

Moving Home, Writing Home: Transnational Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces*

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Abstract

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's autobiography, *Among the White Moon Faces: A Memoir of Asian-American Homelands* (1996), narrates the Malaysian American author's geographical and ontological journey, from her birthplace to the United States, to which she emigrated as a graduate student at the end of the 1960s. The writer recalls her visits back home and her migrations across her host country, shedding light on the exile's contradictory desires as to the prospect of his/her socio-political and cultural integration within the new land. Lim's memoir encapsulates the turmoil which the (im)migrant in exile experiences as he/she tries to figure out his/her status on foreign soil, shifting from the position of the traveller, the exile to the one of the resident alien and eventually consenting to become an American(ised) citizen. Still, ambivalence pervades Lim's relationship with her host country while reviving her primary ties to the native land; *Among the White Moon Faces* questions geographical fixity, the unique territorial inscription as the site for the Malaysian-born immigrant's sense of belonging in America, therefore invalidating any assimilationist reading of her autobiographical itinerary. As the author emphasises the necessity of communal and poetic bonds to Malaysia and America, home re-emerges and thrives beyond the boundaries of national delineation.

Keywords

Immigrant, exile, assimilation, transnational, (dis)location, home

Introduction

Among the White Moon Faces: A Memoir of Asian-American Homelands (1996) retraces Shirley Geok-lin Lim's journey, from British-ruled Malaya and newly independent Malaysia, where she grew up and started her adult life, to the United States, where she emigrated to complete her graduate studies in 1969

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and eventually settled, living with her American husband and American-born son and teaching literature at the University of California, in Santa Barbara. As her memoir moves from her Malaysian life to her immigration in the United States, the writer wonders: "How does one make oneself at home?" (155), "How does one make a home?" (191). These questions spur the narrative on, prodding the author into figuring out what "home" means and where home is to the one whose life bears the imprint of two soils and several cultures. The Malaysian American writer's notion of home is complicated by her ambivalence toward the host country, which makes it difficult for her to articulate her position as an exile, a resident alien and/or an immigrant. As the subtitle of her autobiography suggests, there can only be several "homelands"; the Asian American woman's sense of home will not be restricted within one nation's confines, thriving rather without a homogeneous conception of American identity.

"[N]either here nor there"

If *Among the White Moon Faces* is formally striking as a traditional autobiography, following a chronological pattern and providing an accurate description of the Malaysian and American socio-political realities which Lim has experienced, it resists a linear, developmental² approach to her ontological journey, therefore questioning any assimilationist reading of her identity formation.

The presence of Lim's native country brims over the seemingly restrictive narrative space devoted to her life in Malaysia which is told mostly in the first two sections of the autobiography; it is still palpable in the following chapters evoking the writer's American life, hence implying what Andrew Smith identifies as the immigrant's existential non-linearity. According to Smith, the emergence of memories related to the writer's homeland in the host country's reality imparts a (subversive) regressive tension to his/her narrative and partakes in his/her marginality and (self-)marginalisation within a nation which expects its citizens to yearn for a collective identity based on homogenous, "limited and linear ways of understanding themselves" (Smith 245).

The author's memories of the events she experienced in the native country, of the sensations, impressions and perceptions that were born in her familial environment and which grew on Malaysian soil, within the homeland's

² In "Canon, Institutionalization, Identity," Lisa Lowe points out the institutionalisation of a Eurocentric assimilationist interpretation of Asian American literature through the chief use of a Western critical apparatus, hence the mostly "culturalist" and "developmental" interpretations of the Asian American subject's identity formation (Lowe 48-68). The dominant culture is read as a set of norms and codes, a sort of identity unit – a "culture-substance" (Vinsonneau 10-11) – which the ethnic subject is expected to take in through learning and social interactions. Consequently, the ethnic subject's "development," progression toward the dominant culture is viewed as cultural improvement since Western culture is erected into a "founding identity or wholeness in America" which has to be recovered (Kim xii).

atmosphere and its combination of Chinese, Malay and British cultures, remain vivid in her American life despite the geographical and temporal distances that separate her from Malaysia. Being summoned back into her native country by the diffuse yet persistent presence of her past, both in her flesh and in her memory, the writer cannot feel completely anchored in the United States:

The unmovable self situated in the quicksand of memory, like those primeval creatures fixed in tar pits, that childhood twelve thousand miles and four decades away, is a fugitive presence which has not yet fossilized. Buried 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, and in a continuous undercurrent of feelings directed to people I have known, feared, loved, and deserted for this American success. (9-10)

The writer's occasional visits to Malaysia and Singapore, where her mother settled, her subconscious and relational ties to her homeland ensure the vividness of her primary universe; although the memories of her Malayan childhood have necessarily faded over time, they have resisted the *rigor mortis* of oblivion, preserving Lim from a clear-cut excision from the native country, soothing the pain of exile. The past remains all the more present and acute as it keeps being rekindled by Lim's guilt of having chosen to leave her birthplace and her kin for the United States. Her "American success" is indeed undermined by her feeling of desertion so that assimilation can never be fully achieved.

