

“How Can I Prove that I am Not Who I am?”: Layered Identities and Genres in the Work of Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Abstract

With the recent publication of *The Shirley Lim Collection*, it is now more apparent than ever the range of Shirley Lim’s creative and scholarly pursuits. Writing in multiple genres including short stories, flash fiction, poetry, memoir, novels and academic scholarship, Lim’s work captures many dimensions not only of layered identities but also of layered genres. Much has already been written about her universal themes of shifting identities, loss, displacement, belonging and borders. This article addresses these issues but through the lens of multiple and layered genres. Like the geographical border crossings that Lim addresses in her work, she also crosses genre borders, examining these issues in many different forms. This article asks what difference form makes in representing identities and reconciling the conflicting identities within.

Like her fellow academics, Audre Lorde and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (among others), Shirley Geok-lin Lim engages in memoir in part to document women’s experiences of intellectual life in the academy. Beyond providing lessons learned for future women academics, however, memoirs like Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces*, construct a self-conscious and interactive performance space, encouraging readers to experience the author’s reflexivity. Under Della Pollock’s formulation, Lim’s memoir thus serves as performative autobiography, “tend[ing] to *subject* the reader to the writer’s reflexivity, drawing [her] respective subject-selves reciprocally and simultaneously into critical ‘intimacy’” (“Performative Writing” 86). Lim writes about the “tensions” in her multiple identities, proving that she is something other than what the academy imagines she should be. During this process, she reflects on her role as an educator and feminist, asking readers directly, “Do wild feminists live in universities? Can they?” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 226). In this way, she self-consciously constructs an interactive text that engages readers’ senses of civic, academic and intellectual justice. In doing so, she reveals an additional element to performative autobiography not yet defined by scholars: a call to action. Lim’s text mirrors for women the ways that they can write “out of turn” (*Profession* 214) and dismantle the power structures that serve to reify dominant narratives of self and women in the academy. By examining what Lim’s text

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does as much as what it *says*, I highlight the ways her memoir resists cultural definitions of immigrant women and Asian literature scholars in particular, and generic definitions of memoir and scholarly writing more generally. Furthermore, I compare these resistances to the ways she addresses similar issues in her poetry and fiction, exploring the ways that form can impact the ways that identities are told, represented, and (mis)understood.

Keywords

Autobiography, genre, multiplicity, hybridity, ethnicity, gender

With the recent publication of *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives*, it is now more apparent than ever the range, depth and impact of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's creative and scholarly pursuits. Writing in multiple genres including poetry, short stories, flash fiction, memoir, novels and academic scholarship, Lim's work captures many dimensions not only of layered identities but also of layered genres. Much has already been written about her universal themes of shifting ethnic identities, loss, displacement, belonging and borders (Buss, Davis, Miller, Feng, Tay, Willard-Traub, Zeng), attesting to the profound influence she has had as a writer, scholar and editor of American literature. This article addresses similar themes but through the lens of multiple and layered genres. Like the geographical border crossings that Lim addresses in her work, she also crosses generic borders, examining these issues in many different forms. In this article, I ask what difference form makes in representing identities and reconciling the conflicting identities within. By writing in multiple genres, Lim has answered the question posed in her memoir, "How can I prove that I am not who I am?" (25). She answers as a poet, a novelist, a literary critic and scholar, a teacher and a mentor. No matter what the reader brings to a definition to any of those identities or to the meanings of Asian American, Malaysian American, feminist, mother, or migrant, Lim's engagement with many textual forms, and all the fluidity they offer and that she demands of them, proves she is not who readers think she should be.

While Lim is an accomplished and award-winning poet, much has been made of her (academic) memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*. Like those of her fellow academics, Audre Lorde and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (among others), Lim's memoir in part documents women's experiences of intellectual life in the academy. However, as Lim has stated, "I prefaced my reading then by denying vehemently and entirely that my memoir was an academic autobiography, and defended it instead as the autobiography of a poet, a position which I seem to have lost to the academics" ("The Troubled" 302). While Lim resists the boundaries of the "troubled" genre of autobiography, Rocio Davis concludes that Lim's memoir is an academic autobiography because it is a "map through

which to reconsider her scholarly work” (441-42). Davis points to the “autobiographical character of [Lim’s] critical work” (445) and in doing so suggests that ‘Lim’s recurring intellectual concerns’ (447) about gender, genre, ethnicity, and boundaries in her memoir become “the ultimate act of unifying, not only the personal and the public, but also her thematic and generic intellectual interests” (447).

