

## Foreword

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In 1989, a year before the twentieth anniversary of the founding of The Feminist Press, I wrote a long essay for the *Women's Review of Books* called "A Symbiotic Relationship." I was naming the major aspect of the twenty-year history of women's studies as it nourished and was nourished by the Feminist Press's publishing of literature by women. In 1971, we were fortunate to begin with two gems from Tillie Olsen's reading list: Rebecca Harding Davis' nineteenth-century novella, *Life in the Iron Mills* and Agnes Smedley's early twentieth-century novel, *Daughter of Earth*, as well as "The Yellow Wallpaper," a late nineteenth-century short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, suggested by Elaine Hedges. They are all still in print, used widely in thousands of college courses, and perhaps most interestingly, have become the subjects of scores of doctorate and post-doctorate scholarship.

Even as the work of reclaiming women writers' history moved to Europe and then to India, other parts of Asia, Latin America, and by the mid-1990s to Africa, I grew interested in another project, one that engaged Shirley Lim almost from the start. Shirley and I met at the Modern Language Association's annual meeting, some time in the mid-nineteen-eighties. By 1989, I had begun to encourage young women scholars, professors of English and feminist activists, to write the stories of their coming to feminist consciousness, especially its relationship to their work as teachers and scholars. I thought that the production of a series of such books, ranging across class, ethnic, geographical, religious and sexual lines, might provide teaching materials both for cultural studies and for writing workshops. Most important, I believed that consciousness was essential to social change, and that books were instruments that formed consciousness.

In her memoir, Shirley Lim writes vividly of our meeting at one of the MLA conventions and also of our experience at a National Women's Studies Association meeting. She quotes me as saying, "I want you to write a memoir." I'm sure I did say that to her, but I knew that she could give her manuscript to a

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university press rather than to me, for she was then moving from a community college to a prestigious campus of the University of California. And she was becoming known in MLA circles. But of course I got my wish, and Shirley signed a contract with The Feminist Press.

One Sunday evening, perhaps two years later, Shirley came to my New York apartment for a conference, and to deliver the final version of the manuscript I had edited. This was, she thought, to be a celebratory occasion. Working from my fairly spare edits, Shirley's manuscript contained a lively account of her extended Chinese family, her early years growing up in Malaysia, her school days and her further education there through a Master's degree. The manuscript ended as she left Asia and arrived in the US to enter a doctoral programme at Brandeis University. That night, as she handed me the manuscript, she said, "I'm finished." I congratulated her on a job well done, and added that I was sure she would find a publisher. What she had already written was fine, I said, and she was welcome to take it to another press.

"But you've been my editor," I remember her saying in a tone that indicated dismay and suggested that my editorial work had been useful. I told her that it was my pleasure to do that work and my gift to her. I reminded her of the series title and of my insistence that the memoirs in the "Cross-Cultural Series" record the coming to consciousness of adult women as they make their way through a changing terrain of social mores, values, expectations and opportunities in the United States. In Shirley's case, that terrain was a new country for feminist consciousness, with its racial tensions, its class-conscious academic institutions and its gender restrictions. Unless she was willing to move into those years, I would not publish her book.

We argued for some time, for Shirley was genuinely surprised and very angry. My stoicism was not helpful. There was also one comic moment when Shirley fairly shouted at me that she would not write anything of her marriage, her husband, or her son. "That's your choice," I think I said. "I'm not going to write your book." And perhaps I fully expected that she would have to relent on these matters, as she moved on to her years in Cambridge, New York and California.

*Among the White Moon Faces* was published in Feminist Press's Cross-Cultural Memoir Series in 1996 to impressive reviews, immediate acclaim, even an American Book Award. And yes, while her family gets little attention, the story of her academic career continues to be assigned to students in college classes. More to the point here, exactly like the fiction we began to publish in the early 1970s, 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. As this journal issue suggests, even when scholars are writing about Shirley Lim's poetry or her fiction, the memoir is essential reading and not far off in the background. I

want to claim some modest credit for persuading Shirley Lim to write the book we have. Just one year after the publication of the memoir, The Feminist Press published Lim's *Two Dreams*, a collection of her short fiction written between 1969 and 1996, and in 2001, the novel, *Joss and Gold*, which bravely and brilliantly turns the cruel narrative of *Madame Butterfly* on its head, as several essays in this issue indicate.