As she adapts to American society and starts settling in the United States, the narrator stresses the risk of envisaging her American life as an appendage to her early existence:

The irony about a certain kind of immigrant is how little she can enjoy of the very things she chases. Even as she runs away from her first life, this other life that begins to accrue around her remains oddly secondary, unrooted in the sensuality of infancy and the intensities of first memory. (9-10)

The writer observes the indissolubility of her early life in her current one, hence her inability to indulge in her American existence; being acutely aware of her surviving past, facing the obstinate manifestations of a world she does not inhabit anymore, the Malaysian immigrant feels reluctant to adopt her country of residence and to become a full member of American society.

In her essay "Immigration and Diaspora," Lim hints at what characterises the "kind of immigrant" she was when she arrived in the United States. Offering her analytical reading of Bienvenido Santos's novel, *The Man Who*

(*Thought He*) *Looked Like Robert Taylor*, she identifies “the problematics of cultural desire” as the core of the immigrant’s ambivalence toward his/her assimilation in the host country, highlighting the contrapuntal development of the Filipino American immigrant’s “exilic longing for [his] homeland” and his “counter desire to remain in the United States” (Lim 306). Lim’s observations on Santos’s novel shed light on her own relationship to America, her bonds to the host country being necessarily complicated by the coexistence of her contesting “exilic desire” – that is, her nostalgia for the landscapes, smells and atmosphere of Malaysia – and “assimilatory desire,” namely her yearning to adopt America and settle there. Like Sol, the Filipino American immigrant in Santos’s novel, Lim has to position herself between “filiation” – a term Edward Said utilises to name the immigrant’s relationship with the deserted birthplace, “his/her filiative place (homeland)” – and “affiliation,” which refers to the immigrant’s involvement in his/her host country’s society and culture, within which he/she is building his/her socio-cultural and political identities, “his/her affiliative identity (socialized self)” (Lim 295).³ As a result, the Malaysian American immigrant can only form fragile, vulnerable ties with the new land on her arrival in the United States.

However, returning home will not help the exiled writer recover her sense of belonging since “home” can no longer be confined within one territory, one culture once she has left her native country and started settling on foreign soil. Although they allow a temporary return to the birthplace, Lim’s brief stays in her homeland after her emigration to the United States fail to cure her original wound of separation as distance makes Malaysia irremediably remote and alien.

In 1982, twelve years after her departure for America, Lim goes back to Asia to teach at the National University of Singapore for a semester; she seizes the opportunity to renew her bonds with her mother and introduces her to her two-year-old son Gershom. Yet, as she observes the distance pervading her exchanges with her mother and the intangibility of the maternal presence in her life, the American resident becomes aware of the distance separating her from the native land: “She was a stranger, dragging bare feet in my temporary rented home, and our relationship foundered on what remained unspoken” (205). Her damaged relationship with her mother weakens her ties to her “filiative place”: “Certain hurts are amputations, the lost limb unrecoverable” (205).

When she comes back to Malaysia in 1994, she casts a distanced look on her native town, returning there as an American resident:

First Brother did not think it remarkable to find the watch repairer and the cobbler at work in the age of disposable cameras and disposable shoes. But I did, and my marveling – like a tourist – to find them still in Malacca,

³ Lim refers to Edward W. Said’s “Secular Criticism.” *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986. 605-22.

which now bustles with tour buses and giant air-conditioned shopping malls, brings home to me the interwoven twinning and splitting of past and present, Malacca and the United States. (209)

Her perception of Malacca, which she rediscovers as “a tourist,” merges with her memories of the place she used to inhabit, hence her mixed impressions of familiarity and estrangement while visiting her hometown; the Malaysian emigrant’s sense of belonging to her birthplace both clashes and interlaces with the American resident’s feeling of externality within Malacca. Although a few familiar markers remain, endowing the town with some immutability – “the thick heat and narrow shop-lined streets were still the same” (209); “the economy of time and price was of my childhood.” (209) – Lim cannot recover the feeling of rootedness she has been deprived of by her exile out of Malaysia, henceforth perceiving her homeland only as a foreign observer and a passing guest. The passage significantly verifies what she foresaw at Kuala Lumpur airport before emigrating: “I would never see Malaysia again, except through the eyes of a traveler” (138).