In addition to unifying her various themes (Davis), and providing lessons learned for future women academics (Miller), however, memoirs like Lim’s construct a self-conscious and interactive performance space, encouraging readers to experience the author’s reflexivity. Under Della Pollock’s formulation, Lim’s memoir functions as performative autobiography, “tend[ing] to *subject* the reader to the writer’s reflexivity, drawing [her] respective subject-selves reciprocally and simultaneously into critical ‘intimacy’” (Pollock 86). Lim writes about the “tensions” in her multiple identities, proving that she is something other than what the academy imagines she should be. During this process, she reflects on her role as an educator and feminist, asking readers directly, “Do wild feminists live in universities? Can they?” (226). In this way, she self-consciously constructs an interactive text that engages readers’ senses of civic, academic and intellectual justice. In doing so, she reveals a call to action, an engagement with readers’ own identities. Lim’s text mirrors for women the ways that they can write “out of turn” (from the title, *Profession* 1999), write against the grain of what is expected and dismantle the power structures that reify dominant narratives about women in the academy. As I have argued previously, Lim’s “text, with this direct address to the reader, calls for a response. This memoir is not just to be consumed, but it is also to be responded to, with our own identity challenges. In this way, Lim’s memoir functions as what I call [performance autobiographies... they] *do* things, not just tell something” (“Memory’s Body” 285).

Lim tells readers in interviews and essays that she is interested in the ways that genres work and the ways writers interrogate genres. About autobiography in particular she says,

It is difficult to reconcile such a nimble, flexible, enterprising, entrepreneurial, ethically challenged, un-law-abiding genre with the rigors, circumscriptions, demands and regulations that rule in academia. The autobiography, as it has been produced in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, despite Lejeune’s attempt to legitimize it, has proven very much an illegitimate form, often openly defiant to the strictures he had set down, slyly disobeying as much as seeming to be observant of the laws of genre. (“The Troubled” 303)

This open defiance of autobiography in particular (and genre more generally), one that challenges strictures is part of what makes autobiography, including

Lim's, performative. However, it is not only her autobiography that challenges the "laws" of form and content. Not only is Lim's memoir performative, much of her creative and academic writing is also performative. Collectively her oeuvre uses a "very self-conscious approach to accepted forms and narratives, examining how that very form is limited in adequately representing a life" and critiquing "hegemonic discourse through its self-conscious treatment of the genre[s]" (Powell, "The Embodiment of Memory" 457).

In her work, Lim not only asks if wild feminists can reside in the academy, she is also asking if wild writers can exist. She skips from genre to genre, pushing and blurring their boundaries, confounding readers and critics alike. In much the same way that the memoir "is an act of rebellion against the strictures and structures of academe" (Davis 448), her engagement in multiple genres is a rebellion against any genre and its limits in adequately providing space for an identity(s) such as hers. While Eddie Tay argues that she is "bereft of a cultural identity from which to write" (Tay 302), I argue that her cultural identity *is* indeed to occupy multiple identities and thus multiple genres, disobeying multiple laws of the academy and culture(s) alike.

Across genres, then, Lim's texts *do* things as much as they *say* something. Her writing across genres resists cultural definitions of immigrant women and Asian literature scholars in particular, definitions of generic form and accepted ethnic identities. She has long been interested in the ways these issues intersect, and, as Davis and others have noted, she has been at the forefront as a scholar in multiple fields, publishing "groundbreaking scholarship in three major fields: first, critical studies of Southeast Asian literature in English; second, women-of-color feminism; and, third, Asian American literature" (Davis 447). Lim herself has said that part of her project is to "unpack how textual instances and ethnic and feminist issues have intersected, to analyze how their diverging emphases necessitate an ethnic-cultural nuancing of conventional Euro-American feminist positions on gender/power relations and a feminist critique of ethnic-specific identity" ("Feminist and Ethnic" 572). The multiple intersections of ethnic and feminist projects in literature mirror Lim's creative writing projects: as she crosses multiple traditions and breaks down their barriers, she crosses multiple genres to do so. That she writes in multiple genres makes perfect sense – how could she not? Traditional genres do not on their own provide adequate performative space for the work of Lim.

