"Imagination is a Tricky Power": Transnationalism and Aesthetic Education in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Work

Silvia Schultermandl[1]
University of Graz, Austria

Abstract

In light of the recent "transnational turn" in American Studies, there has been a steady interest in questions about literary productions and aesthetic education. Already Friedrich Schiller's definition of the concept of aesthetic education in 1794 holds that literature has the potential to assume the role of an agent working towards a paradigm shift away from the national as representational category and towards the embracing of transnational concepts. My article examines the relevance of aesthetic education apparent in a selection of Shirley Lim's work. Framed through the personal experiences of protagonists and lyrical personae that are always issuing meta-referential comments on the creation of literature or the production and dissemination of knowledge, Lim emphasises the role of aesthetic education as a politically-charged feeling of beauty and belonging. Examples from Lim's fictional and non-fictional work allow me to trace the ontological dimensions aesthetic education acquires in a transnational context.

Keywords

Transnationalism, aesthetic education, literary imagination, belonging, interpellation, aesthetics

Introduction

In an interview with Mohammad A. Quayum which appeared in a 2003 issue of the journal *MELUS*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim discusses the deterritorialised nature of her work, both as a poet and author of fiction and life writing and as a professor of English and Women's Studies. In all of these professional contexts, Lim encounters very specific circumstances of marginalisation: in the U.S., for

[1] Silvia Schultermandl is an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Graz, where she teaches courses in American literature and culture studies. She has published widely on ethnic American literature, transnational feminism and 9/11. She is the author of *Transnational Matrilineage: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Asian American Literature* (2009) and the (co-) editor of *Contemporary Asian American and British Asian Literatures* (2006), *A Fluid Sense of Self: The Politics of Transnational Identity* (2010), *Growing Up Transnational: Identity and Kinship in a Global Era* (2011) and *Contact Spaces of American Culture: Localizing Global Phenomena* (2012). Together with Erin Kenny (Drury University), she is the series editor of LIT Verlag's book series *Contributions to Transnational Feminism*. She is currently at work on a monograph on the aesthetics of transnationalism in American literature from the revolution to 9/11.

instance, where she gained citizenship in 1980, her citizenship makes her part of a national mainstream while her ethnic identity makes her part of a minority group; conversely, in Malaysia, her country of origin, her ethnicity makes her part of the visual majority, but her citizenship rights are unequal to those of Malay nationals. Lim frames these observations about her own position within the US and Malaysia by addressing the question of her cultural belonging. She asserts that her work cannot be easily subsumed under categorisations which espouse the nation-state as primary representational logic. With a profound understanding of the paradox this constitutes, she explains that her "work is deterritorialised, an ironic property for a writer to whom 'home' has been such a first-order question and thematic" (88).

The question of home resonates with Lim's creative and scholarly productions throughout her career, be it in her attention to issues of globalisation, diaspora, exile and transnationalism; be it in her discussions of American academia and its prejudice towards ethnic American literature; be it in her returns to personal memories so firmly rooted in specific national and cultural spaces. Storytelling becomes a form of belonging which provides a productive alternative to the feelings of inclusion or exclusion in relation to physical spaces. In this light, Lim concludes her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1997) with the compelling idea: "Listening, and telling my own stories, I am moving home" (232). It is precisely this quest for home which the North-American edition of her memoir also highlights in its subtitle; in the Malaysian edition, the subtitle is *Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*.