As a result, double dislocation characterises the Malaysian emigrant’s journey as she feels uprooted both in her native place and in her country of residence, describing herself as “a registered alien [who] is neither here nor there” (160). However, Lim’s territorial and cultural displacement should not be read as the symptom of an “ethnic split,” a “crisis of identity” requiring resolution through an assimilationist “rhetoric of progress and cure” (Cheng 7).⁴ It rather signifies the migrant’s fundamental existential condition which should not be denied by exclusive, monocultural choice and definitive location.

A Mobile *Oikos*

Lim’s distance toward her host country necessarily complicates the way she envisages her living space in America, urging her at first to seek refuge rather in transitory, mobile homes. The author thus stands out as a migrant figure, whose relationship with movement originates from a familial nomadic way of life. She evokes the “*makan angin*” ritual, which used to fuel the Lims’ peregrinations and which her mother cherished:

⁴ In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu highlights the “model minority discourse” as the trait characterising assimilation narratives: such texts subscribe to a rhetoric of identity healing requiring the resolution of the ethnic subject’s (pathological) cultural dilemma – “the ‘ethnic split,’ the ‘crisis of identity,’ and other elements of ethnic malaise” – through exclusive monocultural choice or artificial cultural compromise, in-betweenness (Palumbo-Liu 401). Similarly, Shelley Sunn Wong points to the Eurocentric “teleological methodology” determining both the production and reception of Asian American narratives: “the trope of wholeness frequently plays itself out as an uncomplicated and desirable progress – from a condition of brokenness, estrangement and struggle (the result of an enforced social, cultural, political and economic marginality) to one of reconstituted wholeness and ultimate inclusion in the narrative drama of American history” (Wong 108).

It was a ritual my mother called *makan angin*: to eat the wind, to move as leisure. Not as a challenge or as a means to an end, which are Western notions of travel, but as easy pleasure. It held nothing of the association of speed that “wind” arouses in the West, but rather of slowness, a way of drawing life out so that time is used maximally. *Makan angin* makes sense only in a society in which time is valueless, a burden to be released with least financial loss and most pleasure. It speaks for lives that have not understood necessity or luxury, and that drift in dailiness, seeking escape from boredom of the sense through the senses. (16)

Although as a little girl Lim knew that the family's frequent travels resulted from their socio-economic marginality in Malacca – the family's nomadism acting as a foil to the stability and superiority of their well-off relatives – her mother's restless character and love for movement made her perceive wandering as a source of freedom and completeness. “*Makan angin*” conveys a relationship to time which challenges Western capitalistic societies' sense of teleological urgency: far from serving as a transitory phase in a travel solely initiated by the perspective of arrival and conditioned by the targeted destination, movement is not considered as a means to reach the final stop but as a carefree act, freed from any pragmatic considerations and anchoring the individual anywhere but in the present, the here and now of travelling. “*Makan angin*” thus names the maternal legacy of a migrant identity and philosophy that can emerge only without the reassuringly static Western home – “the banal regularity of the Western home” – and significantly, without the Anglo-American model of social integration.

However, as an American immigrant, Lim is aware that her socio-political integration depends on a sense of place and belonging, which supposes location, albeit a temporary one. Wandering indeed takes on a new significance in the United States as it does not provide the narrator with a feeling of freedom and the pleasure of an aimless trajectory which characterise “*makan angin*.” Instead of anchoring her in American soil, Lim's walks across Boston during her first years as a graduate student in Brandeis keep reminding her of her ethnic difference and further contribute to her marginalisation: “Each morning, I took long desultory walks..., always aware that my Asian body gave me away as a foreigner. It was as if I walked inside an invisible bubble, and all downtown Boston hubbubbed around me, visible but out of my reach” (154).

As a result, Lim soon feels the need for a private space that will allow her to settle in the host country. She applies for a position as a live-in dormitory counsellor in Brandeis, which requires her to be available for the resident students day and night. The dormitory, where the private room she is provided in exchange for counselling duties is part of a collective space and where she can both isolate herself from and be part of the turmoil of communal life,

stands out as an interstitial space within which the resident alien can start feeling safe: “It was clear to me that in moving to a single room earned through my work, a room to which I alone held the key, but which was part of a social complex, I had taken the first step to entering the United States on my terms” (155). Nevertheless, if the narrator accepts to settle in the host country, she still feels reluctant to adopt the United States for good. Dr. Helda, whom she meets at Brandeis crisis intervention centre, identifies the Malaysian immigrant’s distrust toward America and helps her feel at home, even momentarily: “Carry your own key, even if it is to a temporary home. After you have painted yourself into a corner, you can always get up and walk out of that corner” (151). Therefore, the university precincts offer her a proper refuge, namely a place of transit and a platform for exchange, an open and welcoming space within which she can find respite from outward socio-political hostility: “The university, the huge physical conglomerate of brick, glass, concrete, plush, fabric, metal, and vegetation, its heating and lighting dynamos humming still, offered a strange solace, an empty-handed gesture in which I could stay suspended, feeling and not feeling, sheltered yet homeless, solitary yet not absolutely alone” (153). The composite architecture of the buildings – which are both opaque and transparent, made of concrete and glass, combining soft and hard materials, artefacts and natural resources – endows the university with an appealing mobility to the migrant narrator.

