spaces.”⁴² Lim’s poems, too, underline how borders can disappear and change. A case in point: at press time—July 2019—the people of Hong Kong, the city in which Lim was residing at the time, had taken to the streets to protest the extradition laws.⁴³ One can only imagine the potential influence of this event on Lim and her works—not unlike her discussions of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. In other words, as Javier O. Huerta, a co-panelist with Reyes, suggests, “a person who can cross or transgress ... borders regularly is one who has the privilege to do so, the documents to do so, the languages

to do so.”⁴⁴ Lim may be Straits-born, but her later immersion in diasporic Chinese cultures via her tenure in different Asian academic departments—most recently (in 2019) as a faculty consultant for the City University of Hong Kong—has endowed her with an unusual agency to “cross or transgress” borders. Both Huerta’s and Reyes’s thesis and Lim’s border crossings contradict Luis J. Rodriguez’s prose poem, “We Never Stopped Crossing Borders”: “We were invisible people in a city which thrived on glitter, big screens and big names, but this glamour contained none of our names, none of our faces It was a metaphor to fill our lives.”⁴⁵ While Rodriguez’s poem critiques the ethnic and class forces that oppress minority subjects who may not have robust financial means, Lim’s poems present borders as permeable. Quayum argues that Lim now does not merely see “herself as a Malaysian writer writing self-consciously for a Malaysian audience”; she also possesses a “‘deterritorialized’ sensibility, a sense of belonging to several places at the same time and writing for an international audience.”⁴⁶ Although Lim’s explorations of multiple spaces and identities may appear dizzying at times, she maintains command of her many transnational paths through her deft use of metaphorical language.⁴⁷ Thus, she extends her hand to readers who may prove empathetic to her wanderings, poetic and literal. In 1985, she responded in the interview with Thumboo and Disanayke, “my poems are as accessible to Australians, Americans and Indians as they are meant to be to Malaysians.”⁴⁸ This claim to the accessibility of her poetry rings true in 2019. Even if her readers may not be aware of political events such as the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, Lim’s poems can educate the reader on the complexities of such movements with regard to transnational cultures and identities.

Lim’s poems achieve accessibility through her playfulness with form, specifically with regard to the English language. For example, although her published poems have not yet included all the alphabet letters in their titles, she has presented several of these “alphabet” poems in recent years, including “The Letter C.” The poem lists several items that begin with C, including “colony”—“colony C grade, / Well below Democracy, a D word.”⁴⁹ This whimsical use of language here alerts the reader to the colonial status of a country like Malaysia in contrast to the United States and how the two countries may interact with one another based on colonized or democratic status. In the same 1985 interview with Thumboo and Disanayke, Lim explains, “my work [is] rooted in my original source, in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, yet embedded in the traditions of world literature in English; I write of a colonial tropical Christmas in a sonnet; of visiting my ancestral home in quatrains.”⁵⁰ Again, she may tip her hat to literary greats such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, but her poems are crafted around her transnational intersections with multiple cultures: as noted in the passage above, the word “colony” thus appears on the page literally before the word “Democracy.”

Other alphabet poems reflect on personal experiences such as retirement and on the meanings to be teased out of everyday ordinary images. “ABC (at the university)” plays with form to deliver a satirical and blunt message. The first and subsequent lines run in alphabetical order:

agenda appeal appendix
 brief brochure bullet point citation ...

and so on, until she reaches the last two words—

finally
 resignation.⁵¹

Other poems in *Ars Poetica for the Day* take the form of haiku, at least one sonnet, and prose poems.⁵² The breadth and variety of the poems' subjects and forms record the ease with which Lim recrosses cultural and other boundaries. In one of her earlier works, "Pantoun [sic] for Chinese Woman," Lim takes on the challenging poetic form to intensify horror at the murder of female infants.⁵³ On a lighter note, in one of her haiku, "Still Not a Rice Bowl," the poet, drawing both from her childhood and her current global wanderings, invokes food as a way to imagine acceptable substitutes, perhaps in a transcultural society, in which she could be craving cherries instead of traditional bowls of rice:

Cherries, four dollars
 Strawberries, ninety-nine cents.
 Life: strawberries bowl.⁵⁴

Here, the poem expresses an economical and practical viewpoint, as if to remind the reader to work with the materials one has. If a rice bowl is not on hand, make a strawberry bowl. If a cultural festival cannot be transported elsewhere, weld together old and new traditions and languages, and start the first annual Chinese festival local to a US town. Create English infused with deliberately code-switched words and sayings.

