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## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

Past Spaces and Revisits in Transnational Poetry: The Sojourning Returnee of Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's Do You Live In?

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1fp3n077>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 10(2)

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### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/T8102045626

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# The Sojourning Returnee of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Do You Live In?*

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## Introduction

In her much-cited memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1996), Shirley Geok-lin Lim describes growing up in different, overlapping minority groups and feeling isolated within them: being *Peranakan* among an extended Chinese family, being a motherless child in a household of many aunts, being of Chinese descent in colonial Malaya, and becoming an Asian immigrant in the United States of America in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The childhood chapters vividly evoke everyday life in Malacca, then part of British Malaya. In her early twenty-first-century poetry, Lim returns to the spaces of her past, reflecting on the themes of return, sojourning, and transnational connections. She dwells on moments in the present in these spaces, exploring how memory molds the experience of a specific place and, in return, how revisiting can reshape memories. The Malaysian spaces of her poetry emerge both as redolent with relived moments from childhood and as transformed by changing geopolitical as well as personal circumstances. These places are at once informed by intense personal emotion and reviewed through the critical distance of Lim's own postcolonial scholarship and self-conscious transnationalism. Foregrounding the historical and geopolitical complexities of these spaces hence also forms a reaction to the persistent tendency in current criticism to question Lim about the "influence of China and Chineseness on her writing" or to situate her work within the "development of local anglophone poetics in Hong Kong and Singapore."<sup>2</sup> Lim's poetic reflections on her returns and sojourns in Asia as an American-based academic writing retrospectively strikingly juxtapose the changing places of her past, not only with snapshots of these spaces in the present, but also with a transnational experience that is becoming increasingly widespread. Her most localized poetry thus participates in a transnational

project of addressing the emotions of continued migration, revisits, and the transformative returns to the changing spaces of the past through poetry itself.

In 2015, Lim published three collections of poetry: *Do You Live In?*, *The Irreversible Sun*, and *Ars Poetica for the Day*.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these collections provide a tripartite structure of poetic expression in her current work, with *Do You Live In?* in particular encapsulating reflections on Lim's renewed migrations within different places in Asia, as I shall discuss in more detail. As she captures the complex emotions of return, the spaces of the past become doubly reordered through the revisiting. These spaces are informed by personal memories, which in turn become remade through a retracing of the landscapes of the past that have in several cases changed beyond recognition. In expressing this process and the emotions involved in it, Lim seeks to convey a transnational and transcultural experience that is becoming increasingly more common, and yet which the experience of migration encapsulates through a relocation and remaking of identity that cannot be confounded with a more leisurely revisiting. In the simultaneity of both experiences, Lim's renewed visits to Malaysia and Singapore—the latter separated from the former in 1965—produce intriguing double perspectives, self-consciously experienced again from the shifting vantage point of a temporary returnee and an observant sojourner. A critical reading of Lim's poems on Southeast Asian spaces in *Do You Live In?* enables us to trace how reflections on memory and place in a world of growing global change and exchanges contribute to an awareness of the everyday experiences of the transnational, while cutting through diasporic and other dichotomies.

### **Transcending Transnational Definitions**

In reflecting on her writing career, Lim speaks of her “present urgent struggle ... to stretch my imagination to a utopian reach while writing within the poetics of the quotidian; perhaps working out of a trans-real rather than transnational site.”<sup>4</sup> This significance of the quotidian, of the everyday and how it can be imbued with poetic meaning, links her particular transnational journey (or journeys) to a shared experience that involves similar everyday realities around the globe.