Lim significantly stresses the fragile notion of an *oikos* as a fixed and outer place that is dependent on contingencies and therefore liable to disappear or to be irremediably lost:

Sometimes I think too much is made of homes, as if because we equate having nothing with being nothing, we burrow deeper into the stuffing of sofas and beds. Too much can be made of homeland. Stories we tell often take their identity from a piece of soil, and the strongest stories may leave us still standing in the scene of our powerlessness. (191)

Rootedness is precarious if it relies on housing or land. The author questions the reliability of a home which is subject to life hazards, time, personal stories and history and is aware that a property-based self-perception is liable to erode. Consequently, to the Malaysian immigrant, assimilation does not represent an appealing outlook since it requires installation and definitive (re)location, hence implying the risk of confiscation and loss.

Even after marrying an American and securing a teaching position in the New York suburbs, the narrator seeks refuge in movement, finding solace from the confined space of her district and her invasive neighbours in her daily drive from Brooklyn to the White Plains:

Each time I stepped into the car, shut the door, and turned the key, I imagined I was entering a different house, a house not under hostage to the cook, the mechanic, the gamblers, the listeners of salsa, and their children. It was enveloped by the roars of a frenetic world, but it was a silent house. I never turned the radio on. Sometimes I talked to the car-house, I hummed and sang aloud. I did not mind my neighbors as much; there was always the fifty-mile drive each day to the green world of Westchester County. (185)

Although the trip is not free from all spatiotemporal constraint, it provides the narrator with a mobile travelling space that can significantly be likened to the refuge Brandeis used to represent when she was a student: her “car-house” offers her a place of salutary isolation and individuation while still inscribing her in the collectively shared reality of traffic.

“The Ambivalent American”

Lim underlines the contradictions which “mak[ing] a home” supposes for the exile: how does one make a home in a country where exile is protracted, where new bonds are likely to be burdened with the guilt of desertion? To the Malaysian American writer, “mak[ing] oneself at home” does not mean choosing one territory, one nation and excluding or renouncing another; on the contrary, it implies accepting the mobile, dynamic nature of a homeland which, instead of being unique and fixed, confined to one’s birthplace, will split into “homelands.”

Giving birth to Gershom on American soil is what turns Lim’s host country into another homeland, another “filiative place”:

Birth changes a place to a homeland: birth land, children, our childhoods, where our parents have buried our umbilical cords, where our children will bury us and will bear their children. There are homelands of the memory and homelands of the future, and for many of us, they are not the same. (191)

Motherhood endows her with a genealogical inscription within the United States, enabling her to put down roots in American soil by starting the Lims’ second generation of Malaysian Americans.

Gershom’s birth is mentioned at the beginning of the last part of the autobiography, in which the narrator has successfully settled in the United States, having married an American, given birth and found a teaching position in a college in the wealthy area of Westchester County. Yet, even though Lim’s journey suggests her integration in the host country – as is stressed by the titles of the last two chapters “Immigrant Mother” and “Moving Home” – it should

not be read as an “immigrant/assimilation narrative”⁵ since the emigrant’s desire for integration and acceptance in the host country clashes with her acute awareness of the dangers of assimilation. As she starts teaching in the University of Westchester, she quickly understands that acceptance among her colleagues is likely to be achieved at the cost of her authenticity. Lim exposes the homogenising process of assimilation which supposes the erosion of one’s idiosyncrasies: “In my anxiety not to be different, I sleepwalked through years of such meetings, smiling, nodding, keeping my mouth and mind shut, drinking drafts of boredom, hypocrisy, fear, cynicism, and the desire to be accepted” (193).

The author remembers her reluctance to define her political status as she tried to adapt to her American life: “I may have been a blackbird, flying into Boston as a disheveled traveler uncertain whether I was choosing expatriation, exile, or immigration” (194). Although the term “immigrant” properly names her political situation in the United States, distinguishing her from her husband and her American-born son, it wrongly implies that her journey from Malaysia to the United States was mostly impelled by “assimilatory desire.”⁶ The author insists on the different factors which drove her to leave Malaysia and to settle in the United States – namely the socio-political and ethnic turmoil in her native country, her grant from Brandeis, the lack of professional opportunities that could meet her intellectual expectations when she returned home from the United States, the unexpected evolution of her American experience which she thought would be only temporary – all the circumstances that the term “immigrant” barely conveys.