Home is, of course, a complex idea, especially in the diasporic, exilic and transnational contexts Lim's work addresses. In the introduction to *Transnational Asian American Literatures: Sites and Transits* (2006), for instance, Shirley Lim and her co-authors consider "the complex, dialogical national and transnational formulations of Asian American imaginations" (2). Their investigation of the current body of Asian American scholarship purports a definition of Asian American literature that "can no longer be viewed as merely a minor ethnic province of a domestic American canon" (22). Instead, *Transnational Asian American Literatures* emphasises the multiple dynamics at play in Asian American cultural productions, dynamics that emerge due to

> the diasporic, mobile, transmigratory nature of Asian American experience, a history characterized by disparate migratory threads, unsettled and unsettling histories churned by multiple and different Asian ethnic immigrant groups each with a different language and cultural stock, different value and belief systems, and different notions of literary aesthetics, albeit most largely mediated through the English language. (1)

While this passage adequately captures the complexity of Asian American literature, what Lim actually refers to is the process of literary imagination, which, unlike lived experience, is not confined by the same borders as people clearly are, much more so than capital and knowledge. Lim addresses this borderlessness of literary imagination when she claims that "[i]magination is a tricky power; it refuses to stay in one or even two places" (Quayum 89). This power of literary imagination and what it does to the reader is at the centre of my essay. I argue that Lim's work continuously raises issues about the potential of aesthetic education through literature. Framed through the personal experiences of protagonists and lyrical personae that are always issuing meta-referential comments on the creation of literature or the production and dissemination of knowledge, Lim's work emphasises the role of aesthetic education as a politically-charged feeling of beauty and belonging. Examples from Lim's fictional and non-fictional work allow me to trace the ontological dimensions aesthetic education acquires in a transnational context.

Aesthetic Education and (Trans)national Identity

Lim treats beauty as a Western standard which colonises Asian women even at a time of relative economic prosperity in many formerly poor Asian countries. In her essay "The Center Can(not) Hold: American Studies and Global Feminism," Lim analyses the effects of globalisation on the bodies of Asian and South Asian women, especially through the global dissemination of Western ideals of beauty which only serve to strengthen local concepts and practices of patriarchal power. With Asia as an emancipated player on the global market, so much so that its productivity and selling power hurts Western industries, the symbolic implementation of Western culture constitutes a new form of colonial power, one which manifests itself predominantly on the lives and bodies of (young) women. Lim argues that "[e]ven as women around the world appear to be winning the struggle for greater equality in the labor force, they are losing the larger struggle for control over symbolic meaning and power" ("The Center Can(not) Hold" 29). Lim's critique of the proliferation of images of Western beauty to create coercive ideals for Asian femininity exemplifies how political ideology can be communicated through seemingly universal standards of beauty and serve as an instrument of aesthetic education in the name of Western hegemony.

The very notion of aesthetic education is inherently connected to the question of national identity. When Friedrich Schiller first discussed the role of the aesthetic as a community-building agent in post-Enlightenment Europe in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), his focus was on the establishment of a secular, national identity which was to ensure that proper values underlie the formation of group identity. Having the same sense of beauty and appreciating its expression through canonical works of art, so Schiller believed, would equip

citizens with the ability to form a moral consciousness without much external political control. Schiller's concept of the aesthetic was, of course, founded on universalist ideas which defined beauty strictly in reference to European hegemony. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship shares Schiller's general assumption that aesthetic education can bring about a paradigmatic shift: when for Schiller this shift was away from European aristocracy towards liberal democracy, for contemporary scholars this shift can occur away from nationalism and towards a more global and transnational concept of identity. In *Nationalism and the Literary Imagination* (2011), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contends that "literary imagination can impact on de-transcendentalizing nationalism" (20-21). Spivak's *Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization* (2012) equally emphasises the role of literature in enlightening contemporary readers and in preparing them to live ethically in a globalised world: "Globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being except insofar as it always was implicit in its vanishing outline, only an aesthetic education can continue to prepare us for this, thinking an uneven and only apparently accessible contemporaneity that can no longer be interpreted by such nice polarities as modern/traditional, colonial/postcolonial" (2).