I knew from the first moment I met her that Shirley Lim was a rare individual, an extraordinary academic, by any standard. She spent her early career in the US teaching at a community college in New York, where she also ran a writing centre for students that did not win accolades for her. Though she was an acclaimed teacher, she did not advance or feel appreciated by the Dean. And soon she understood that her "problem" was her seeming over-ambition. Her publishing marked her as "uppity" at a community college, as a person consumed by ambition rather than focused solely on her teaching job. Her publishing marked her as especially presumptuous, for it included not only scholarly essays, but also poetry and fiction.

I remember an early talk with her on an airplane, when we met accidentally, and perhaps then she gave me a copy of a prose essay which has totally disappeared from my memory, except for a paragraph which is still visually inscribed on my brain. It comes at the top of a right-hand page of print and it describes the struggle of young Shirley and her five male siblings to cope with their daily hunger by stealing fruit from strangers' yards. In the essay, Shirley explains clearly, out of her own experience, why destitute people are not suicidal: they are too hungry to think about death. All they can think of is finding food. I remember telling her how important that was to me, since my family life reeked of suicides and poverty, though not the poverty of hunger.

In that conversation or another, I also suggested that she needed to find another job, perhaps in a major university, where she would be appreciated for her teaching, but where she would not be considered "odd" to be also a publishing scholar. Still, as I view Shirley's career today, it is "odd," for, as the essays in this publication illustrate, she is celebrated here not for her academic scholarship, but for providing especially for younger scholars the literary material – fiction both long and short, poetry, and perhaps especially literary memoir – for *their* scholarship.

Further, the narratives of Shirley Lim's life and her literary production provide counter-perspectives within which to view the lives of Asian-Americans as global citizens. Perhaps as important, if one is intent on studying or teaching cultural studies, one can assume as a common text *Among the White Moon Faces*. The themes of the essays in this special issue of *Asiatic* radiate from Shirley Lim's depiction of marginality and her search for centres of stability, identity, even productivity. As a Chinese in Malaysia, she was marginal even in her own country of origin. Once in the US those matters of nationality were not even

marginally relevant. She was simply Asian and female in an environment in which such people were to keep their place behind established boundaries.

Not surprisingly, Shirley Lim began to make poetry out of her marginality and her quest for understanding the world and perhaps, in the process, using her unusual energy to tell others what she was thinking and how she was learning to make sense of an often senseless universe. At least one of the essayists in this issue refers to Shirley Lim's physical energy, her love for walking streets and beaches. I too have experienced that energy, walking with Shirley Lim to the beach for brunch, or walking the streets of Santa Barbara or New York City, on the way to a meal. The energy seems also to have fuelled her ability to turn experience into poems and stories.

The title story of *Two Dreams* sharpens a portrait of the seemingly antithetical worlds of Shirley Lim's early and later lives, contrasting the icy geographies of the Northeast coast of the US with the lush warmth of Malacca. Then in a split second, a policeman's cruelty mars the scene, reminds the onlooker that climate includes more than thermal temperature. The final chapter of Shirley Lim's memoir is called "Moving Home." In part, it tells some of the story of the making of this memoir. In part, it includes some of the important reasons I wanted to publish it, among them the acknowledgement that students need such a text in order to understand the complicated world in which they have to study and work and live as responsible citizens. Shirley Lim ends her memoir by regretting that she had not talked enough with her mother, and remembering that her mother had told her "that home is the place where our stories are told."

"Listening and telling my own stories," Shirley Lim concludes, "I am moving home."