As Yu-te (Tom) Kuo notes, "She is always on an itinerary" (2). However, Kuo implies that this is a negative way to write, indeed a negative way to be, suggesting an inability to locate a particular place or identity is "smoke." However, I suggest that she is a goddess of transitions; she resides in multiple liminal spaces at once, creating spaces for others to also reside, making it possible to reconcile multiple, conflicting and liminal identities. It is therefore logical that the issues that haunt her must also reside in multiple generic spaces,

each overlapping, blurring, turning, leading to the others, back and forth, in between, always in transition, and always with an itinerary, in a nomadic sense, a definite sense of purpose. She pushes boundaries, not accepting exclusion. Genres, like identities, are fluid and dynamic, always on the verge of change.² In this way, Lim's grappling with multiple genres mirrors her grappling with identities. However, rather than a negative connotation where identity fluidity and change has been denigrated, Lim suggests these are valid and legitimate places to occupy.

In the following pages I try to highlight the ways that Lim's project cross generic boundaries, each falling loosely, provisionally in two categories: ethnicity and gender. But as many who are familiar with Lim's work know, her work confounds these boundaries. There are constant overlaps and they are difficult to separate. In addition, often when she is confronting inequality or exclusion in one identity she worries about compromising another. This worry does not paralyse her, however. She ultimately asks readers to recognise these contradictions and compromises within themselves, leading to an understanding of identity as occupying multiple subjectivities at once.

Many of Lim's poems address issues of dislocation, the body of the immigrant and ethnic identity. Poems such as "Lament," "Identity No Longer," "Cross Cultural Exchange" and "Christmas in Exile," to name a few, are where she seeks to reconcile a body out of place and searches for physical and linguistic belonging.

In Asian American literature, there is an expectation that the immigrant will long for home. Lim's poetry contains moments of longing, but she often also complicates that sentiment by interrogating the postcolonial subject and critiquing "landscapes of exile" like the United States together with highlighting her love of the English language. In "Visiting Malaaca," for instance, she says,

I dream of the old house.
The dreams leak slowly like sap
Welling from a wound: I am losing
Ability to make myself at home.
Awake, hunting for lost cousins,
I have dreamed of ruined meaning,
And am glad to find none. (*Crossing the Peninsula* 93)

The home she came from represents complicated and difficult memories of poverty and patriarchy. And while she still longs for home and the ability to find a meaning there, her sense of what constitutes being "at home" has shifted, moving her away from the dominant themes in immigrant literature where the

² See Amy Devitt's overview "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre," especially "genre as present, varying, and dynamic" (699).

homeland represents the penultimate place. Lim takes risks by saying she finds no (ruined) meaning in the old house. The narrator muses over the gladness of not finding what she had dreamt of, but also realises the consequences.

This and other poems point to Lim's grappling with the ways that language functions for an immigrant like her: "Lim writes of a colonized subject not merely acted upon by language.... Her diasporic experience, that is, a dislocated body, though subject to commodification, highlights her body learning language with agency, with a sense of power" (Powell, "Memory's Body" 283). She continues this struggle in "Modern Secrets," where

The dream shrank to its fiction.
I had understood its end
Many years ago. The fallow child
Ate rice from its ricebowl
And hides still in the cupboard
With the china and tea-leaves. (*Crossing the Peninsula* 50)

The dream of home, though powerful and luring, still represents the poverty and suffering of a childhood of fear and ill-health. However, her heritage and longing, despite realising the fiction of the dream, continue to haunt her.

"Passport" is another poem in which Lim laments foreignness in a place where her kinfolk live(d). The sensation of going to China as an American citizen is like "walking backwards," "where everyone looks like me" (*Walking Backwards: New Poems* 35). Yet she is foreign and "Without a tongue of China." These constant tensions of the body, identity and language, belonging and not belonging, are also addressed in an earlier poem, "Pensée." She ponders her purpose, the meaning of her poetry, saying, "We want so hard to believe things matter./ Will someone read these words in another world?/ In our world will we read them again without disillusion?" (*What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* 44). She considers the role of poetry in understanding death, writing and complexities of place. After "Reading book after book of poetry," and examining places and spaces, the narrator surmises that "Something matters world after world:/ terra, land, earth, place/ un/tongued, un/wounded, blooded" (*What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* 44-45).