Aesthetic education, then, intimates such attitudes and experiences, often, no doubt, with the intention of having an exemplary effect, but, more generally, of moving the reader and making any impression at all. For instance, every historically important moment in American literary history is marked by the publication of works which, in addition to their entertaining and enlightening function, also have an appellative and a reflective function. Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008) distinguishes between recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. All four categories of aesthetic effect, if we take into consideration the efforts of feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies and indigenous studies, are never only phenomenological experiences but are also manifestations of ideology, especially when the text in question qualifies as what Spivak calls a "culturally different" book (73), i.e., a book which confronts the reader with cultural realities different from the ones he or she is familiar with. In such a reading context, the "implied reader" (Iser), already written into the text in terms of the aesthetic experience the text seeks to trigger, is confronted with aspects and potential interferences of cultural difference: through texts which challenge and critique the boundaries of national identity and do so by means of the aesthetic (including transgressions of genre, literary periodisation and formalist criteria). Thus, aesthetic education invites, even forces, the reader to apply a "transnational sensibility" which "sees a lack of fixity as simultaneously inevitable and rich in possibility" (Friedman and Schultermandl 5) and leave behind prevalent concepts of identity and literature to the same extent.

In Lim's work, aesthetic education works in two ways: on the one hand, she characterises British and American literature as an agent of knowledge formation which imposes a sense of aesthetic and moral values onto Malaysian readers; in this sense, aesthetic education functions as an instrument of colonialism and neo-imperialism, one which Lim critiques by emphasising the particular forms of interpellation through the nation-state apparatus which create minority subjectivities. The second function of aesthetic education in Lim's work relates to her counter-narratives to such forms of domination through literary practices which resist national ideology, challenge canon formation and position postcolonial, bifurcated and emancipatory subjects at the centre of her stories. Eddie Tay, for instance, argues that "Lim's works exemplify a poetics of liberation and articulate a selfhood that renders the strictures of a nation-bound identity irrelevant" (289). In relation to Lim's poetry in particular, Tay notes that "[i]f Lim is an exile because she stands outside cultural, linguistic and political boundaries erected by Malay nationalism, then one may propose that as a strategy of articulation, her poetry produces a national allegory that interrogates these contextual boundaries" (295).

This poetic practice of challenging the nation-state is at the centre of Lim's transnationalism and also extends into the realm of aesthetic education. What is considered aesthetic among Lim's protagonists, and how she, through her own authorial and pedagogical interventions, challenges prevalent concepts of aesthetic universalism, tie in with ongoing debates about the nexus between aesthetics and politics in so-called minority literatures. A pressing issue in literary studies since the culture wars of the 1990s (and in fact dating back to the emergence of Russian Formalism in the 1920s), the interest in the aesthetic has raised the question why certain texts are considered to have literary relevance, and perhaps more so than others. Emory Elliott, for instance, argues that the historically conservative idea of what constitutes the aesthetic "implies that 'artistic merit' and 'minority writers' are mutually exclusive terms" (11). This has led to a breach in literary studies, whereby the classics tend to be read for their aesthetic value and ethnic literatures for their representations of cultural realities. In the specific case of Asian American literature, Sue-Im Lee contends that "literary works have been readily examined as symbolic enactments of material forces; as exemplifications of a particular ideology, phenomenon, or a conflict; or as illustrations of the political, economic, and sociological concerns of the times" (2), but not sufficiently for their negotiation of aesthetic criteria. All major recent works which reinvestigate the relevance of the aesthetic (Levine, Eagleton, Bérubé, Castronovo) refute the notion of a universalist sense of aesthetics and favour a dialectical relationship between the aesthetic and the political.

The interplays between the aesthetic and the political form a dominant theme in Lim's work. In particular, her protagonists are often confronted with

questions of literature's political relevance in contemporary society. Her works themselves renegotiate the aesthetic precisely in their endeavour to capture the political contexts of Lim's unique personal history.