In contrast, Lim's prose poems (such as "Choke. Gasp") are more introspective.⁵⁵ In "Choke. Gasp," the imagery of a newborn experiencing its dependency on "the giants" hearkens to the language of medical diagnoses, also reminiscent of the discourse of many retirees. Clinical treatments, whether routine or for follow-up appointments, become the focus of aging subjects. Has Lim reached this stage? At times, she seems to portray a gradual closing of the sweeping cultural lens that characterizes her poetry, but then she reopens this lens immediately. Many of her introspective poems focus on the physical body and its immediate needs, not on politics or external social matters such as resignations and agendas: "Cry loudly when you are empty, when you are wet, when you are dirty."⁵⁶ Such poems perhaps highlight the poet's repositioning herself for other, unexplored stages in life. Boey recognizes this preparation in his "Foreword" to *Ars Poetica for the Day*: "Looking at the narrative arc of Shirley's work, one can discern two halves—pre- and post-

emigration, or Malacca and California Now begins a new or what Shirley sees as the ‘third’ segment of her journey.”⁵⁷ *Ars Poetica for the Day* appeared in print in 2015; however, as borders continue to shift and change, so should her objectives as a poet.

Some of Lim’s work, including the three sections of her novel, *Joss and Gold* (2001), and the four sections of *Do You Live In?* (2015), contain neatly packaged units, likely for the benefit of readers.⁵⁸ However, Lim’s thematic and stylistic trajectory through these stages consists of much more than three or four basic units. And, yes, as a retiree, Lim may expect routine doctor’s appointments, but then journeys to Hong Kong surprisingly immerse her in a different society struggling with its own borders and policies. Again, a case in point remains the protests in Hong Kong during 2014 and (still ongoing at press time) in 2019. Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997, was afforded some autonomy until 2047 under the “one country, two systems” handover agreement, but as journalist Mike Ives notes, “the Basic Law has been weakened as China’s ruling Communist Party and its security apparatus increasingly encroach on Hong Kong.”⁵⁹ In her interview with Tammy Ho and Jason Eng Hun Lee, Lim laments that, “[i]n Hong Kong, ... freedom and the Chinese state are like a lamb facing a hammer ... if it will not go obediently into the pen.”⁶⁰ Such observations of events outside of the US widen the cultural lens for both the reader and the poet. Lim explains, “[m]y Hong Kong Umbrella Movement poems could not have been written had I not been living in Hong Kong that year and teaching Hong Kong undergraduates who shared their engagement in the Democracy protests with me.”⁶¹ Lim’s ensuing poems—if any—on her stay in China in 2019 have yet to emerge, and, even if a political resolution clearly emerges, her poems may continue to wander on uncharted routes.

Lim notes she does not view her “work ... [as] political”; instead, she exercises her utopian tendencies to ensure (with a nod to Aristotle) that “ethos and rhetoric are inextricably at work.”⁶² Thus, Lim thematizes the events surrounding the US presidential election on November 8, 2016 as detours from the expected path of her poetic musings. Her recent poems consciously evoke images to motivate women and other readers to encourage each other to soar. Her “Cassandra Days: Poems” exemplify this intention. The first of these three poems begins with the Latin phrase, “*Vox populi vox Dei*”—“The voice of the people is the voice of God,” followed by a date, “June 20, 2016.”⁶³ The year 2016 alludes to the poet’s prophecy, of which the public may not be fully aware.