Simultaneously, China, named the source, presumably of her identity, is the place she seeks to understand, connect with, and find some sense of belonging. She returns to China as a place and a language, "not studied," though they are a "constant" in her consciousness. China serves both as a place where her ethnic cousins and brothers and sisters live, yet simultaneously is also "too heavy," like "Vomit" ("The Source," *Walking Backwards* 36). Just as she writes of her father's strict patriarchal values in many poems like "My Father," "My Father's Sadness," "Father from Asia" and "Father in China," she also notes in

“The Source” that the women of China “taught other women what/ Was right and wrong,/ and they were almost/ Always wrong” (36). Lim then calls “China in Malacca, a misfit, dumb/ Country; and I its misfit child,/ Bastard and deaf, handicapped and wild” (*Walking Backwards* 36). As the misfit child and with an illegitimate identity, Lim seeks an empathetic relationship with the patriarchal China, excluded in Malacca and disappeared through various laws and restrictions.

Intercultural marriage, mixed ethnic identity, a girl who wants education, all defy categories and written laws in multiple spaces. This and other poems address the both/and subject positions that Lim occupies. Revered across continents as evidenced by her many awards, her complicated and overlapping subject positions have been subjects of her poetry since her early work. In “Thoughts from Abroad,” for instance, she says, “Imagine this world invisible/ As instinct on the flood for home/ From which all exiled landscapes come” (*Crossing the Peninsula* 34). The instinct, or the flood of emotions, is a visceral reaction to dislocation. However, she recognises that her corporeal instinct is problematic in postmodernity and consequently subject to deconstruction. Lim does not let that kind of reading be the only one, however. As she says, instinct is an “overwhelming homesickness[,] as a kind of primordial sentiment, i.e. instinct” (personal correspondence). So while on the one hand we can deconstruct the body’s location and the primordial ways of being as located and situated in contexts, the “overwhelming” visceral responses to landscapes are always connected to the language. Instincts are always already a part of the language, whether we can deconstruct them or not. The so-called normalcy of experience is called into question and the “flood” which might be interpreted as emotion, a tsunami, or the place of immigration, is seen as a place or event to survive. That is, one survives it, rides it out, *writes* it, in whatever form is necessary. The notion of landscape here is not innocent. The physical landscape of American is an obvious setting, where her exiled-ness puts into sharp relief her longing for home. But the landscape of the English language has also caused her exile. Separated from Chinese and Hokkien, the narrator’s longing, expressed in English, comes after the “rural land” of Massachusetts, that is Brandeis and her education there, reflects her “sensible” immigration. But the promise of education, the promise that the English language has provided her since the nuns taught her, cannot overshadow the flood for home, creating the ongoing tensions of desire for the benefits of exile and longing for home.

For these tensions in her subjectivity, Lim recognises in poems like “Lament” and “Immigrant,” that she has been labelled a fool. She says in “Lament,” for instance, that “Although everyone knows/ You [English] are not mine./ They wink knowingly/ At my stupidity—/ I, stranger, foreigner,/ Claiming rights to/ What I have no right—/ Sacrifice, tongue/ Broken by fear” (*Listening to the Singer* 26). Lim is acutely aware of her simultaneous attachment

to the English language and its lack of innocence as a language of power. She says in *Among the White Moon Faces*, “To confess to an attachment to the English language and its literature as the motivation for professional study is to open oneself today to the scrutiny of the tough-minded and the incredulity of materialist philosophers. A blind attachment to English and its colonial past reveals vulgarly the colonialist formation of the colonized subject. The very integrity of the decolonizing intellectual must drive her to critique her own ideological formation and so to jilt her first loves. The dominant narrative today stages a culturally free subject who, in the moment of nationalist independence, must disavow the music of the colonizer” (183). Recognising this duality (indeed, multiplicity) of language, Lim cautions against absolutism on either side. The complexity of her experience with her first language, particularly the violent words of her Chinese aunts, asks readers to reconsider the forgone conclusion of English as only constraining. In this way, she troubles several positions about the constraints of language, just as she similarly troubles the notion of genre. To readers she seeks wild feminists, wild writers, those who do not sit silently within borders of identity, ethnicity, gender, space, or genre.

Patriarchy and women’s sexuality are dominant themes in Lim’s work, as well as space, place and the immigrant body. In her resistance to the constraints of poetics, language and genre, Lim also extends her treatment of resistance to gender. Her search for wild feminists began long before she entered the academy, as she was disciplined for going outside gender norms as a child. In “Women’s Dreams” and in other poems in *Crossing the Peninsula*, she speaks of her “Delight in the effort to fit./ Being Mother Nature and our own creation./ Puzzles, tricks, stratagems: we match wits/ Because we have not known dominion” (70). Lim juxtaposes women’s bodies and the objectification of their bodies by others and by themselves with the “stratagems” used to overcome “dominion.” She not only speaks to the intelligence or “wits” of women, but also the recognition of the use of the body to “lord” over and control. Through her use of words like “tricks,” “wits,” “arm-pits,” “crones,” “clumsy,” and “cock,” Lim confronts patriarchy and feminists alike.