Aesthetic education in Lim's literary works

In a 1994 article in *Ms*. Magazine, Jessica Hagedorn uses the term "colonization of the imagination" (78) to denote the dissemination of popular culture phenomena and practices which compartementalise Asian identity as inferior to Western culture. Hagedorn's idea of colonisation addresses the role of film productions which reproduce Western hegemony in their depictions of Asian Americans as submissive, infantile and passive. This notion that Western cultural productions distribute political ideology to audiences in Asian countries is also prevalent in Lim's work. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, Lim remembers the formative power of English literature: "Western ideological subversion, cultural colonialism, whatever we call those forces that have changed societies under forced political domination, for me began with something as simple as an old English folk song" (64). Because English literature was part of a colonial curriculum which replaced English culture for the local cultural diversity of Malaysia, Lim's own creativity was shaped by English literature, so much so that she wonders whether this occurred at the expense of her creative power as a Malaysian intellectual: "Thinking back through the cultural imperialism of British colonial education, I regret the loss of the potential Malaysian intellectual in that precocious child and young adult [she was]" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 87). Instead, English inevitably induced feelings of limitations and inferiority, reminding young children like herself of their constant marginality within colonial power. Linguistic deviations from standardised English are one such occasion which imply marginality: "The misspellings, ungrammatical syntax, labored sentences, and dull prose testified not to a lack of schooling but to lives and experiences mismatched to the well-oiled machinery of the English-language essay" (85). This contradiction between English discourse and Malaysian social realities evokes a feeling of alienation brought about through aesthetic education which seeks to teach colonial subjects about the cultural richness of the colonial motherland.

Lim returns to this idea in her novel *Joss and Gold* (2001), where the protagonist Li An only slowly discovers her own entanglement in colonial indoctrination through her work as an English tutor. In the novel's first section entitled "Crossing," Li An finds herself, as several times in the novel, defending the role of literature in the context of social change. In a conversation with her husband Henry and their friend Chester, an American anthropologist volunteering for the Peace Corps, Li An mentions several canonical British authors who are part of her curriculum. Li An focuses on the poems' aesthetic qualities, their ability to communicate a feeling of beauty and reverence. With

particular reference to A.E. Housman's poem "Into my heart an air that kills," Li An marvels at the influence of aesthetic effect: "The killing air came out of the words and echoed in her body as Chester and Henry were smiling at the absurdity of the ideas. Her body went quite still. How beautiful! she thought, and felt the poem making her a different person" (32). This bodily experience of beauty elevates Li An's soul in the classical sense of aesthetics, namely that regardless of cultural difference, there are elements in the text which translate into the reader's recognition and appreciation of beauty.

In the novel, Li An's appreciation of literature remains entirely lost on Henry and Chester. In fact, Chester proposes a critique of Li An's appreciation of British literature, arguing that what she should be teaching is Malaysian literature: "You've got your own culture. That's what you should be teaching" (33). The conversation becomes poignant when Li An insists that "it's not culture [she is] teaching. It's literature. It's language, words, images, feelings…" (33). The two perspectives, one tellingly held by the cultural anthropologist, the other by the literature student, exemplify the tension between aesthetics and politics. Li An's defence of British literature with largely universalist ideas about aesthetic education is juxtaposed by Chester's immanentist understanding of literature as a cultural artefact. It is no coincidence that this conversation takes place in the "Crossing" section of the novel set in the years 1968-69, with the increasing manifestations of Malaysian postcolonial identity in the backdrop. Chester's comment on the imperative to teach Malaysian literature shows how a new national consciousness, even if adopted by a foreigner, repositions the value of local and national literary productions.

Li An does not explicitly change her mind about the value of English literature; still, the alienating effect of colonial aesthetic education becomes apparent to the reader in relation to Li An's own creative impulses. The same theme of the relevance of English literature comes up just a few days before the May 13th riots. Li An at this point keeps a diary and records both the political climate of Kuala Lumpur and her own aesthetic education, e.g. what she reads and what moves her. In her entry from 5th May, she records her frustration with a poem she modelled after "[William Carlos] Williams' variable foot" (73). When Li An notes that "nothing I've written sounds like me" (73), she creates a distance between herself and the formalist criteria of American poetry she tries so hard to adopt. This section recalls Li An's earlier confrontation with Chester on the political potential of literature (Chester is even evoked in the passage). As such, it becomes clear that amidst her impatience with her own poetic talent, Li An also traces her constraints in expressing herself through her poems to her mimicking of literary works which have little to do with her social reality. Her main concern seems to be that she cannot find her own poetic voice in the books she borrows from the United States Information Service (USIS) in Kuala Lumpur. When Li An spends the night of the May 13th riots at Chester's