To decipher the poem and its prophetic power, the reader must consider the Latin phrase, which dates further back than the fourteenth century, when the phrase came into popular use. Political strife in England had compelled the Archbishop to utter these words in reference to Queen Isabella and her love, who compelled Edward the Second to resign in 1326: “Some of both Houses were sent to Edward the Second to acquaint him with the Election of his Son, and to require him to resign the Crown, which accordingly he did, [sic] all the People consented to the election; as did all the Prelates, and the Arch-Bishop made an Oration on these Words, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*, exhorting all to pray for the King Elect.”⁶⁴ Lim’s “Cassandra Days: Poems” allude to this dogma

in a dramatic criticism of the politics culminating in the US presidential election on November 8, 2016. The poet writes,

[When] actor and audience are one ...
 One is the voice of the people.
 Scattered—the lame and the crippled,
 When the voice of God is human
 And bellows on stage from this man.⁶⁵

In the next poem, “Cassandra: November 8, 2016,” the poet laments,

This Cassandra opens a bottle of red,
 Begins drinking early, alone, in bed.

Fascism with a friendly face does not
 Console ...
 They who were hailed

Heroes in their homeland enter the temple,
 Swagger, swearing, seared in the Sun King’s call

To torch and burn⁶⁶

This second poem foregrounds the name, Cassandra, linking the three poems and the dates of their composition to the Greek myth in which Cassandra, the daughter of the last king and queen of Troy, was “a prophet ‘possessed’ by Apollo ... with a kind of ‘second sight’ that enables her literally to ‘see’ both past and future as well as present events as if they are all happening in the present.”⁶⁷ Although Cassandra could foresee the future, Apollo, the sun god, ensured that no one believed her prophecies (one of which was the fall of Troy), to punish her for refusing Apollo’s attentions.⁶⁸ As a result, as critic Scott L. Schein explains, Cassandra “is gifted with a power which is divine, and to that extent she is more than human. But at the same time, her helplessness, suffering, and imminent death clearly indicate her mortality, and the contradiction between this mortality and that divine power makes her plight especially moving.”⁶⁹ Reading Cassandra’s story in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, the reader becomes distracted by her plight and her rape by Ajax the Lesser instead of focusing on Agamemnon’s own tragedy.⁷⁰ The reader may identify with Cassandra’s mental anguish: Cassandra foresaw events, but the chorus and others characters repeatedly disregarded her prophecies.⁷¹ Schein notes, “[s]he evokes the same awe, horror, and pity as do schizophrenics, who often combine deep, true insight with utter helplessness, and who retreat radically into madness.”⁷² Lim’s poem leads the reader into this realm of “madness” in its references to the presidential race. The poem predicts in June the

outcome of the November election, and laments this madness as rising from the voices of the people who are responsible for the president's election.

The third Cassandra poem, "What rough beast?," focuses on the Biblical figure of "Ruth"—"It's me, Ruth, / slouching to / who knows where." The poem suggests an immigrant's isolation due to questions concerning her legal status in the United States:

Have you a
permit? Are
you licensed?
Your papers,
documents,
ID cards?⁷³

The poem's Ruth suggests the figure of an undocumented immigrant in its allusion to the Biblical Ruth and the narrative of her journey from Moab to Jerusalem.⁷⁴ After the death of her husband, Ruth chooses to remain with her mother-in-law, Naomi, who is from Jerusalem. Ruth and Naomi encounter hardships and life in a strange land for many years. Eventually, Ruth, a Moabite, marries a wealthy man, Boaz, and they bear a son, who became the grandfather of King David (*Ruth* 4:17). The poem, dated "November 11, 2016," imagines Ruth's isolation to underscore the alienation that individual immigrants suffered in the immediate wake of the US presidential election. The poem sets up a dichotomy between citizens and non-citizens like Ruth:

the
palace grounds
are secured,
the woods fenced,
the house's
red-lined seats
reserved⁷⁵

Ruth cannot sit in these seats, nor can she partake of "fruits / forbidden" (778). Instead, she must walk, as did the Biblical Ruth, to find her own way to survival and success. Despite the poem's lamentation of the restrictions placed upon Ruth, the poet encourages her to speak:

Speak, Ruth, when
spoken to,
only not
now, not here.⁷⁶

The poem's call here is clear: only by speaking, when appropriate, can women and other minorities endure and overcome transcultural hardships. Is the poet suggesting that individuals like Ruth have to wait in order to once again seek a return to the place of exile? The poem slyly asserts that immigrants and other oppressed minorities are compelled to silence. They have to wait to move and to speak. Still, the poem suggests a hope that eventually, as in the Biblical story of Ruth, the adopted homeland will become the new homeland. Despite this holding pattern re moving and speaking, eventually, this opportunity should arise even if it takes a generation or more. Lim's poems finally cannot advocate for transnationalism nor can they speak to and for abject subjects unless they also address or symbolically act to remove human rights injustices.

If one flies through a political or social storm, whether as a refugee like "Ruth" or as a recent migrant or even like Lim, who has spent several decades in the US, crossing and recrossing the Pacific and the US mainland, one learns that one must keep flying to survive.⁷⁷ Lim's poem reminds readers to move forward: She wrote through her early worries that Malaysian English would founder; she wrote even as she struggled with her early self-identity as a Chinese Malaysian American poet, writer, and academic; she wrote through doctor's appointments, California fires, peaceful walks in nature, and visits to Hong Kong malls and ice rinks where she observed Zamboni machines;⁷⁸ she wrote through Hong Kong protests; and she wrote through the events surrounding November 2016 in the United States. Writing, she shapes transnational discourses that include and even shelter others momentarily. She writes even if the path is not always linear or even when it disappears at times.

The poem "Keys to the Kingdom," published in *Do You Live In?* (2015), explores the long process of gathering agency. The poet reflects, "I remember the first keys given me: / to a shared bedroom, Third College / for Women." In earlier years, her father had "locked the door at eight," and she had to convince her brother to let her in whenever she returned home past that witching hour. This first key, therefore, offered the poet her first sense of self-empowerment.⁷⁹ Since then, the poet has collected many "keys to desks and offices ... / proliferating / like metal rabbits, marking MINE."⁸⁰ Although the poem does not elaborate on the uses of these keys, they clearly represent ownership, even of rented rooms and office buildings. The poet can use such keys to open doors not only for herself, but for others. Hoarding such keys can remind the poet of the importance of a Woolfian "room of one's own," in which one can claim privacy from brothers—and write.⁸¹

Although Lim explains to interviewers Ho and Lee, "I am never sure of a reader," her writing compels readers to listen. J. M. Cameron also speaks of the reader as an important agent in his essay, "Poetic Imagination," explaining his desire to "characterize human subjectivity, primarily that of the poet ... secondarily that of the one who reads or listens."⁸² Reading or even listening to a poem may appear a sedentary activity, but it can spark synapses in the brain. How can one listen? How can one respond? The blackbird is calling its nestlings; they must reply.

Motivational speaker on diversity and inclusion initiatives, Dr. Zahra N. Jamal once said, “[w]e’re talking past each other. We’re not even listening to each other.”⁸³ She suggests that one should find “mentors that don’t look like [mentors]—and more than one mentor.” As evidenced in numerous testimonies, Lim has done just this: She has served as a mentor to scholars and students, both through personal advice and through her poetry, which is rich with lessons and with important reflections on agency and transnationalism. Lim endeavors to avoid this “talking past each other” with her creative and critical work. Amid the cacophony of different birds of all sizes and shapes, her poems urge the reader to stop and listen. As Cameron argues, “there is only the presence of effort and striving, an attempt to bring something to birth; and this is the poem, and here the poet may be confronted with what is absolutely novel and surprising.”⁸⁴ With each poem comes a new labor, a renewed effort to reach that “utopian goal”⁸⁵ perhaps to “voice authenticity as a signified; ... to give an accurate correspondence to a particular social world.”⁸⁶ Even if the “trans-real” slips out of our “utopian ... grasp,” the reader and the poet must move forward, wandering and soaring.⁸⁷

Notes

¹ See the chapter, “Blackbird Singing,” in Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: Feminist Press, 1996), 194. See also, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “The Letter C,” in *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 30; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Egrets,” in *Do You Live In?* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 41; and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Listening” and “Among the Western Jays,” in *The Irreversible Sun* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2015), 42 and 43.

² Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 30.

³ Mohammad A. Quayum, “The Apprentice Years: Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s ‘First’ Interview,” *Asiatic: IUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 11, no. 1 (June 2017): 229, <https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/article/view/974>.

⁴ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 232.

⁵ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 240.

⁶ Pauline Newton, “Lloyd Fernando’s Circle: An Interview with Marie Fernando, Wife of Lloyd Fernando,” *Asiatic: IUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 2, no. 2 (December 2008): 108–09, <https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/article/view/51>.

⁷ Joe Upton, “‘Survival—to Keep Writing’: An interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54, no. 4 (2018): 557, emphasis in original. DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2017.1418411.

⁸ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 559.

⁹ I learned much about Kurdistan’s efforts through conversations with this student. See “Who Are the Kurds?,” BBC, October 31, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>, for more information on this topic.

¹⁰ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 558.

¹¹ Vinh Chung shares his story in *Where the Wind Leads: A Refugee Family’s Miraculous Story of Loss, Rescue, and Redemption* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

¹² Chung, *Where the Wind Leads*, 246.

¹³ See Lim’s discussion on this in *Among the White Moon Faces*, 94.

¹⁴ Chung, *Where the Wind Leads*, 246–47.

¹⁵ See Vinh Chung, “Vinh Chung,” June 13, 2019, <http://wherethewindleads.com>. See also Chung, *Where the Wind Leads*, 247.

¹⁶ Dr. Chung is a specialist in Mohs, and his wife, Leisle, has worked in his practice. See his bio (“Vinh Chung, MD,” *Vanguard Skin Specialists*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.vanguardskin.com/meet-the-providers/vinh-chung-md/>).

¹⁷ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 232.

¹⁸ Boey Kim Cheng, “The Hiding Places of the Imagination,” “Foreword,” in *Ars Poetica for the Day*, by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 11.

¹⁹ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 232.

²⁰ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 558.

²¹ Pauline T. Newton, “Walking Backwards and Sideways: The Transmigrations of the Poet in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Work,” *Asiatic* 8, no. 2 (December 2014), 85.

²² See Lloyd Fernando’s *Cultures in Conflict*, for example, and Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 233–34, 240, and elsewhere.

²³ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 241.

²⁴ See Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 560 for a discussion of influential writers.

²⁵ Lim’s “Mother to Son” echoes the poem with the same title by Langston Hughes (Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 64). Other poems include “Wordsworth and Coleridge” (Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 105); “The Moment,” which references Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” (Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 50), and “Jane Austen” (Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 44). Lim also refers to Rossini in “My dear Rossini,” in *Ars Poetica* (Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 73). See also Tammy Lai-Ming Ho and Jason Eng Hun Lee, “City Poetics: An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” *Wasafiri* 33, no. 3

(2018): 50-53 for a discussion of poets, including Auden and Yeats, that have influenced Lim and her writings.

²⁶ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 94.

²⁷ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats: 1907-1973," 1939. <https://poets.org/poem/memory-w-b-yeats>.

²⁸ The poet and the author are not synonymous. In her interview with Ho and Lee, Lim explains, "[m]any of my poems do not 'express my personal experiences' ... but they do come out of deeply internal states of sensibility." (Ho and Lee, "City Poetics," 51; emphasis in original).

²⁹ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 94.

³⁰ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 234–35.

³¹ Lim's next poem is "Irelands: From his Tower," though the poet never concretely identifies the "he" in the poem (see Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 95).

³² Upton, "Survival—to Keep Writing," 559.

³³ Upton, "Survival—to Keep Writing," 559.