Therefore, if Lim consents to define herself as an “immigrant mother” in the last part of her autobiography, she evokes her determination to preserve her son from the noncitizen’s exclusion and loneliness as the main reason for her “assimilatory desire”: “I wanted my child to possess the privileges of a territorial self, even as I had as a young Malaysian” (194). By applying for American citizenship, the Malaysian emigrant finally accepts to put an end to her exile and consequently, to enlarge her national inscription. She thus contributes to strengthen Gershom’s relationship with the United States, allowing him to enjoy instinctive ties to his birthplace – “I wished, at least for his infancy, the primal experience of bonding with an American homeland”

⁵ In “Immigration and Diaspora,” Lim defines Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) as such (Lim 307).

⁶ Rajini Srikanth mentions the assimilationist acceptance attributed to the term “immigrant” in some critical discourses on Asian American literature; she thus makes a distinction between the immigrant’s status and his/her position, stance as regards the host country’s socio-cultural values and standards: “I use the term ‘immigrant’ merely to indicate individuals born in countries other than in the United States and not to suggest, as some immigration scholars do, their greater investment in and assimilation so something called ‘the American way of life’ than that exhibited by sojourners and those in exile” (Srikanth 95-96).

(194) – even though her decision somehow causes her to sever her bonds with her native land one more time. *Among the White Moon Faces* shows the paradox of the Asian American immigrant whose political assimilation soothes the fear of territorial indeterminacy for the next generations while reviving the guilt of self-disavowal: “It may have been important for my imagination to maintain the distance of the resident alien, but I wanted for [my son] to have a pride of belonging, the sense of identity with a homeland” (197).

To grant Gershom the privileged ontology of American citizenship, the immigrant mother has no choice but to consent to her political definition and national inscription through naturalisation. Lim experiences such a procedure, which silences the pain of uprooting and questions her exilic loyalty to the deserted land, as a sacrifice. If American citizenship officialises the narrator’s political assimilation in the United States, her newly-acquired sense of national belonging remains fragile, artificial so long as it is mainly based on her fear of her son’s exclusion. She bitterly remembers the set of tests that she had to pass so as to be granted American citizenship: “language tests, history tests, economic tests, social tests. Tests that impress with the enormous and amazingly indifferent power of representative Americans to deny you identity, tests that force you to compliance, tests for inclusion that threaten exclusion. So my patriotism on my first day as an American citizen was not unbounded” (195-96).

Likewise, in her essay “The Ambivalent American,” Lim points to the violence of the naturalisation process which subjects the immigrant to an anti-natural exclusive choice between his birthplace and his “adopted” country: “An immigrant, no matter how reluctant an exile, usually undergoes a process of naturalization.... [W]hat an ironically inept term that is, for there is nothing natural about the process of Americanization” (Lim 18).

By relinquishing her resident status and choosing American citizenship, she becomes affiliated to the source of her own stigmatisation. Guilt and alienation burden the political assimilation of the narrator who has turned herself into the object of her own recriminations and “ambivalence”: “I felt alien in a different way, as if my ambivalence toward the United States must now extend inward to an ambivalence toward myself” (196). Citizenship turns out to be an object of desire and rejection, allowing the immigrant to provide her son with a feeling of national belonging – though not as safe and unquestionable as that of a Caucasian American⁷ – while weakening her bonds with the native country.

⁷ “When I describe Gershom as a 100-percent American, it is only Americans who disapprove, Americans who, making an equation between essence and face, infer from his features that he has lost his roots.... His confidence in his identity as American is perhaps a tenuous effect, one that can perhaps be shattered by prejudices and racism, but it is a necessary possession” (210).

Nevertheless, Lim points out the solely political nature of her assimilation through naturalisation: “I became an American *politically* with the birth of my child” (194).⁸ By swearing allegiance to the American flag, the Malaysian immigrant acknowledges her new national membership without denying her primary territorial inscription:

The naturalized American... is proud to be an American now, just as simultaneously there are in him those other selves that will always escape being only an American. In a nation of immigrants, there must therefore always be already that straining against the grain, the self that is assimilated and the self that remains unassimilable. (Lim, “The Ambivalent American” 18-19)

As Lim underlines, the immigrant’s ambivalence toward his/her Americanised self is what keeps him/her from amnesia and permanent exile: Lim’s native country survives in her memories, leaving an indelible imprint on her identity; its residual presence prevents her Americanisation from being fully achieved, restricting it to statutory procedures. Through her frequent visits to Malaysia, the narrator endeavours to “strain against the grain,” nurturing her ambivalent self: “I would like to think that something of me remains in my Malaysian family, not merely as past but as prologue” (210). Even though Gershon’s birth in the United States eventually assigns the Malaysian emigrant to a new national space, inscribing both her present and her future in the place of her exile, she strives to keep her relationship with her native country from fossilising by reviving her bonds with her kin in Malaysia.