Perhaps ironically then, while Lim has endeavored to situate herself within and, increasingly, to transcend or rework transnational writing, recent studies, including several interviews over the last few years, have been registering attempts to pin down her work within specific geographical or geopolitical categories, usually embedded within a binary postcolonial or diasporic paradigm. Thus, Joe Upton prompts her to discuss her “Chineseness,” which Lim acknowledges as “that other language domain whose absence looms in every anglophone text I produce,” terming it “the erased, aborted subject I have been approaching ever since I began consciously to place myself in a tradition of literature” (560). As Weihsin Gui has already suggested in his discussion of Lim's earlier collection, *Walking Backwards: New Poems* (2010), “[o]ne cannot mistake Lim's vehement refusal of either filiative or affiliative identification with China

and Chinese culture”: There is a “nonidentity between Lim’s objective sense of herself and the concept of China either as a nation-state or as an ethnic or cultural identity.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, even as Lim emphasizes that she has consciously “over-layered [her] own anglophone, British American formations” onto a “plural-cultural identity,” what she celebrates in her more recent work is precisely how the “influences on art today more and more are cross-border, cross-national, cross-hatched-everything.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in “City Poetics: An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” Tammy Lai-Ming Ho and Jason Eng Hun Lee open up by positioning Lim within a chart of “anglophone poetics” with specific reference to her sojourn in Hong Kong as an academic and writer in order to stress how she “highlights in her work an articulation of identity that is hybrid, transnational and global, and yet also intimately intertwined with city spaces such as Singapore and Hong Kong.”<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Mohammad A. Quayum raises the fraught question of parallel dual perceptions of being an Asian American and a Chinese Malaysian, which forms for Lim an opposing contrast rather than a parallel, while she once again stresses that she sees her work as “deterritorialized,” even as her “imagination has been and continues to be located in [her] earlier experiences as a Malaysian.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition, her complementary perspective as a trained postcolonial scholar and a literary critic specializing in Asian American writing informs her changing negotiation of “home” as “such a first-order question and thematic.”<sup>9</sup> Transnationalism offers a more flexible framework for her reordering of memories and feelings of belonging, an opportunity to transcend the binaries of more traditional postcolonial and diasporic approaches, and yet her writing also urges the adaptation of the transnational paradigm beyond an American-centered Transnationalism Studies. A discussion of Lim’s poetic representations of her changing engagement with spaces in Asia—partly associated with childhood memories and partly connected to her work as a scholar—therefore also needs to be carefully attuned to the differences between these spaces and what they stand for in Lim’s life experience and artistic imagination.

The revisiting of the spaces of the past in *Do You Live In?* registers a dual change within the temporarily returning migrant and within the spaces as well. Boey Kim Cheng speaks of “a sense of movement and a transnational poetics that traverses geopolitical and cultural boundaries” in Lim’s latest poetry.<sup>10</sup> Several volumes of her twenty-first-century poems express what Boey terms “perambulatory themes,” which express her experience as a sojourning returnee (9). Temporarily living and working in new or changed environments in different parts of Asia, Lim simultaneously revisits the spaces of her past while encountering them anew. As Boey pointedly puts it, “the cosmopolitan writer is now a participant observer in her host culture, part of her liminal self at home in the dense cityscape, the other part resolutely nomadic and marginal, her detached observations of the local spaces and inhabitants revealing as much about the host culture as it does about the internationalist and displaced traveller-poet” (9). This dual perspective is played out in several distinctive ways in *Do You Live In?*, as we shall see. The glimpses of past spaces are firmly located in moments of the present,

carefully poised in the radically changed realities of these places. Revisiting becomes an admixture of experiencing once again and a reordering of memory. In her earlier poetry, memories tend to be placed in a more clear-cut dichotomy—what Boey diagnoses as “this dialectic between travel and home,” which is already present in Lim’s poetry of the 1980s (10). Reading *Walking Backwards* side by side with Lim’s novel *Joss & Gold* (2001), Pauline T. Newton has argued that in “both texts, Lim successfully demonstrates the challenge of facing myriad crossings,” showing the protagonist/speaker may find “pleasure and comfort in her travels, and yet disturbing echoes about displacement reverberate throughout *Walking Backwards*.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout Lim’s poetry, the concept of travel bursts through the dichotomies of immigration: of the place of departure and of arrival, the old and the new home, leaving and home-making. Boey’s thoughtful choice of the word “travel” in his discussion of Lim’s early writing hence already pinpoints how Lim has always been circumventing both the sense of a permanent departure and of a one-way journey to a place of arrival. *Do You Live In?* goes further in adding a question mark to the issue not so much of belonging as of residing.