In poems like “My Father,” “My Father’s Sadness,” “Father in China” and “Ballad of the Father,” we see poignant moments of a daughter’s struggle with her father’s dominance, guilt over leaving him, and the tension of feelings of appreciation of his situation and that he had sent his daughter to school. In “My Father,” for instance, we get a moment of a daughter’s regret:

When younger, my father had wanted
Everything, if he could afford it,
To make me happy. I am sorry
Then I had not learned enough to lie. (*Crossing the Peninsula* 39)

In these and other poems, there are brief images yet they hold moments of poignancy. She says in her article in *Feminist Studies* that these brief images are like photographs emerging: “The commentator observes the coloration of the text as it appears for the first time with a postmodern consciousness of the text’s belatedness, an awareness that the images are to be understood in the contexts of a lapidary of discourses on and from the past; memoir, myth, family and community history, folk tales, talk-story” (“Feminist and Ethnic” 573). Her notion of a “lapidary of discourses” suggests a determined and purposeful cutting and re-cutting of a particular story, one to be retold in multiple ways.

In her short stories and novels, therefore, Lim is able to explore these moments with more depth. In *Sister Swing*, for example, Lim also explores regret and guilt, but together with the patriarchal attitudes of the father and community that impacted the three sisters. Originally written as her award winning short story, “Mr. Tang’s Girls,” Lim’s most recent novel refigures the plot of the father’s death. However, the novel’s form affords Lim the space to re-imagine the plot and more fully develop the characters. In addition, the novel is the place where Lim explores the hilarity of the girls’ interpretation of the circumstance: that the father dies of shock at his daughters’ budding sexuality. Lim builds tension in the chapter, including the oldest sister’s impending arranged marriage. Ah Kong’s family members’ discussions of the wedding reveal culture and race clashes through humourous dialogue but also with an underlying insidious racism. The string of patriarchal situations, though serious and oppressive, is rendered with humour. Then suddenly, late in the chapter, the narrator says, “What I wanted was to get away quick from Ah Kong’s ghost, I was afraid it would do me harm because Yen and I had killed him” (12). The timing of the statement sets the reader up, building the plot. The narrator says, “Ah Kong had been prowling around the house on Saturday night when we gave him his heart attack” (12). After explaining how her teacher had given her a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the feminist book encouraging women to know their bodies and understand their sexuality, Swee Yin recounts how late at night while reading the book, the girls mimic the women in the book by examining their private parts with a compact mirror. “Let me see, let me see,” Yen urged, craning her head down, and that was when I looked up and saw Ah Kong at the door” (14). After a litany of misogynist insults, Ah Kong soon after dies of a massive heart attack. Swee Yin concludes they are the cause of his death and says, “Mama never even suspected, and how were we to tell her Ah Kong died because he had seen Yen and me looking at ourselves in a mirror...” (15).

The remainder of the novel, in the sisters’ varying voices, examines the intensity of the daughters’ guilt. Lim simultaneously makes the reader aware of the ridiculous correlation of the girls’ actions and their father’s death, while also taking very seriously their sense of responsibility and the difficulty they each have in reconciling his death. This juxtaposition serves to show how difficult it

is to shake loose from misogyny for girls raised in a patriarchal society and called “slut” by their father. In the novel, Lim explores this long lasting struggle with attitudes toward women. Swee Yin is driven to leave ostensibly to escape her actual father’s ghost, but Lim uses the ghost to show how a young Asian woman like Swee Yin is haunted by the ghost of her patriarchal society. This long treatment of the movement between home and the West provides time for Lim to more fully delineate the complexities of the ways that women immigrants hold a complicated relationship with the “freedoms” of the West that many postcolonial scholars critique. This novel, together with her poetry and scholarly writing, show us those complexities in sharp relief, countering typical narratives of assimilation and nostalgia for the homeland.