apartment, the first and only time they sleep together, she also returns to the idea of bodily experience in a similar fashion as in her account of how poetry moves her. Her realisation that Chester "had marked her forever" (91) is not only a metaphor for the child she conceives that night, but her new understanding of the interplay of aesthetics and politics in literature.

While for Li An the symbolic May 13th, 1969 riots signify a new understanding of aesthetic education, Lim's memoir highlights to what degree this political end of Malaysia's colonial history was the beginning of a new hegemony: "In the process of the formation of a Malaysian elite, the May 13th riots provided the bloody revolution that changed Malaysia from the ideal of a multicultural egalitarian future – an ideal already tested by hostilities over power-sharing – to the Malay-dominant race-preferential practice in place today" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 136). Prior to the 1969 riots, several new laws, including the Education Act (1961) and the National Language Bill (1967), were introduced to enforce a nationalist identity, in particular through the privileging of Malay as national language. Eddie Tay retraces this adoption to Malay nationalism onto the level of literary canon formation, suggesting that "Malay nationalism constitutes a form of hegemony that governs not only the social, economic and political arena but also the formation of a literary canon" (293). In her memoir, Lim remembers these changes by referring to the shifting discourses she experienced while a student at the University of Malaya: "My second year at the university was filled with continuous debates on the cultural future of the country. More and more, the term 'Malay' appeared where 'British' once stood" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 122). Lim is critical of this elevation of Malay identity over British culture. In particular, she points out the artificiality of this newly emergent Malay identity: "The 'Malaysian,' that new promise of citizenship composed of the best traditions from among Malays, Chinese, Tamils, Eurasians, Dayaks, and so forth, seemed more and more to be a vacuous political fiction, a public relations performance like those put on for Western tourists at state-run cultural centers" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 122). Her scepticism about Malay nationalism seems to go back to earlier experiences of loss and alienation, such as when Great Britain and the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) started negotiating for the independence of the Federation of Malay. Starting in 1952, "Legislation controlling citizenship for Chinese residents was enacted, and suddenly millions of Chinese were legally enmeshed, their loyalties and identities suspended until certain forms, government stamps, notarized certificates, and fees were collected" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 52).

Lim's memoir suggests that all hegemonic ideals (colonial and post-colonial alike) can coerce feelings of alienation. In her own work as a writer, this alienation has to do with her choice of language of expression, her emigration to the United States and her constant intermingling of memories of alienation:

"In Malaysia, I would always be of the wrong gender and the wrong race" (133). This feeling of alienation influences Lim's work, perhaps precisely because the topic of home appears throughout her creative work. Home can mean both a feeling of belonging and the securing of a domestic space, such as in the following poem first published in *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980):

> Reading Tennyson, at six
> p.m. in pajamas,
> listening to down-pour-
> ing rain: the air ticks
> with gnats, black spiders fly,
> moths sweep out of our rooms
> where termites built
> their hills of eggs and queens zoom
> in heat. (90-91)

The juxtaposition of Tennyson's poetry with the reality of everyday life in the comfort of home and the contrast between the dead white poet and the living signs of nature, position the lyrical I at the intersection of literature and material realities. Although filled with tension between these polarities, the poem integrates one into the other by highlighting the particular context in which the reading of Tennyson occurs, thus acknowledging a specific politics of location of the lyrical I's reading practice.