In publishing three curiously complementary collections of poems in 2015, Lim newly addresses the shifting meanings of differently experienced spaces. The spatial juxtaposition helps us chart how her writing continues to map out, order, and reorder her memories of migration and of its shifting place in her poetry, providing a larger context for the specific question of how memory shapes perceptions of space in *Do You Live In? As The Irreversible Sun* aims to capture and celebrate the changing physical landscapes of California in poetic form, this collection may be said to demarcate a reflection on decades of being at home—and part of the landscape—in California.

In a parallel project of reorientation, *Ars Poetica for the Day* draws on different literary traditions, divergent life experiences, as well as spaces, in order to express what are presented as shared human concerns. This collection is least inflected by a sense of the geopolitical or geographical, which forms a recurrent theme in the writing of postcolonial or diasporic writers, including some of Lim’s own early work, in particular her fiction.<sup>12</sup> Instead, these poems dramatize Lim’s often acknowledged roots in nineteenth-century British poetry. Thus, the collection opens up with a piece simply entitled “Fable,” evoking the unceasing power of inherited stories that we can revive even without meaning to, and even if they were not meant for us, for “[s]omeone / is speaking / not to you / who’s listening, / although it’s you / who’s made the voices / reverberate / out of the noise.”<sup>13</sup> Comprising poems concerned with storytelling or literary expression more generally (“To the Storyteller,” “To the Muse,” “To the Sonnet,” “Re-reading the Greeks,” to name just a few), as well as with well-known figures of literary, art, or music history (“Jane Austen,” “Picasso,” “My dear Rossini”), *Ars Poetica* appropriately concludes with a piece on “Wordsworth and Coleridge” as two influential figures in traditional modern poetry who have redefined poetry’s relationship both to “Nature’s loyal / beauties” and to “your tremulous memory”: “Two against the world of letters.”<sup>14</sup> Interspersed with these pieces are more specific,

personal reflections (“On Leaving a Tenured Position”), musings on home and homelessness, and an evocation of the Goddess of Mercy in Chinese Buddhism, “To Guan Yin,” bowed to by “the miserable / billions” as “they pray, waiting / for the scalpel.”<sup>15</sup> Precisely the specific context intends to foreground a shared human condition. Transnational poetics, in this collection, means expressing the general through the particular, including the local, bringing together, while challenging, the “fables” of different pasts and different cultures.

In sharp contrast, *Do You Live In?* signals in its very title its rootedness in the perception of geopolitical space while problematizing how we move within it and write about it. Revisiting the spaces of a personal past, partly during temporary sojourns, appointed as a visiting academic in different Asian cities, Lim encounters both new and changed places. The confusing mix of familiarity and difference complicates the migrant’s recollections and her experience of return, while drawing any dichotomous framework into question. As Lim’s poems endeavor to express moments of recognition and the reordering of emotions, experience, and memory, they provide glimpses of everyday life now in these spaces, viewed through the dual lens of the migrant encountering the once familiar and the sojourner from overseas who is more familiar with the everyday elsewhere. Simultaneously, her poetry registers the resultant multiple vision as an increasingly common component of transnational experience. In her introduction to the collection, Lim suggests that the poems mark a “home stretch,” covering a time of revisits and temporary sojourns, when she was at once “a nomad and yet a ‘home-body’—a resident alien” that defined her various visiting professorships in Hong Kong and Singapore between 2012 and 2015 as a “place of nomadism.”<sup>16</sup> These “poems of different homes, written in present tense of what is past” concentrate on sites in three different places: Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong (“Introduction” 11). In its entirety, the collection aims to achieve a wholeness that transcends the fragmentary experience that the individual pieces evoke. As Weihsin Gui advises in his discussion of postcolonial lyric poetry, an “aesthetic consideration of the lyric form in relation to subjectivity might foreground how the postcolonial lyric cherishes the concept of a bounded self while [the lyric] at the same time reshapes these boundaries.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jahan Ramazani reacts against the hitherto prevailing understanding that “[p]oetry may seem an improbable genre to consider within transnational contexts” not only to show that poetic forms (like all genres) travel, but also that poets can travel within their poems by vicariously crossing borders.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ramazani refines the term “transnational” to describe “poems and other cultural works that cross national borders, whether stylistically, topographically, intellectually, or otherwise” (181). This also connects Lim’s ongoing experiments with anglophone poetic traditions (such as the legacies of British Romantic poetry) to her overarching negotiation of different homing spaces, including that of the poetic form itself as a way to articulate a transnational experience.