This theme is also addressed in Lim’s earlier novel but in a different way. In *Joss and Gold*, Lim explores interracial relationships, patriarchy and ethnic traditions and racism, but from a space not typical of Asian American literature. Lim has said, “I am quite cognizant of what Asian American writers have been writing and not writing. And I know that there’s a huge gap in the representation of race issues other than white and Asian” (Nge, “Interview”). Lim not only tackles assimilation and whites’ assumptions about who an Asian is supposed to be, but she further complicates race issues by examining the precipitating and subsequent racial tensions within Malaysia and in particular the events of the May 13 riots in 1969. According to Feng, “the racial riots constitute a traumatic memory to which Lim has to return in her writings in order to reconfigure her Malaysian identity” (112). Poems such as “Song of an Old Malayan,” signal the riots as violent events exposing racial tensions among ethnic Chinese and Malays and the complexities of nationalist discourses together with postmodern conceptions of multi-layered identities.

In *Joss and Gold*, Lim includes Li An’s journal entries, a genre within a genre that not only chronicles her daily life, which Li An says is “boring,” but also comments on her life as a writer:

Chester’s suggestion to read American poetry. Doesn’t sound like me. But nothing I’ve written sounds like me – whiny, petty, dissatisfied. Poetry already too grand, fine attitudes. How to write a good whiny poem? Maybe I should be a journalist like Abdullah. Poetry is for people who know something. No wonder I’m depressed. (*Joss and Gold* 73)

These personal entries about Li An’s daily life, musings on a potential affair with Chester and the weather in Kuala Lumpur, are mixed with the growing ethnic tensions in the city: “All this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick too. Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am Malaysian. I don’t exist” (75). Li An experiences several moments of dissatisfaction – as a writer and as a definable identity. Clearly then, Lim’s deft

mix of the ordinariness of life (education, work, friends, the weather), together with the geopolitics of the time, emphasises her larger project in all her work. It seems that genres within genres, identity issues across genres, images of identity, long plot lines of identity and the border crossings *are* who she is. Writing in multiple genres makes someone like Li An “exist.” As Lim says in *Among the White Moon Faces*, “I needed to find another, more welcoming America in which poetry, Asia, and woman could be accepted in the same body” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 225). In this way, multiple genres/identities/spaces are created and recreated to fulfil her imaginings.

Lim therefore occupies all these spaces at once and is not apologetic about the contradictions. Indeed she asks readers to confront their own contradictions and argues that it is those very contradictions that constitute an identity. With the occupation of multiple identities, Lim makes it *a priori* that she would engage in multiple genres. Her scholarly work, as Davis notes and as Lim notes herself, is occupied with these questions. Because of her scholarship in this area, she has provided a pedagogical model for exploring “how representation of the subject is negotiated between ethnic and feminist thematics” (“Feminist and Ethnic” 573). Davis points out that by occupying the positions of scholar, poet and memoirist, Lim exemplifies literary criticism enacted. Understanding the history of a writer in relation to the spaces that writer inhabits brings Asian American and other diasporic writing to the fore of American literature, highlighting that those moments have already existed, even if the so-called canon did not recognise them as valuable initially. Indeed, Lim’s scholarly writing is as beautifully written as her poetry, stories, novels and memoir.

In addition, in her scholarly work Lim points to the limiting description of immigrant identity as a “dual identity” and suggests instead a “tripartite construction of Asian American identity, affirmatively propositional” as a result of “feminist intervention” and “a reclamation of mother/other origin, an affirmation of continuity or relation between origin and present tense, and a new foregrounding of gender identity” (“Feminist and Ethnic” 578). In this essay and others during this time, as Davis points out, Lim provides us with a detailed history of Asian American literature and clearly points out the tensions, contradictions and fluidity of Asian American literature. She says, “For the Asian-born woman, moving away from a relatively closed patriarchal world into a relatively democratized, egalitarian, interrogative America, immigration can be a liberalizing and freeing experience” (“Feminist and Ethnic” 579). This implication of fully understanding immigrant experience through an inclusion of gender as a critical point is key to full understanding of Asian American literature and the so-called immigrant experience generally. Lim concludes that, “For the woman writer whose ethnic community is patriarchal, ethnic and feminist values and identities must inevitably intersect in potentially uneasy,

conflicting, or violent ways” (579).