³⁴ Specifically, Yeats's "Easter, 1916" comes to mind. See W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916," 1921, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43289/easter-1916>. Examples of place poems include "Seaweeds (Puget Sound)," which references Puget Sound. See Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Walking Backwards: New Poems* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 2010), 7. "California Sun," appears in Lim, *The Irreversible Sun*, 27. She references Ireland in her poem, "Irelands: From His Tower" following her tribute to Auden's advice (see Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 95). The very next work, a prose poem, references Hong Kong: "Wet Market in Hong Kong" (Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 96–97). Many more place poems exist in Lim's writings; these are just a few recent examples.

³⁵ Pauline Newton, "Shirley Geok-Lin Lim: 'Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems,'" *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 9, no. 2 (December 2015): 247–79, <https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/article/view/667>.

³⁶ J. M. Cameron, "Poetic Imagination," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62, no. 1 (June 1962): 225.

³⁷ Lim, *The Irreversible Sun*, 64.

³⁸ Lim, *The Irreversible Sun*, 65; Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 41.

³⁹ Lim, *The Irreversible Sun*, 65; Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 79.

⁴⁰ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 79.

⁴¹ In her interview with Ho and Lee, Lim refers to these works as “city poems” (Ho and Lee, “City Poetics,” 53).

⁴² Barbara Jane Reyes, “Transnational Poetics: Some Thoughts,” April 4, 2010, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/transnational-poetics-some-thoughts>.

⁴³ See Mike Ives, “Is Hong Kong Part of China? The Recent Protests Explained,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-china-protests-explained.html>. Ives notes that the Basic Law protects freedoms in Hong Kong until 2047, but the extradition efforts break that promise. Ives writes, “Hong Kong, a former British colony, was returned to China in 1997 under a policy known as ‘one country, two systems,’ which promised the territory a high degree of autonomy. The policy has helped preserve Hong Kong’s civil service, independent courts, freewheeling press, open internet and other features that distinguish it from the Chinese mainland” (“Is Hong Kong Part of China?”). Journalist Natasha Khan, with *The Wall Street Journal*, explains, “[f]oreign business groups and diplomats have warned the extradition proposal poses a threat to the rule of law that helped Hong Kong prosper for decades as an international financial center and base for foreign companies, arguing it breaks China’s promise to preserve the city’s relative autonomy until at least 2047” (Natasha Khan, “Massive Crowds Take to Streets in ‘Last Fight’ for Hong Kong,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/massive-crowds-take-to-streets-in-last-fight-for-hong-kong-11560075915?mod=article_inline).

⁴⁴ Reyes, “Transnational Poetics.”

⁴⁵ Luis J. Rodriguez, “We Never Stopped Crossing Borders,” in *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*, edited by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Jennifer Gillan (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 6.

⁴⁶ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 232.

⁴⁷ Lim writes primarily in English, although she knows “some spoken Hokkien, a little Cantonese, [and] phrases in Putonghua (which is oral Mandarin)”; she does not possess reading literacy in Mandarin, but she “received a Pass at Fifth Form for Malay” (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Email to Pauline T. Newton, 31 July 2019). In her interview with Upton, she explains, “[m]y writing more than occasionally makes visible features of multilingualism But ... [a]s a disciplined literary scholar, I approach English as a rigorous practice that follows conventions of grammar, citation and more. In contrast, I struggle with the pressure to script orality, to give written testimony to multilingual voices” (Upton, “Survival—to Keep Writing,” 560). She notes that she can “slip almost involuntarily into this speech world, where English, Malay and Hokkien come together in a powerful commingling (with Tamil, Portuguese, Arabic and other minor traces)” (Upton, “Survival—to Keep Writing,” 560).

⁴⁸ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 241.

⁴⁹ Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 30.

⁵⁰ Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 241.

⁵¹ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 69. See also “Writing Alphabets” (Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 70), and “M” (Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 69) as other examples of alphabet poems.

⁵² For examples, see Lim, *Ars Poetica*, “Haiku: Relationship,” 56; “Choke. Gasp,” 97; and “To the Sonnet,” 14. See also Lim’s discussion of using freer form in Quayum, “The Apprentice Years,” 239-40 and elsewhere in that interview.