The Malaysian American immigrant’s cultural ambivalence clearly questions the dominant myth of a homogeneous American identity, suggesting the transnational nature of her self-perception which can only emerge in a space that will spread beyond the confines of Euro-American society and culture.

Becoming Asian American

In the first chapter of her autobiography, Lim narrates a key episode in her identity formation. She remembers the day of her grandfather’s funeral as her first experience of familial cohesion and communal consciousness. The mourning rituals which the family publicly performs and the tokens of respect shown by the whole town constitute the first concrete signs of her sense of national and cultural belonging: “This moment imprinted on me the sense of Malacca as my home, a sense I have never been able to recover anywhere else in the world” (20). The solidarity shown to the bereaved family by the Malacca people enables Lim to experience communal unity for the first time. She thus feels part and parcel of the Malaccan population and experiences a strong sense

⁸ Italics in this quotation are mine.

of community which goes beyond the family sphere, beyond blood ties: “A photograph captures this single moment, when I felt Malacca not as a town but as a familiar spirit, a space extending from the family, and familiarity encompassing territory intimately inside my memory” (20). Lim understands that her permanent bonds to her family, her community and her people have been strengthened by that first experience of “familiarity,” by the memory of the communion of the Malacca people’s emotions and acts in response to the loss of one of them. Rootedness, the sense of territorial, national and cultural belonging does not lie in a place but in a collective emotional experience like the loss of a kin: “I felt Malacca not as a town but as a familiar spirit.” The patriarch’s death and the ritualised acceptance of his loss cause the narrator to form ties with her family and her community, ensuring the invariableness of her bonds to the native land, despite the losses and breaks engendered by time, socio-political upheavals and exile. The Malaysian writer’s filiative relationship with her homeland was created and survives in the communal bond, hence her feeling devoid of any depth and social visibility in the United States, where she has to live without a familial and cultural collective entity soon after her arrival: “Without family and community, I had no social presence; I was among the unliving” (155).

When she attends her first block association meeting, the narrator observes that the formation of collective identities similarly ensures the renewal and dynamism of the American social fabric: “the necessity for political action in the United States, I discovered, could create community where none existed before, thus contributing to the continuous fresh construction of civic identities” (177). By joining a group sharing the same cause within his/her host society, the foreign emigrant accepts to further integrate into the socio-cultural structures of his/her adopted country, despite being aware that “[i]t is the family, parents, siblings, cousins, that signify the meaning of the self, and beyond the family, the extended community” (164).

Consequently, Lim sheds light on the pivotal role the feminist community has played in her Asian American identity formation. In the last chapter of *Among the White Moon Faces*, the author relates her first participation in a seminar supervised by Nancy Miller at Barnard College, in the mid-1980s. The narration of the episode initiates a political aside from the author who then asserts her belief in transnational feminist thought. Questioning the binary opposition between women from ethnic minorities and Western women, Lim insists on the necessity of a women’s alliance beyond ethnic, national, socio-cultural, economic and religious boundaries as a way out of political invisibility: “We need women of all colors to jump fences of gender, race, class, nation, and religion, to help us rescue ourselves from the empire of blankness” (226).

Lim believes in women’s associations built around a dialogue confronting different points of view, shaping ideas beyond all types of divisions. As a result,

to the writer and scholar, Asian American literature and critical studies offer Asian women coming from different ethnic communities a forum that also welcomes the perspectives of non-Asian women; it provides her with a space where her native land and her adopted country no longer exclude each other, where her Malaysian imprint can actually interact with her American consciousness:

These [Asian-American women writers], and critics such as Elaine Kim and Amy Ling, publishing in the United States, lit up a different space, one that promised rather than denied community. I wanted to learn another life from them, finally to place Malaysia side by side with the US, and to become also what I was not born as, an Asian American.

To grow as an Asian-American scholar... I needed a society of scholars, an abundance of talk, an antagonism of ideas, bracing hostile seriousness, and above all a community of women. (227)

Asian American studies give Lim access to a community which acknowledges the ethnic origins and the cultural specificities of each participating author, reader and critic, and which encourages fruitful dialogue and debates among them. The writer's involvement in Asian American studies consequently allows her to feel part of American society and culture by endowing her with a new Asian American consciousness and consolidating her "affiliative identity" in the United States.

Significantly, as she sees her son living in a globalised society ruled by information technologies and liable to cross-border mobility, the Malaysian American writer hopes to see him grow into a world citizen with a transnational self-perception and conception of human relations. Since American identity is fundamentally an immigrant and ethnically plural identity, it makes sense only if it is engaged in a dynamic relationship with other cultures: American identity, Lim claims, should be a way for the individual to be part of humanity, rather than being the token of national(ist) isolationism: "Being an American, after all, is not much good if it is not good for something other than identity" (211).