As in her creative and scholarly work, Lim’s memoir complicates a traditional feminist reading of a girl leaving her homeland in search of education. And her ethnicity complicates her response to her family’s patriarchal limitations. She challenges readers to see that in leaving behind a homeland, no matter how limiting for girls and women, that space of origin remains the homeland nonetheless. It is not automatic that she would abandon it in her memories, thoughts and present identity – no matter how feminist readers might think that she should. She creates a careful balance of affirming culture while also making changes from within, so that “ethnic and gender identities are continuously negotiated in tension against each other, the very act of naming and re-presenting, that is, of writing, composed of strategies of identity that challenge each other in a dialogical mode within the texts themselves” (591). Lim’s assessment of Asian American literature, particularly literature that addresses ethnic and gendered themes in tandem, is also reflected in her essays, poems, and longer fictional works as she responds across genres.

Lim’s poetry provides moments of images, one shot, one moment to reflect. But her prose reflects the moments where the images, like photographs developing, come into relief. Each stands on its own, but alongside each other readers can see the prose contains the lyricism of the poems. Even so, they are not complete, not necessarily sufficient to represent the whole. It is as if to say, by writing in all these genres, Lim is instructing us that just as we cannot confine her to one identity, we cannot confine her to one genre. With multiple migrations come multiple identities and multiple genres. In her memoir Lim asks, “How do I reconcile these two different yet simultaneous images[?]... We tell stories” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 231). As Miller points out, we are implicated in her story (“Getting Transpersonal” 171). Miller says it is the affective quality of her memoir that draws us in as readers. While I agree, I would also argue that it is Lim’s crafting of her life, the performative nature of her text and the lyrical quality of her prose that make her life and consequently the lives of others matter through writing. She has proven that she is “not who I am” by writing in multiple genres, deftly, honestly and aesthetically masterful while playfully and wickedly resistant.

In addition to gender and ethnic identity, many other comparisons may be drawn in Lim’s work, such as with the themes of motherhood, landscape, education and teaching, among others, and those I have briefly discussed here also warrant further investigation. Lim’s resistances in her poetry, fiction and memoir suggest that form can impact the ways that identities are told, represented and (mis)understood. For these reasons, I do not think one can suggest all memoirs are “nouveau solipsism” any more than one can suggest a poem is self-indulgent. However, this analysis suggests that it is how the memoir is written, in relation to poetry and prose, that relegates Lim’s memoir

to something more than a listing of life events. Davis argues that academic autobiographies like Lim's are "complex cultural products that invite multiple critical approaches" that "function as institutional or professional critique" (Davis, "Introduction: Out of the University" 160). In addition, I would argue that Lim's writing across genres reveals the performative nature of autobiography generally and of academic autobiography in particular. Lim's crafting moves her work beyond the surface of historical fact telling. Indeed, because Lim's memoir contains some of the same lyricism and imagery as her poems, readers see the writer moving through live events, rendering them similar as her literary writing.

Lim's on-going, "processural" (Davis) writing, across genres, weaves experience into representations that challenge gender and ethnic identity and notions of genre. In her memoir, Lim says that for years she searched for "what to do with my life as a woman: not simply what kind of work I wanted, but how to grow up as a woman" (*Among* 101). Her poems, essays, novels and memoir serve as the exploratory vessels for discovering what kind of woman she might be. Ever instructional and conversational, Lim is a teacher and mentor, exploring her own life in several forms. In this way she models the ways women and any writer can reconcile multiple and conflicting identities, with a broad definition of reconciliation that makes a space for contradiction.

In her essay about the genre of life writing, Lim recounts her Taiwanese colleagues and fans wishing for another autobiography. She explains that at first she could not understand why – she wrote the book as a "book of memories" (306) and as noted earlier, refused the notion that her book was academic autobiography at first and instead insisted it was the autobiography of a poet. However, even if Lim's notion of her memoir was that it would be recognisable as the genre of autobiography, she is a poet. It is consequently written against the grain, confounds generic expectation, performs identity and resists both generic and identity constrictions. In this way it is the autobiography of a poet *and* an academic autobiography as Buss, Davis and others suggests. This both/tri/multiple/and location functions as Lim's identity. But Lim is careful to question, in her own cross-genre analysis between a memory of her father in *Among the White Moon Faces* and her poem "Father in China," whether and how either a poem or an autobiography may or may not be more truthful or authentic. She places it in the hands of the reader, the scholar, the teacher and the student to examine autobiography's "troubles in order not only to underline its inherent fictivity but to undermine it, if we are to do our work as academics" (312). The essays in this volume, I think, say, "Yes, Professor."

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