*Do You Live In?* questions the concept of a single home or even of two contrasting homes, located respectively in the past and in the present. The bounded

self, therefore, needs to be found somewhere else, or constructed out of different memories, not located in a particular place or places, but perhaps in the “place of nomadism.”<sup>19</sup> The collection originally emerged from a series of walking poems. This idea of mobility and movement, of observing through encountering (and newly encountering) different spaces, still pervades and structures the collection. Ironically perhaps, the first set of walking poems took place in Santa Barbara, California, and were subsequently collected in a separate edition. In addition, the pieces that made their way into *Do You Live In?* are further sorted according to place. The collection itself is divided into four parts: “The Power of Once,” “Nine Egrets,” “Retail Therapy: Mall Ballads,” and “Embracing the Angel.” The first section most urgently and insistently engages with the revisiting of past spaces (located in what is now the nation-state Malaysia), whereas especially the poems engaging with observations of daily life in Hong Kong (collected in the final two sections) are from the vantage point of a visitor or temporary sojourner. These poems engender a different perspective on the idea of a nomadic home. Through the juxtaposition, the recognitions of a temporary returnee who revisits childhood spaces on the one hand, and the observations of the sojourner (the visiting academic, temporarily based in familiar and yet defamiliarized spaces) on the other hand, become curiously intertwined. The parallels as well as the noted differences urge us to complicate the divergent experiences of transnationalism.

The first part, “The Power of Once,” consists of twelve short lyrics that dramatize different responses to the speaker’s temporary return to the country of childhood and youth. However, the poetic representation of this revisiting simultaneously initiates a reworking of the classic diasporic bifurcation into past and present spaces. Thus, in Lim’s memoir, Malacca is the place of her childhood self, which is left behind in what quintessentially remains a classic Bildungsroman that charts the main protagonist’s growth. The format of the lyric, by contrast, allows Lim to express the emotional experience of the moment, and the collection as a whole consequently produces a juxtaposition of divergent emotions: snapshots of returns and the reordering of memory. Thus, *Do You Live In?* opens with a poem that, while intensely localized centrally addresses the larger questions of individuality versus community, wholeness versus fragmentation, and whether there is a way to differentiate what is past from what is present but preserved through memory. In “1Malaysia,” Lim puns on “one” and “once” to introduce the theme of a bounded self.<sup>20</sup> The diasporic speaker recognizes “many threads un/raveled” as at once “mismatched” and “ripped” and as “woven” once again into one (14). Images of fragmentation, even of a violent ripping apart, are countered by a reconstruction that is at once organic and intensely quotidian as an image, reminding us of the familiar image of the patchwork blanket or quilt in postcolonial writing. C. L. Innes refers to the motif of “stitching and patchwork, and this relates to a concept of history as a kind of patchwork quilt, containing varied ‘limited histories,’ which can be stitched together to make different patterns.”<sup>21</sup> Lim’s poem thus joins a tradition specifically of postcolonial women’s writing and the

alternative histories they present. The simple dichotomy associated with this motif, however, becomes constructively complicated in the subsequent poems.