The writer points out the absurdity of a nativist conception of American identity insofar as it denies the historical circumstances of the United States' formation and the nature of its social fabric, as is also underlined by Mary Dearborn in her essay *Pocahontas's Daughters*: "the central feature of American identity is the experience of migration, that Americans are in fact all descended from immigrants and that American selfhood is based on a seemingly paradoxical sense of shared difference" (Dearborn 3).

To the Malaysian American writer, America stands out for the complexity and heterogeneity of its social fabric; it is the living product of the "cultural ambivalence" or "biculturalism" (Lim 28) which she identifies in "The Ambivalent American" as the safeguard against degeneration and atrophy:

"This self that escapes assimilation, I believe, renews American culture, making it ready for the future. Even as each new generation of immigrants casts away its old selves in the fresh American present, so American culture casts away its old self in the presence of new Americans" (Lim 19). The multi-ethnic composition of American society, the fact that "it has no pure products" is precisely what appeals to the Malaysian-born immigrant, as her poem "Learning to Love America" stresses (Lim 74).

"Moving Home": Writing a Transnational Identity

Lim does not wonder where home "is" but rather how one "make[s]" a home, thus connoting the pivotal role of creation – creation through socio-political, academic and intellectual affiliations as seen earlier, but also poetic creation – in her quest of a sense of belonging and rootedness in America.

In the fourth chapter "Pomegranates and English Education," the author relates her experience of British school education and dwells on the emergence of her love for literature and writing. Although literature grants the little girl access to a completely different world and offers her a retreat from her familiar environment, it does not represent a way out of reality, enabling her on the contrary to interact both with her environment and with her inner world. Lim's desire for writing feeds on her strong Malaysian consciousness, her visceral bond to her native land – its landscapes, noises and people – as well as on the sensory and emotional experiences related to her birthplace:

This world, I understood dimly, was somehow connected to that world which I clutched in my hands. It had little taste of adventure, unlike the wars, princes, murders, and balls that took place regularly in books. But it was my world, red soil, green leaves, hot sun, cool shade, sturdy body, distant noises. What connected the two was myself, and I knew I would someday write this world down, finding a language that would do justice to it. (75)

The narrator instinctively considers literature – particularly poetry – as the medium of her individuality, not a self-sustaining, withdrawn one, thriving only in fantasy and imagination, but a locally rooted, community-conscious identity: "The ambition for poetry, a belief in the vital connection between language and my specific local existence, was clearly irrational.... By eleven I knew I wanted to be a poet, and nothing has changed that desire for me since" (76).

Only through writing can the Malaysian exile recover a feeling of rootedness and a sense of home once she lives in the United States. During her teaching years at Hostos Community College, poetry preserves her from intellectual and artistic apathy by bringing her back to the fertile ground of the memories of her Malaysian childhood: "I wrote to know I was still there, somewhere among the accumulating details of numbing reality. Writing offered

a nostalgia beyond comfort, the only way to keep alive” (214). The exile searches for her “territorial self” (194)⁹ in poetic writing; thanks to poetry, Lim somehow manages to recover the corporeality, the dimensionality which had started to wither once she left her native country.

Malayan writers Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam, whom she had studied in her Commonwealth literature courses at the University of Malaya, kindled in her the desire to write nationalist poems that would celebrate the endurance of Malayan identity and her visceral, vital relationship with the grounds and the atmosphere of her homeland. Although Lim adheres to the subversive, anti-colonial purpose of these English-speaking Malayan poets, she reproaches them for confining their self-perceptions and discourses to a sense of territorial and cultural dispossession: “[I]n the poems of these pioneer English-language writers, Malayan identity was of something absent” (120). The author thus suggests the reterritorialising, “dis-alienat[ing]” potential of poetry: being seduced/compelled by Wordsworth’s desire to explore and preserve childhood memories, Lim claims her poetic urge to convey the sensorial imprint of the native land on the migrant’s identity formation – “short lyrics that might seize on senses that were rapidly displacing themselves” (174) – and to assert her Malayan identity: “I wanted to write a literature like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, but overflowing with native presence: writing should be an act of dis-alienation, of sensory claims. If we were not Malaysians, who could we be?” (120).

