To Honor the Poet: A Festschrift for Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Introduction

The eight articles in this section of *JTAS*, Volume 10, Number 2, form a Festschrift to honor Shirley Geok-lin Lim, the distinguished Asian American poet, professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and one of the founders of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. Lim was born in British Malaya during the period of Japanese Occupation (1942–45), in a culturally mixed Chinese Hokkien-*Peranakan* family in the historical town of Malacca in southwestern Malaysia, layered with British, Dutch, and Portuguese footprints left in forts, museums, churches, and other colonial structures. After completing her undergraduate study in English Literature at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Lim chose to travel to the United States in 1969 on a Fulbright Fellowship to pursue a PhD at Brandeis University.

Although Lim began as a poet, and considers poetry her favored genre, making her first breakthrough on the international stage with *Crossing the Peninsula*, her debut poetry collection, it is her cross-cultural memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, "threading between at least two subjectivities, a Malaysian Chinese and an Asian American," that has received the most critical attention.[1] The well-known feminist scholar and publisher Florence Howe, who was instrumental in publishing the memoir, remarked about its outstanding success:

> *Among the White Moon Faces* was published … to impressive reviews, immediate acclaim, even an American Book Award … [T]he story of her academic career continues to be assigned to students in college classes. … Shirley Lim's memoir has become the subject of critical essays by other, usually younger academic critics, who see it as a touchstone text for their thinking and teaching

> about cross-cultural studies … even when scholars [write] about Shirley Lim's poetry or her fiction, the memoir is essential reading and not far off in the background.[2]

The book's comparative success is also evident in the range of articles collected in the *Asiatic* special issue on Lim published in June 2014. Of its fifteen articles, five are general in nature, while three are on poetry, three on her novels, and four on the memoir. To redress this imbalance and to reclaim Lim's primary identity as a poet actively engaged with poetry—"writing it, thinking about it, planning to teach it, accepting invitations for public readings and workshops on poetry"—the articles in this issue of *JTAS* are focused solely on Lim's poetry.[3]

Lim's first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, earned her the 1980 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, marking the first time this prize was awarded to an Asian and a woman writer. Since then, she has published a dozen books and chapbooks of poetry, from several locations, i.e., Malaysia, Singapore, the US, and Hong Kong, tracing the trajectory of her own journeys. Some titles of her books in different genres—*Crossing the Peninsula*, *Another Country* (1982), *No Man's Grove* (1985), *An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* (1996), *Two Dreams* (1997), *Walking Backwards* (2010), *Do You Live In?* (2015), *The Irreversible Sun* (2015)—and student magazines she helped to establish in Hong Kong while working there as visiting professor—*Yuan Yang*, *Moving Poetry*, *Halfway Home*—reflect Lim's themes as a poet: loss and longing, roots and routes, dislocation and ambivalence, emotional shuttling between two or more lives and societies, place promiscuity, in-betweenness of the trans-nation, and the paradox of "homelessness" in the midst of having multiple "homes." These titles underline Lim's nomadism; her life on the road as a *chiropathik* or wayfarer; recurrent cross-border movements and ties; her restless search for the halfway home across international borders; and her ambivalent sense of self like one who is, in British Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid's phrase, "caught in a hall of mirrors."[4]

The articles in this Festschrift broadly explore the thematic and stylistic dimensions of Lim's poetry, examining her entire oeuvre, selected works, or a single volume. Together, they argue how Lim's poetry often tends to be subjective and deeply personal, even autobiographical, crisscrossing between her memories of childhood in Malacca and her present life in the US, and sometimes delving into her experiences as a sojourner in other countries. They further argue that Lim's durable ties across countries and recurrent transnational mobility compose an inclusive, international, postnational, and cosmopolitan poet who remains defiant of national borders or national identity, and whose artistic production cannot be categorized in Fredric Jameson's reductive definition of Third World literature as national allegory.[5] These articles, however, also thematize the sense of dislocation, deracination, and displacement that permeates her work—the ambivalence, in-betweenness, and

liminality of a traveler, a bird of passage, whose dominant sensibility is that of an "unmoored" "unmade i." [6]