This introductory piece, in fact, is followed by intensely personal poems that present glimpses into Lim's childhood, such as "Learning the English Alphabet" and "A," about being a schoolgirl in Malacca. "Solemn Missionary Girls" signals a specific time and place by its reference to the death of James Dean in 1955.<sup>22</sup> The encapsulated emotion becomes firmly set in history; historicized, almost with a sense of self-irony that simultaneously encompasses the presence of the global—of globalizing popular culture—in colonial Malaya and hence in childhood memories of what is now a postcolonial nation-state. The missionary girls' reaction to James Dean's death evokes a shift from the colonial to the global, with the loss of an American teen icon reported in a British colony "as if a Prince of the Royal family / had died" (24). Several layers of irony help to dismantle a dichotomy between an intensely localized childhood and subsequent transnational journeys. The speaker evokes an ironic instance in colonial history and the history of globalization (the putatively solemn missionary girls weeping over the death of an American teen icon), but juxtaposes it with her personal memories, her own individual reactions, and thereby also a more encompassing negotiation of sudden death, grief, and comfort:

I knew a girl who cried the day  
James Dean died. But I knew better  
Than to pin ears to the crackling radio,  
When "To An Athlete Dying Young" read  
Louder than any screen James Dean. (24)

To this colonial schoolgirl, the popular icon remains remote: a "screen James Dean." Instead, the global reportage of his death is countered by poetry itself, by A. E. Housman's reflections on a young man's sudden death in "To An Athlete Dying Young," published in his 1896 collection *A Shropshire Lad*.<sup>23</sup> Housman creates a melancholy reflection on death and grief that curiously parallels and yet, in the speaker's memory, rivals Dean's death. Housman, moreover, pursued his development as a poet in conscious distinction from (and at times in self-conscious contradistinction to) the literary trends of his time. The evocation of his poem, precisely through its juxtaposition with the reference to popular culture (an American teen idol), becomes shorthand for both originality (avoiding or ironically commenting on current trends) and traditions, especially traditional poetry. Furthermore, the simultaneity of influences on the speaker in the past, as remembered in retrospect, articulates the individuality of experience and of memory. Such juxtapositions structure the poem: references to popular culture (James Dean, Cliff Richards), poetic tradition (Housman), colonial references (missionary girls, the Queens Infantry Radio Station), historical detail ("technicolored," "crackling radio"), as well as geographical context in opposition to "faraway America" and specifically California (where Dean died). The heteroglossia of this lyric



express the multiplicity of influences and their ongoing reordering in the speaker's memory, breaking through the expected binaries.

Lyrical poetry, Ramazani argues in *A Transnational Poetics*, "is more often seen as local, regional, or 'stubbornly national,' in T. S. Eliot's phrase," and yet it can transcend the false dichotomy of the local and the global through its very form.<sup>24</sup> Evoking Stuart Hall's model of both "homogenization and absorption" on the one hand and "forms of local opposition and resistance" on the other, Ramazani further emphasizes that a "close look at transnational poetry reveals more complex patterns of assimilation and resistance."<sup>25</sup> Hence, whereas "many transnational poems are 'lyric' in being compressed, self-aware, and sonically rich, they also evince Bakhtin's dialogism, heteroglossia, and hybridization" by "switch[ing] codes between dialect and standard, cross between the oral and the literary, interanimate foreign and indigenous genres, span distances among far-flung locales, frame discourses within one another, and indigenize borrowed forms to serve antithetical ends" (4). Several of Lim's poems on her revisits to Malaysia work through a convergence and fusing—actively bringing "poetry into critical conversations about globalization," which as Ramazani argues, "can thus help focus attention on the creolized texture of transnational experience as it is formally and imaginatively embodied" (4). Lim's redeployment of local terms that are intimately connected to her childhood, while they have meanwhile become appropriated as part of a newly marketed heritage in Southeast Asia, shows how this play with language(s) can engender deliberate ironies. The stark opposition between remembered childhood trauma and the language of heritage preservation generates, through the creolized texture, what Ramazani terms an antithetical effect. In reappropriating the language of the heritage industry, Lim engenders a mix of registers as well as of local and imported expressions.