However, when she publishes her first collection of poems *Crossing the Peninsula* in 1980, she understands that her writing will not be circumscribed within national delineations. By winning the Commonwealth Prize for her collection, Lim’s readership expands beyond the boundaries of her native country while she thought she had been awarded a Kuala Lumpur prize. Still, she faces her own country’s reluctance to grant national recognition to her poetry which was written in English: “It had not occurred to me till then that since only writing in Bahasa Malaysia was considered national literature, my book might not be admitted into official existence. How strange to be a poet without a country! And yet how inevitably it had come about that it should be so” (187). The poetry of the English-speaking Malaysian-born American citizen is necessarily deterritorialised; it overflows national delineations. Having to breastfeed her new-born son, the poet cannot fly from the United States to London to receive her prize in person and attend her own birth as an acclaimed poet: “My son’s birth usurped the birth of the book, one sacred moment making a heresy of the other. Or as paired siblings, the younger of the two shrinking to a runt in the presence of the bonny one” (187). By underlining the simultaneity of both births, Lim points out the emergence of her plural self-

⁹ “I wanted my child to possess the privileges of a territorial self, even as I had as a young Malaysian.” (194)

perception, her awareness of having put down roots in more than one soil. The Malaysian American writer underlines the transnational nature of her experience and identity in an interview she gave six years after the publication of *Among the White Moon Faces*:

Kuala Lumpur is definitely not MY home turf; I am not delusionary. But neither is California.... [M]y work is deterritorialized, an ironic prior property for a writer to whom "home" has been such a first-order question and thematic.... This is not to say that I have no home turf or two. Imagination is a tricky power; it refuses to stay in one or even two places. (Quayum, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview" 88-89)

The author stresses the process of cultural hybridisation underlying her life both as a Malaysian emigrant and as an American immigrant and claims the transnational aesthetics of her work. If she insists on the primariness of her Malaysian experiences in her identity formation, locating her inspiration, her "original literary identity"¹⁰ on Malaysian soil, she nonetheless asserts her irrevocable bonds with America.

Rootedness is paradoxically inseparable from the migrant writer's geographical and imaginary mobility, which mirrors the constant process of cultural (re)construction and hybridisation underlying his/her identity. Elaine Kim describes the dynamics at work in the shaping of (im)migrant American writers' identities: "Perhaps there is no 'home', except for a place of contestation that negates as well as affirms. And identity, like 'home', is ever in process, less a refuge than the site of contending, multiple meanings" (Kim xii). Kim's words echo Edouard Glissant's definition of identity as a process, a space for cultural interrelation, particularly as regards West Indian cultures, in *Poetics of Relation*. Questioning the concept of "root-identity" which is based on the idea of a pure, invariable, strictly filiative and territorial origin, Glissant advocates "relation-identity," namely a changing, "variable" identity that feeds on "contacts between cultures" (Glissant 158). Such an identity emerges and develops in mutual exchange, through cultural interaction, where one "give[s]-on-and-with" (Glissant 158) – instead of "giving to" which implies an asymmetrical relation of (cultural) subordination, the absence of hyphen also suggesting division, antagonism – and where one is free to wander, to tread upon a new, "total" space spreading beyond structures and national boundaries. The Malaysian American writer's sense of home does not lie in "necessary or eternal belongingness," which Homi Bhabha denounces as a myth (Bhabha 179); on the contrary, her feeling of rootedness emerges in her writing, where a

¹⁰ "I have returned frequently to Malaysia and Singapore to refresh my spirit and my original literary identity" (209).

permanent dialogue between her memories and experiences of her Malaysian homeland and her American homeland can occur.

In “Moving Home,” the last chapter of *Among the White Moon Faces*, Lim finally answers the questions that initiated her autobiographical narrative: “How does one make oneself at home?,” “How does one make a home?” The author words the maternal legacy, reading the story of her migrant mother as the expression of a dynamic sense of rootedness, of a deterritorialised identity that can be located only in the place(s) where stories spring from: “Absence was the story my mother taught me, that being the story of the migrant people, the Malacca peranakans. But perhaps she was also teaching me that home is the place where our stories are told” (232). Only through the narration of her stories can the Malaysian American author feel at home, write her “homelands” which necessarily exceed national borders: “In California, I am beginning to write stories about America, as well as about Malaysia. Listening and telling my own stories, I am moving home” (232). Lim’s autobiographical and poetic writing nurtures her bonds to the native land while asserting the imprint of her American reality on her identity journey, summoning her into a constant double return movement both to Malaysia and to America.

Conclusion

Among the White Moon Faces ignores the dominant injunction of a linear, assimilationist identity narrative, further contributing to freeing Asian American literature both from Western aesthetic hegemony and from sterile anticolonial nationalism. By narrating her journey from the native land to the host country while highlighting the ontological implications of exile and immigration for the migrant subject, Lim exposes the artificiality of a monocultural conception of identity. To the Malaysian American writer, home does not await to be found but needs to be written out. Almost twenty years after the publication of her autobiography, the author seems to have come to terms with her ambivalence toward her adopted country, having turned it into a source of poetic inspiration:

You are America, sweet
 Brown grapeland, alien mustard seed, transplanted
 Europe and Asia, cultivated,
 Wild, exotic, as native here as almost
 Anything – like me, like me. The needle
 Points homeward, keeping count of distances
 Traveled, we two on separate roads.
 This land produces the story I am telling you. (Lim, “Keeping Your Distance” 62)

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