While many of the articles pivot on Lim's poems depicting a problematic Malaysian past from the vantage point of her American present, other articles explore the poems that sketch her vision of the United States, where she has been living with her American spouse and son for more than fifty years. These poems portray happy and joyful experiences, juxtaposed with the outsider's many anxieties and uncertainties of not-belonging—where past and present intermix to generate doubt, dilemma, and vacillation, as embodied in her poem "Horizon":

> I, I, I astride my carriage,
> Away from home and cemetery,
> Eyes fixed on the eternal
> Horizon eternally wavering.[7]

The eight articles have been arranged sequentially for range and scope of analysis, beginning with those that address a larger body of Lim's poetry, to those on a selected body, and finally to articles that concentrate on a single text. In this arrangement, we have also considered the articles' thematic proximity—transnational, diasporic, familial, political—to structure a gradual transition in framing.

The first essay, "'The Art of Being Home': Home and Travel in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Poetry," is by **Boey Kim Cheng**. As the title suggests, Boey explores the contrary motifs of travel and home in Lim's poetry, couched in a narrative that tracks a day the author spent with the poet in her Santa Barbara home. Boey probes the poet's complex and ambivalent constructions of the signifier "home" and examines the changes over the course of her oeuvre of her perception of what and where home is. The article also explicates the poetics of travel and transnational mobility that informs Lim's work, to understand how these poetics complement and yet contrast with the senses of home that her poems imagine. The essay provides a balanced study of Lim's Malacca poems as well as the ones on Santa Barbara that have received relatively less attention so far. Explaining why Lim decided to make Santa Barbara her new home, Boey vivifies the cultural and topographical similarities it bears with her original hometown in Malaysia. The article draws a portrait of the poet at her Santa Barbara home, surrounded by the artefacts collected throughout her writing-cum-wandering life as she crisscrossed and recrossed places and cultures around the world.

The next article, "'cultivated, / Wild, exotic': Nationalism and Internationalism in the Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim," by **Dennis Haskell**, overlaps partly with Boey's essay; both emphasize the poetry's first-person subjectivity, its stories of recurrent mobility and "aimless wondering," and the shifting, often unstable, sense of home as poignantly phrased in the poem "Home Stretch," "a word with no / stillness, no stand still."[8] However, while noting Lim's transnationalism, internationalism, or cosmopolitanism, as in Boey's piece, Haskell's article queries Lim's perception of nationalism.

Why had the poet come to reject it for an open, inclusive, and borderless world? Haskell argues that Lim renounced nationalism for two distinct reasons: she was disillusioned by a nationalist ideology that was deployed to oppress and repress the minorities in Malaysia; and secondly, rather than writing public, national poetry as practiced by fellow poets such as Edwin Thumboo, she subscribed as a poet to the values of "spontaneity, naturalness, simplicity and private emotions."[9] Haskell further argues that the personal in Lim's poetry, its attributes of spontaneity and naturalness, individualistic rebelliousness, sense of loss, longing, and nostalgia, as well as her interest in "negative capability and in the natural world," establish her affinities with Romanticism and Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. While Haskell's placement of Lim's poems in the tradition of British Romanticism is not entirely new, as Lim herself acknowledges her debt to the Romantic poets, his readings bring fresh insight to the arguments proffered in this set of articles.[10]

The main thrust in **Pauline T. Newton**'s article, "Juncos, Sparrows, and Crows in the Transnational Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim," as in the previous two articles, is also on Lim's transnationalism and transnational sensibility, and Lim's efforts "to express and encourage inclusivity through the agency of her poetic imagination." But unlike the preceding articles, Newton's deliberation focuses on Lim's collections published after 2014—*Ars Poetica for the Day*; *The Irreversible Sun*; and *Do You Live In?*—and her three poems published in *Feminist Studies* in 2018, "Cassandra Days: Poems." Newton traces Lim's identity formation over time, to read these recent works as a fitting reflection of that ever-changing, expanding subject. Newton's article apprehends not just Lim's pre- and postmigration selves but also the more recent segments of her journey, such as her residence in Hong Kong. This brings Newton to Lim's Hong Kong poems in *Do You Live In*?, on the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, inspired by Lim's students when she was Visiting Professor at the City University of Hong Kong. Although these poems have clear political overtones, Newton agrees with Lim that they are not "political."[11] In a 2003 interview, Lim states, "[m]ore significant I think is the ideological weight that bears on most of my thinking—the leftward leaning perspective, the sympathy for the weaker, poorer, the outsider."[12] This "leftward leaning perspective" of sympathizing with the poor and dispossessed, and to work for social justice, which Lim had learnt from her own life experience, is what introduces a political weight to some of her later poems. Although one cannot suggest that Lim is an overtly political poet with certain distinct propaganda in mind, Newton's article ends with an extended discussion of Lim's recent Cassandra poems, that, addressing the 2016 US presidential elections, figure the anger, sorrow, and loathing of a world-centric imagination intuiting the dire changes from an open, inclusive, and transnational USA to a nation ridden by jingoism, xenophobia, and paranoia.