The figure of the *Peranakan* thus resurfaces in several of Lim's recent poems as an indelible aspect of her childhood trauma. The gritty realities of the quotidian counter the sanitation of the past in what Stanley Fish has so pointedly termed "boutique multiculturalism": "the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other."<sup>26</sup> The lyric form allows Lim to play with seemingly exotic references that resonate with specific memories for the speaker, enabling the reader to experience the irony through the reordering of associations. Several contrasting poems in *Do You Live In?* reference Peranakan culture, history, and their changing significance in contemporary Southeast Asia. The Peranakan Chinese, often also referred to as the *Baba-Nyonya* or Straits Chinese, are a mixed culture, descending primarily from Chinese merchants who had immigrated to the region, in particular to what became the British Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang, and Singapore) in the nineteenth century, and intermarried with Malay women. "Peranakan" is Malay or Indonesian, meaning "locally born" or "local descendants," derived from "anak" (child). The term is now often used to describe a local culture based on a mixed ancestry. Especially Peranakan Chinese traditions have received an immense revival as a celebrated, unique heritage in Singapore, which helps

to express a history of multiculturalism, while signaling a difference from mainland Chinese culture. Much of the interest (and the way it has been marketed), however, has been skewed by a focus on cuisine, clothes, and crockery. In sharp contrast to the still growing plethora of Nyonya cookbooks or fiction celebrating food with nostalgia, Lim's memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, subtitled the *Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* in the edition released in Singapore, is a good reminder of the raw realities of growing up as the daughter of an English and Malay-speaking Peranakan mother, married into a Chinese-speaking family in British Malaya. Although Lim dedicated "Grandmother's Batiks" to the Peranakan Museum in Singapore, evoking the exhibited costumes as "honoring the dead," several pieces in the same collection deliberately explode the image of Nyonya domesticity as celebrated by the heritage industry.<sup>27</sup>

"A History of Aunties" forcefully dismantles the cozy associations with Nyonya embroidery, their distinct clothing, and their minutely decorated slippers.<sup>28</sup> Rendering this domesticity claustrophobic, the poem instead evokes power struggles to dramatize escape. "Nyonya" is Malay and Indonesian, a way to address a married woman, especially of Straits Chinese origins. Now associated in Southeast Asia with the marketing of Nyonya dishes or certain pieces of attire such as the *sarong-kebaya*, a traditional blouse-dress combination that Lim likewise evokes as a way to identify a particular heritage, the meaning that "nyonya" would still have had during Lim's childhood is pointedly replaced by the titular "Aunties." According to Gwee Li Sui, in colloquial Singaporean English, an "auntie" is defined as a "mature lady."<sup>29</sup> Unlike in British English, this "auntie" (and the same counts for "uncle") does not refer to a relative. Although it may be used as an honorific, its daily use especially in contemporary Singapore shows that it has become more flexible, denoting a certain age (often in comparison to that of the speaker). Similarly, its reference is often class-based (associated with blue-collar labor) or might express fond ridicule, sarcasm, and even contemptuous dismissal of outdated behavior.<sup>30</sup> Lim's poem plays with the divergent connotations, poisoning the contemporary image of an "auntie" in the Singaporean context against the domestic power wielded in "Nyonya kingdoms." Thus, the refrain about aunties who "ruled once in their kingdoms," repeated with a sense of liberation at the end as daughters and nieces have escaped "worlds away / from Aunties' Nyonya kingdoms," accentuates the sharp difference between past and present in a deliberate dismantling of heritage nostalgia.<sup>31</sup> The powerful aunties of the past become monstrous: "Pontianak fingers pinching" (18). The *Pontianak* is a vampirish female ghost in Malay folklore. In Lim's poem, the Nyonya aunties throw daughters and nieces "into closets / of mindful fear." Their presence is claustrophobic and stifling, characterized by "loud voices and purses / heavy with embroidery and coin," from which "girls like me" "plot escape / from their sweetmeats and sambals, / 'sundals!' [bitch in Malay/Indonesian] and thick whacking sandals." Hence, when "the Aunties [have] gone / to museums," with "kebayas displayed, / as if just ironed / for approval," there is a sense of relief in this containment (18).