A similar sentiment occurs in her poem "I defy you," a lyrical address to challenge Wallace Stevens' idea of a universal truth:

> I defy you Wallace Stevens
> to prove 'the exquisite truth'
> ….
> The young Cambodian whose father drowned
> in monsoon ocean knows
> his sister's raped eyes are truth;
> the hungry and dead are his 'exquisite truth,'
> and you an American fiction. (*Passports and Other Lives* 293)

Lim's poem exposes the limited horizon of awareness in literary production of American modernism where the social realities of non-WASPs find little reflection. In the context of the "young Cambodian" who suffers personal losses, Stevens' concept of an "exquisite truth" exemplifies the contradictions between Stevens' own provincialism and the global tragedies which remain unacknowledged in his work. While Southeast Asia, embodied in the figure of the young Cambodian, is shown as excluded from Stevens' definition, Lim equips him with a great deal of agency, so much so that Stevens becomes reduced to an "American fiction."

Throughout her work, literature is encoded in both aesthetic and political contexts, so much so that the identities she sketches gain agency precisely because of the tension between universal ideas of beauty and particular circumstances of lived experience. The subjects of her poems or prose display a keen awareness of their own processes of knowledge formation through aesthetic education.

Aesthetic Education and Academia

Lim's work also addresses the question of aesthetic education in relation to academia and higher education. It is in poems such as the above where Lim succeeds in inscribing her personal realities into the exclusivist world of poetry, fulfilling a desire for recognition which she articulates in *Among the White Moon Faces* in the following manner: "I needed to find another, more welcoming America in which poetry, Asia, and woman could be accepted in the same body" (225). The background for this desire for recognition is Lim's experience of racial discrimination/xenophobia within American academia. Having been hired at the lesser echelons of the academic ladder and passed over for promotions despite an outstanding academic record while she was employed at Westchester Community College suggests to Lim the limitations of the US higher education system.

As an alternative space to this lived discrimination, the borderless realm of literary imagination allows Lim to create a sense of self beyond the identities assigned to her by the various national contexts she inhabits. In the prologue to *Among the White Moon Faces*, she explains that "[b]uried in the details of an American career, my life as a non-American persists, a parallel universe played out in dreams, in journeys home to Malaysia and Singapore" (9-10). She concludes her memoir by reflecting on the deterritorialised nature of her work: On the occasion of her award of the 1980 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, she muses "How strange to be a poet without a country! And yet how inevitably it had come about that it should be so" (187). Amidst these symbolic movements which her literary imagination performs and demands the reader to follow in turn, the only constant aspect is her privileging of the English language, the language which consistently served her in all of the many cultural and national contexts. In an essay entitled "The dispossessing eye: reading Wordsworth on the equatorial line," Lim specifies that her "first memory of spoken language is also [her] first memory of the English language" (127), connecting the English language to the beginning of her linguistic processing of the world around her. In reflections such as this one, Lim acknowledges the impact of aesthetic education on her earliest conceptions of the world.

A dedicated teacher to further her students' potential, Lim has written about the effect of her teaching English literature to students whose social realities are in no way comparable to the ones of canonical authors or texts on

standardised reading lists. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, she acknowledges the discrepancy between what students learn and what they actually relate to on a cultural level: "I left [Hostos Community College in the Bronx] because I could not reconcile English literature and the deprivations of black and brown students" (183). As someone who experienced forms of marginalisation both inside and outside of academia, Lim commits to promoting an empowering pedagogy: "Someone who walks between and in and out of national and institutional borders draws attention to the arbitrariness of divisions and to the vested interests of gatekeepers" (222-23). This position prompts her to advocate in favour of an anti-imperialist pedagogy in higher education. "I believed that Hostos students deserved better and more, and I did not believe that teaching them English grammar was what they deserved. More to the point, I left Hostos because I was edgily depressed, hating my engagement in the colonialist versions of higher education" (183).