The three articles that follow, Grace V. S. Chin's "'My Father's Daughter': Filial Dislocation in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Poetry," Walter Lim's "Patriarchal Authority and the Southeast Asian Chinese Diaspora in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Passports and Other*

Lives," and Andrew Hock Soon Ng's "The Familial Grotesque in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Poetry," have considerable thematic affinity. They concentrate on those poems by Lim that depict complicated, ambivalent relationships with her parents. These articles form a cluster within this collection and should preferably be read as one "family" of articles, supplementing and complementing one another. As I have mentioned earlier, Lim's memories of childhood and parents, her personal and familial history in Malacca, and the dis-ease and anxiety these memories often evoke are central to her imagination. Not surprisingly, critics often return to this theme in the interrogation of her poems, especially when analyzing how the poet writes about this past from her immigration country and transnational space. While Boey's and Haskell's articles occasionally engage with these materials to explore and illustrate a diasporic and transnational sensibility, in the articles by Chin, Lim, and Ng they are pivotal and occupy center stage.

Grace V. S. Chin's article focuses on the father figure and the father–daughter dynamic in Lim's poetry to argue how Lim's relationship with her father changed suddenly the day she was first hit by him. That traumatic moment—especially so because her father was up to then perceived as a loving, caring parent who flouted Chinese patrilineal conventions by treating the girl child as a "a gift, a treasured child," rather than marginalizing her in a society that traditionally favors the male child—caused an acute psychical and emotional rupture, reflected in the portrayal of the father in many of her poems. [13] Chin argues that the traumatic break created a push and pull tendency, a seeking of connection with the father "while simultaneously using geographical distance to deflect and vex, even dislocate those very same bonds." The father's violence and the child's wounded relationship exacerbated and reified Lim's uprootedness and displacement from Malaysia and diasporic rootlessness in America, creating a psychological dislocation that eventually affected her sense of personhood, familial bonds, and notions of filial piety. The latter, Chin notes, is particularly thorny because, as a core principle in traditional Chinese as well as *Peranakan*-Chinese cultures, filial piety essentially defines the parent–child relationship.

Walter S. H. Lim also examines some of the same poems—"My Father," "Father from Asia," "Father in China," "Bukit China," "Black and White"—discussed in Chin's article, to highlight the ambivalent—love/hate, respectful/disrespectful, attachment/detachment, sympathy/aloofness—nature of the father–daughter relationship in Shirley Lim's poetry, but with crucial differences in the way he frames and draws the parameters of his reading. Firstly, as the title suggests, the article's focus is limited to a single collection of Lim's poetry, *Passports and Other Lives* (2011), while extending its scope by locating the argument in the larger context of the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora. Moreover, he draws comparisons of Shirley Lim's representation of the patriarchal authority in her poems, as well as in her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), with similar thematic elements in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), and the Indonesian-born Chinese American poet Li-Young Lee's "magical work of memory and myth,"[14] *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995). His thesis unpacks the similarities and differences in the poet's