Throughout Lim's work, as Weihsin has noticed, her "focus on the somatic and sentimental aspects of women's experiences negates the postcolonial state's instrumentalization of women's bodies and characters as celebrated icons of the new nation," and in the same vein Lim here questions their appropriation and objectification as sanitized multicultural heritage.<sup>32</sup> In the face of boutique heritage programs, the revisiting speaker does not see exotic historical costumes, but scenes from a past that resonate with a mix of warring emotions.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, "Palimpsest" evokes "Malacca's hot and noisy / alleys, sluggish monsoon drains," while the evocation of a multiplicity of languages unearths layers of colonial cultures and histories.<sup>34</sup> The "ghosts of Portuguese nuns" as well as the "ancient Stadthaus" refer to histories of multiple colonization, but if these also evoke the image of a rich heritage, the "massacred and mysterious lost / in history books" urge us not to forget stark realities (17). In Lim's poems, heritage terminology is reappropriated for antithetical means, stressing violence and individual suffering while challenging the sanitization of past spaces.

Similarly, her poetic representation of contemporary urban spaces probe beneath shiny surfaces to lay bare individual emotion. In the poems grouped together in the final two parts of the collection, "Retail Therapy: Mall Ballads" and "Embracing the Angel," inspired by scenes and events in Hong Kong, the speaker is more specifically a sojourner who acts as a "participant observer."<sup>35</sup> Yet several reflections on urban modernity address current developments more generally, self-consciously connecting the localized to a more encompassing investigation of modern isolation that transcends locality. "Tableau" centers on the image of a train or underground platform, a recognizable, familiar, and yet defamiliarized urban space that represents departure, uncertainty, and the waiting for arrival.<sup>36</sup> The people grouped together at this platform epitomize mobility, migration, and the hopes and anxieties about the future, as they work as a metaphor for the journey of life itself: a man and a woman with a child between them, a "wedged figure / between like a talisman / against their lives" (55). The poem, however, opens up with an image of stationary loneliness before moving on to this image of departure. It is an intensely quotidian image, expressive of a resignation to being alone, rather than of despair: "Eating breakfast alone / on a shiny metal seat," a man "chews a bun wrapped in plastic, / like a cow chews its cud" (54). It is an urban, parodic pastoral in which, in an ironic twist, people have replaced the expected motif of grazing herds. The mechanical, monotonous action, moreover, is delineated as "mindless like his / yesterdays and tomorrows" (54). This scene then shifts to a man watching a boy eat a roll on a platform, seated between his parents on a similar "shiny / metal bench," with the woman holding "a green plastic cup / of water by the boy's mouth" (55). The green plastic cup suggests distinct detail—a detail that is subsequently invested with a sense of loss as the cup is evoked in a future "when he will be eating his breakfast / alone, like a cow, / father and mother vanished / like that roll, the cup / of water, unremembered" (55). The "Millennia of watchfulness" (55) and the "eyes that feast" on the eating child between the parents' bodies address

encompassing themes of humanity (mortality, parenthood, loneliness, and memory), while the details of the tableau combine references to increasingly common urban realities (the mall, the train or underground platform, urban anonymity, and isolation) as well as cultural specificities (the bun eaten while partially wrapped in plastic; the child, old enough to drink out of a cup, being fed in public) (55). This duality is prefigured in the dual vision of the unnamed “he” chewing a bun and “a man [who] watches a boy” chewing a roll: the second scene is said to occur a “few hours later” (55) and yet the man seems to be reviewing a memory. Memories redefine observations, creating different connections and pockets of meaning. The transnationalism rests in this simultaneity as the poem at once resonates with a range of associations, while reordering observations of the particular, the local, and the specific.