⁵³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives*. Singapore: (Marshall Cavendish, 2011), 287.

⁵⁴ Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 56.

⁵⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Choke. Gasp,” *Ars Poetica*, 96–98.

⁵⁶ Lim, “Choke. Gasp,” *Ars Poetica*, 98.

⁵⁷ Boey, “Hiding,” Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 16.

⁵⁸ The sections in *Joss and Gold* are “Crossing,” “Circling,” and “Landing.” The sections in *Do You Live In?* are “The Power of Once,” “Nine Egrets,” “Retail Therapy: Mall Ballads,” and “Embracing the Angel.”

⁵⁹ Ives, “Is Hong Kong?”

⁶⁰ Ho and Lee, “City Poetics,” 52.

⁶¹ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 559.

⁶² Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 559.

⁶³ Lim, “Cassandra Days: Poems,” *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 776.

⁶⁴ *The Judgment of Whole Kingdoms and Nations, Concerning the Rights, Power, and Prerogative [sic] of Kings, and the Rights, Priviledges [sic], and Properties of the People: ... Written by a True Lover of the Queen and Country*, T. Harrison, 1710, Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Southern Methodist University. 23 May 2019. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=txshracd2548&tabID=T001&docId=CW3303787947&type=multiPage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. Here page 38; italics original.

⁶⁵ Lim, “Cassandra Days,” 776.

⁶⁶ Lim, “Cassandra Days,” 777.

⁶⁷ Scott L. Schein, “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus’ ‘Agamemnon.’” *Greece & Rome* 29, no. 1 (1982): 11. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/642925.

⁶⁸ Variations on the story of how Cassandra became able to prophesy exist. In one version, Apollo initially gifted her with the ability to foresee the future, but later cursed her after she refused his advances.

⁶⁹ Schein, “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus,’ ‘Agamemnon,” 12.

⁷⁰ See Schein, 11, for a discussion of the placement of Cassandra’s story “just at the point when the audience would expect Agamemnon to be murdered.”

⁷¹ Schein, “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus,’ ‘Agamemnon,” 12.

⁷² Schein, “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus,’ ‘Agamemnon,” 12.

⁷³ Lim, “Cassandra Days,” 778.

⁷⁴ *The Bible*. New King James Version, Ruth 1:22, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ruth+1%3A22&version=NKJV>.

⁷⁵ Lim, “Casandra Days,” 778.

⁷⁶ Lim, “Casandra Days,” 778.

⁷⁷ The quote, “if you’re going through hell, keep going,” is often mistakenly attributed to Winston Churchill. See “Quotes Falsely Attributed to Winston Churchill,” 2019. <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/quotes-falsely-attributed/> and John Randall Dunn, “Binding the Power of Pain,” Editorial, *Christian Science Sentinel* 45, no. 44 (October 30, 1943), Section: 1851.

⁷⁸ Lim also wrote about her time in malls in Hong Kong; I did not reference this “Retail Therapy: Mall Ballads” section in *Do You Live In?* or in her *Mall Ballads* chapbook, as I had discussed this in an earlier work. See Pauline T. Newton, “Walking Backwards and Sideways: The Transmigrations of the Poet in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Work,” *Asiatic* 8, no. 2 (2014): 85-96. See also Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Mall Ballads* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, English Department, 2013). She refers to the Zamboni in “The Rink,” *Do You Live In?*, 49. The whole “Mall Ballads” section in *Do You Live In?* runs from 43-74.

⁷⁹ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 19.

⁸⁰ Lim, *Do You Live In?*, 19.

⁸¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), 3.

⁸² Cameron, “Poetic Imagination,” 221.

⁸³ Zahara Jamal, Lecture, Dallas, 24 April 2019.

⁸⁴ Cameron, “Poetic Imagination,” 238.

⁸⁵ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 558.

⁸⁶ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 558, 561.

⁸⁷ Upton, ““Survival—to Keep Writing,”” 559.

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