abjection of paternal authority while embarked on her immigrant life in the US vis-à-vis Kingston's and Lee's parallel themes in their works. Walter Lim begins his discussion by providing a brief juxtaposition of the mother and father figures in Shirley Lim's poetry to argue that in spite of the father's violent nature, he was by far the more affectionate and caring parental figure compared to the mother, who committed "[m]aternal malice"[15] in abandoning her children, and whom the poet asserts remains unforgiven: "I will not forgive you / till I have made you pay the full / debt of your abandonment."[16] Walter Lim concludes that Lim's tensed and fractured relationship with her parents continues to haunt her through dreams, photographs, and the persistence of memory, thus establishing psychological and emotional continuities between the diasporic subject in America and her birth country, Malaysia, that also define and characterize her transnational identity.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng's interpretive pivot on Lim's familial poems reads them not as positive or affirmative but as sites of conflict associated with repression, unbelonging, and embroilment. He focuses on a major figurative strategy, the use of grotesque imagery, to portray the family, its individual members, and more so the women (i.e., mother and grandmother) than the men (i.e., the father). Ng critiques this strategy as problematic, arguing that it undermines Lim's feminist position and reinforces the patriarchal status quo that she otherwise seeks to challenge and subvert. Ng draws on a select/slim body of poems from Lim's *Monsoon History* (1994) and *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998)—"Ah Mah," "Mother," "Mother wasn't," "Mother's Shoes," "Father from Asia," "Watching," "Women's Dreams"—to cast his discourse through the lens of such theorists of the grotesque as Justin Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Thomas Weiskel, and of feminist scholars as Mary Russo and Margaret Miles. Ng argues that the use of the grotesque and its concomitant methods of caricature, inversion, and hybridization could have been used in "Ah Mah," on the one hand, to expose the true grotesque of patriarchal body politics premised on Confucian belief that discriminates against women, and, on the other, as a potent image of transcendence and female empowerment. But the grotesque in "Ah Mah" remains problematic because although the fetishization of the grandmother's bound feet helped to preserve her sexual innocence, arguably the deformity was also enabling, elevating her social status and economic comfort. In the poetic representation of parents, affection for the father may have withheld a direct ascription of grotesquerie to the father figure, except through abstract, symbolic ways. Sympathy, however, was a sentiment largely absent in Lim's perception of the mother and this less forgiving portrayal renders the mother as comical, unnatural, obscene, and monstrous.

In her article, "Past Spaces and Revisits in Transnational Poetry: The Sojourning Returnee of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Do You Live In?*," **Tamara S. Wagner** probes the changing positions and perspectives of a temporary returnee and an observant sojourner, marked by an admixture of reexperiencing and reordering of memory, in Lim's 2015 volume of poetry, *Do You Live In?* The year 2015 was a particularly productive

one that saw three compilations in print, providing a tripartite structure of poetic expression in Lim's current work. Of these, *Do You Live In?*, based on a series of walking poems or "perambulatory themes,"[17] divided into four sections, specifically encapsulates reflections on renewed migrations to Lim's "place of nomadism"—spaces in Asia where she was at once, in her own words, "a nomad and yet a home-body—a resident alien."[18] These include poems of revisits to childhood spaces in Malacca as a temporary returnee and to Hong Kong as an observant sojourner. As the poet captures the complex emotions of return in these poems, Wagner argues, "the spaces of the past become doubly reordered through the revisiting." These spaces are informed by personal memories, which in turn are reconstructed through the recalling of the landscapes of the past that have in several cases changed beyond recognition. In expressing this process and the emotions involved in it, the poems convey an increasingly transnational and transcultural sensibility. Wagner maintains that although critics in recent years associate Lim's poetry with specific geographical or geopolitical categories, i.e., Chinese, Malaysian and Hong Kongese, Lim's poetry should justifiably be read within the paradigm of transnationalism shaped by her cross-border movements and recurrent nomadism, of traversing geopolitical and cultural boundaries time and time again.