### Conclusion

The sojourning returnee of Lim’s latest poetry moves seamlessly between observing and remembering, reviewing and reordering memories, reliving and reconsidering changed spaces. In her returns to the region, often as a visiting scholar, temporarily migrating to once familiar places, the dichotomies of diasporas, like sets of arrivals and departures, become constructively complicated. In *Do You Live In?*, Lim creates intensely localized poetry to express a transnational experience, prompting readers to review the spaces of memory and of returns. Her poetry on Malaysia remains intimately connected to childhood experiences. Evoking Malacca in her poetic reflections also moves us into a newly experienced past, giving us vivid glimpses of multiple histories. Encountering heritage, especially *Peranakan* heritage, from the vantage point of a museum visitor from overseas—and thereby contrasting this experience with childhood memories—allows Lim to explore further the individuality of experience and memory. These poems forcefully divorce such a reviewing from either personal nostalgia or the heritage industry. The position of observer in her Hong Kong poems, by contrast, gives her the freedom to reflect on changing urban developments in contemporary Asia—or on a global scale—more generally. Throughout the collection, Lim expresses her experience of transnationalism by newly combining and converging specific local detail, both of the present and of memory, with reflections on ongoing migrations, shifting geopolitics, and poetic traditions. The speaker is at once a returnee and a sojourner, observing and experiencing anew, while reviewing and reordering memories. The most powerful effect of this new engagement with the spaces of her past rests in her juxtaposition of the personal, individual perceptions of the transnational migrant with the generalizing, even sanitizing appropriations of heritage marketing.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The memoir was published with two different subtitles, with the US edition subtitled “An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands” and the Singapore publication carrying the subtitle “Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist”; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996); and *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Joe Upton, “‘Survival—to keep writing’: An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” 54, no. 4 (2018): 556; Tammy Lai-Ming Ho and Jason Eng Hun Lee, “City Poetics: An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” *Wasafiri* 33, no. 3 (2018): 50.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Do You Live In?* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015); Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *The Irreversible Sun* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2015); Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Upton, “‘Survival,’” 559.

<sup>5</sup> Gui Weihsin, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Upton, “‘Survival,’” 560.

<sup>7</sup> Ho and Lee, “City Poetics,” 50.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad A. Quayum, “Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview,” *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (2003): 88.

<sup>9</sup> Quayum, “Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview,” 88.

<sup>10</sup> Boey Kim Cheng, “The Hiding Places of the Imagination,” *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Pauline T. Newton, “Walking Backwards and Sideways: The Transmigrations of the Poet in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Work,” *Asiatic* 8, no. 1 (June 2014): 86.

<sup>12</sup> I briefly discuss *Joss and Gold*; see Tamara S. Wagner, *Occidentalism in Novels of Malaysia and Singapore, 1819-2004: Colonial and Postcolonial Financial Straits and Literary Style* (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 180, and 217–18.

<sup>13</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Fable,” in *Ars Poetica for the Day*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Wordsworth and Coleridge,” in *Ars Poetica for the Day*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “To Guan Yin,” in *Ars Poetica for the Day*, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Introduction, 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Gui Weihsin, “Lyric Poetry and Postcolonialism: The Subject of Self-Forgetting,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 43, no. 3 (December 2007): 264.

<sup>18</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Lim, Introduction, *Do You Live In?*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “1Malaysia,” in *Do You Live In?*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> C. L. Innes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Solemn Missionary Girls,” in *Do You Live In?*, 24–25.

<sup>23</sup> A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896; London: Pan Macmillan, 2017), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 9. Compare Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 378.

<sup>27</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Grandmother’s Batiks,” in *Do You Live In?*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “A History of Aunties,” *Do You Live in?*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Gwee Li Sui, *Spiaking Singlish: A Companion to How Singaporeans Communicate* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International Asia, 2017), n.p., Google Books.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Tan, Ponprom Rojanakiratikan, comments on “Is there a Guideline to Calling Someone ‘Auntie’ or ‘Uncle’ in Singapore?,” *Quora*, June 6, 2017, April 25, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/Is-there-a-guideline-to-calling-someone-Auntie-or-Uncle-in-Singapore>.

<sup>31</sup> Lim, “A History of Aunties,” 18.

<sup>32</sup> Gui, *National Consciousness*, 121. Compare Gui on Singapore’s official multiracialism versus divergent concepts of multiculturalism (*National Consciousness*, 126). The heritage industry, however, arguably endeavors to celebrate traditions of multiculturalism.

<sup>33</sup> Lim, “A History of Aunties,” 18.

<sup>34</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Palimpsest,” in *Do You Live in?*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Boey, “Hiding,” 9.

<sup>36</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Tableau,” in *Do You Live In?*, 54–55.

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