The gatekeepers, Lim acknowledges, are all too often agents of neo-liberal capitalism, whereby English as an academic subject must translate effortlessly into the job market. That universities are increasingly run like businesses is not foreign to Lim's own experience in American academia. In *Joss and Gold*, Lim raises this issue by eventually positioning her protagonist Li An at the heart of Southeast Asian business dynamics. The novel's final section "Landing," set in 1980, show's Li An's conversation with Abdullah, her friend from college, who since has established himself as a notable journalist. Provocatively, Abdullah asks: "What is the purpose of all the literature they're still teaching in the university? Malay literature, Chinese literature, English literature – no practical use. Better to teach communications, public relations, like you are doing now" (178). It is a long shot from Li An's earlier moments of an intense aesthetic experience to the sober assertion how much she has changed: "she is businesslike now. No more poetry, no more literature. She's trying to make a buck. Singapore is go, go, go. Everyone is trying to make a buck" (183). Li An describes a well-known phenomenon, namely the devaluation of the humanities: no aesthetic education is relevant in the English classroom, and certainly not the formation of political awareness; what seems to have replaced both aesthetics and politics alike are neo-liberal market values of academic degrees.

Lim's own experiences of discrimination in American academia are caused by both institutional and ideological borders. Her unsuccessful endeavour to secure a promotion at a community college leads Lim to wonder why her reputation as a teacher in the college is not rewarded in the same degree as her reputation as a poet in the larger world: "My success outside the college contrasted with a profound sense of failure in it" (223). Years later and firmly established as a professor, Lim addresses this question differently by interrogating the disciplinary borders between English and Creative Writing. Lim bridges the "aloofness" between creative writing and literary/feminist

scholarship which is so often an issue occasioned by institutional divisions between English and Creative Writing departments. Lim's own strategy to circumvent this division is by turning to creative non-fiction. Her life writing practices in both poetry and prose transgress established definitions of autobiographical writing. These genre transgressions relate to Lim's particular experiences of interpellation as much as they resonate with her interest in the potential of what literary imagination can do, both for the writer's expression of identity and the reader's approach to the aesthetic effect of literary works.

That her particular identity often dominates her readers' approach to her works can be seen in specific cases of her work's reception within the American canon. While Lim's work constantly pushes the edges of established categories of identity and literary typologies, the coercive presence of such categories determines in which way readers regard her work. In her essay "Academic and Other Memoirs: Memory, Poetry, and the Body," Lim relates an interview question that she got from a graduate student who was working on a project on women's autobiographies. The student started the interview with the following assessment of Lim's work:

> A startling number of personal-history works – including your autobiography *Among the White Moon Faces: A Memoir of Asian-American Homelands* [sic] – by women immigrants, particularly from "Third-World" countries, have been released in the later half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s. (36)

In that same essay, Lim astutely points out the prevalence, and in her case, unreflected accordance of such categories of identification: "The identities encompassed in [the student's] single question include American national, immigrant, women, third-world, twentieth century, and genre – autobiography, personal history, and narrative" (36). The accordance of such categories is indicative of the ways in which Lim's work has been received in the United States, namely as an example of a proliferating canon of literary texts that are not "mainstream" and thus seem to be in need of such classifications as "women immigrants" or "Third-World." Lim however counters such attempts at categorisation of her work by emphasising that "while [her] memoir is chiefly read as U.S. ethnic, it is in fact transnational, treading between at least two subjectivities, a Malaysian Chinese and an Asian American" (37).

Conclusion

The question of aesthetic education, of the aesthetic at large, has gained new relevance since the "transnational turn" in American Studies (Fishkin), a new turn which Shirley Lim in no small part shaped, such as by her initiatives in Asian American Studies and as one of the founding editors of the online publication venue *The Journal of Transnational American Studies*. In the ten years