Finally, in "*Embracing the Angel*: Reading Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Hong Kong Poetry with Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*," **Joan Chiung-huei Chang** provides an analytical discussion of Lim's collection on the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, juxtaposing the work with Hannah Arendt's classic "textbook" on participatory democracy and the civil disobedience movement of the 1960s, *The Human Condition*. Chang's argument, while different from Wagner's, shares Wagner's interest in Lim's Hong Kong poems. In *Do You Live In?*, the last two sections, "Retail Therapy: Mall Ballads" and "Embracing the Angel," comprise the Hong Kong poems. The chapbook *Embracing the Angel*, published a year earlier, has twenty poems (included in *Do You Live In?*), all addressing the peaceful protests in Hong Kong from September 26 to December 15, 2014, against the People's Republic of China (PRC). The poems, as Lim states in her preface to the chapbook, were written in the spirit of "a mother, teacher and poet" who felt both "anxious" and "prideful"[19] upon seeing her students take to the streets when the PRC began violating the "one country, two systems" policy established at the 1997 handover of Hong Kong. Chang argues that the poems' memorializing of the Umbrella Movement and their valorization of the students' struggles epitomize what Arendt calls a "space of appearance," manifesting Lim's political ideas. Arendt believed that the storyteller's mission is to make a hero's life complete after s/he writes the heroic action into stories. In writing these poems chronicling the students' vision and struggles, Chang argues, Lim was thus fulfilling the poet's mission as storyteller.

Overall, these articles cover considerable ground in the reading and exploration of Lim's poetry and imagination, approaching her work from different angles and literary-cultural traditions. The predominant argument focuses on Lim's multiple

presences in many countries, her "nomadic forms of cross-border movements and ties,"[20] and persistent attempts to negotiate different homing spaces, all of which have increasingly made her poetry cross-border, crosshatched, and "deterritorialised,"[21] or multinational and multilocal at the same time, creating a rich tapestry of ideas, images, and cultures that tends to gather the whole world, in Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's metaphor, "in one nest."[22] These articles will generate more dialogue on Lim's poetry to underline her rich, flourishing, and complex imagination, riding cultures and continents or, like the Emersonian equestrian, straddling multiple "horses" at the same time, stretching it, as Lim explained in a recent interview, "to a utopian reach while writing within the poetics of the quotidian."[23]

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Notes

[1] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Academic and Other Memoirs: Memory, Poetry, and the Body," *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performance, and Culture*, ed. Rocio G. Davis, Jaume Aurell, and Ana Beatriz Delgado (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008), 37.

[2] Florence Howe, "Foreword," *Asiatic* 8, no. 1 (June 2014): 9.

[3] Upton, Joe, "'Survival—to keep writing': An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54, no. 4 (2018): 562.

[4] Eve Gerber, "The Best Transnational Literature: Recommended by Mohsin Hamid," https://fivebooks.com/best-books/transnational-literature-mohsin-hamid/.

[5] Lim is fairly explicit in her rejection of the ideology of nationalism. In her interview in *Asiatic*, she explains, "Literature is human speech and speaks to all humans; political divisions of nations may inspire some writers, but many more will, as James Joyce said, 'fly by those nets.'" Mohammad A. Quayum, "The Apprentice Years: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'First' Interview," *Asiatic* 11, no. 1 (June 2017): 241.

[6] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Sing Cuckoo," *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 36; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Saying Yes," *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 66.

[7] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Listening to the Singer* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Maya Press, 2007), 134.

[8] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Home Stretch," in *Ars Poetica*, 85.

[9] Quoted in Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), 119.

[10] In her interview with Joe Upton, Lim, for example, comments, "[m]y work is as much influenced by the Romantic poets such as Blake, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth and early women writers as the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen and George Eliot as by American writers like Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros and Louise Erdrich." Upton, "Survival," 560.

[11] Upton, "Survival," 559.

[12] Quayum, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim," 157.

[13] Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 48.

[14] Li-Young Lee, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), blurb.

[15] Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 51.

[16] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011), 302–03.

[17] Boey Kim Cheng, "The Hiding Places of the Imagination," in *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 10.

[18] Lim, *Ars Poetica*, 9–10.

[19] Shirley Geon-lin Lim, "Preface," in *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, 2014), 3.

[20] Thomas Faist, "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?" in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 17.

[21] Lim used this phrase to describe her poetry in her 2003 interview. See Mohammad A. Quayum, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim," 157.

[22] Tagore set up a university in West Bengal, India called Visva-Bharati whose motto was *Yatra visvam bhavatieka nidam*, which literally means "Where the whole world meets in one nest." See Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 267; and Mohammad A. Quayum, "Education for Tomorrow: The Vision of Rabindranath Tagore," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (2016), 2.

[23] Upton, "'Survival,'" 559.