since this transnational turn, although Lim's work shows that the presence of the transnational is a much older phenomenon, the tension between the aesthetic and the political has become reanimated. In a 2011 special issue of the journal *New Literary History*, the debate between contributing authors Winfried Fluck, Robyn Wiegman and John Michael expresses concern that transnational American studies continues to pursue, albeit under a new moniker, lines of inquiry which ultimately always cast the United States in exceptionalist terms: approaching the phenomenon of American interpellation from a transnational studies perspective (trans-Atlantic dialogues, inter-American Studies, Pacific Rim studies, etc.) highlights the forms and variations of American identity discourses of exemplary individuals by privileging the American content, destination of their journeys, integration in or alienation from American society at different historical moments. Fluck even distinguishes between an aesthetic transnationalism and a political transnationalism, the first one, casting America itself as an aesthetic object and the second one, reading identity formation as major evidence of the power and politics of America's asymmetrical relationship with the rest of the world. In both cases, Fluck concludes, as long as the focus lies solely on the question of interpellation through the nation-state, all transnational American scholarship may end up enacting a new version of American exceptionalism, discussing America in terms of its imperial force not with the effect of undoing the implied power-structures but with the effect of re-instituting them, albeit involuntarily. As such, as Michael makes clear, "American studies remains altogether too American in its obsessions with America's exceptional delusions" (410).

It is true, as Sue-Im Lee proposes, that "Asian American Studies has its beginnings in the political activism of the 1960s, as a multidisciplinary approach devoted to the examination of the material and discursive ramifications of being particularly interpellated as 'Asian American'" (4). But the aesthetic realisation of these forms of interpellation, as Lim's works show, also transcends the level of merely being representations of cultural and material realities. While interpellation through the nation-state, both in Malaysia and the United States as well as through the British colonial empire, has tangible effects on Lim's life, her aesthetic practices of re-inscribing marginal subjectivities, of transgressing established genres, of critiquing prevalent dynamics of canon formation, and of challenging university policies, refute national boundaries. Her various meta-referential comments on the role of aesthetic education contribute to a negotiation of a borderless world, at least the world of literary imagination, and thus force her readers to imagine alternative modes of being and belonging.

Works Cited

Bérubé, Michael. "Introduction: Engaging the Aesthetic." *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*. Ed. Michael Bérubé. London: Blackwell, 2005. 1-27.

Castronovo, Russ. *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Elliott, Emory. "Introduction: Cultural Diversity and the Problem of Aesthetics." *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton and Jeffrey Rhyne. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. 3-27.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies – Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005): 17-57.

Fluck, Winfried. "A New Beginning?: Transnationalisms." *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011): 365-84.

Friedman, May, and Silvia Schultermandl. "Introduction." *Growing Up Transnational: Identity and Kinship in a Global Era*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. 3-18.

Hagedorn, Jessica. "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck." *Ms* (January/February 1994): 74-79.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Lee, Sue-Im. "Introduction: The Aesthetic in Asian American Literary Discourse." *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*. Ed. Rocío G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006. 1-14.

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

---. "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 3.2 (2003): 151-69.

---. *Joss and Gold*. New York: The Feminist Press, 2001.

---. "The Center Can(not) Hold: American Studies and Global Feminism." *American Studies International* 38.3 (October 2000): 25-35.

---. *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1996.

---. "The Dispossessing Eye: Reading Wordsworth on the Equatorial Line." *Discharging the Canon: Cross-cultural Readings in Literature*. Ed. Peter Hyland. Singapore: Singapore UP, 1986.

---. *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1980.

---. "Academic and Other Memoirs: Memory, Poetry, and the Body." *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performances, Culture*. Ed. Rocío G. Davis, Jaume

Aurell, and Ana Beatrice Delgado. Münster, Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007. 22-39.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn and Gina Valentino, eds. *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006.

Michael, John. "Transnational American Studies, or, Tainted Love." *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011): 409-17.

Quayum, Mohammad A. "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview." *MELUS* 28.4 (Winter 2003): 83-100.

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. London: Dover Books, 2004.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.

---. *Nationalism and the Literary Imagination*. London: Seagull, 2011.

Tay, Eddie. "Hegemony, National Allegory, Exile: The Poetry of Shirley Lim." *Textual Practice* 19.3 (2005): 289-308.

Wiegman, Robyn. "The Ends of New Americanism." *New Literary History* 42.3 (2011): 384-407.