Academic Autobiography and Transdisciplinary Crossings in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces*

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The growing number of academic autobiographies published in recent years has sparked interesting debates on the nature and function of life writing. We now grapple with the question of the degrees to which autobiographical and professional writing function in conjunction— if we can read autobiographical writing from professional perspectives or, alternatively, to what extent scholarship grows from personal experiences. This approach to the academic autobiography links our notions about processes of self-inscription to the forms of production of historical and cultural knowledge. This essay examines these ideas by reading Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces* (1997). Lim’s literary and scholarly production superlatively illustrates the development of contemporary perspectives on national identity and language, migration, and homelands. Her work, which includes poetry collections, novels, short stories, academic studies, and a memoir—compels readers to engage the interplay between the competing forces of race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality within spaces that embody these conflicts. I argue that a comparative reading of personal and professional narratives invites us to reconsider how, working within specific epistemic contexts, academics like Lim consciously negotiate the intersection between personal history and academic commitment, a vital subtext in their autobiographical performance.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s literary and scholarly production superlatively illustrates the development of contemporary perspectives on national identity and language, migration, and homelands. Her work, which includes poetry collections, novels, short stories, academic studies, and a memoir—compels readers to engage the interplay between the competing forces of race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality within spaces that embody these conflicts. In this essay, I read Lim’s academic autobiography, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1997), as a map through which

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to reconsider her scholarly work.¹ This discussion arises from debates on the nature and function of life writing that have developed due to the growing number of academic autobiographies, particularly by women, published in recent years. Using Lim’s text, I explore how autobiography and professional writing complement each other in order to examine life writing from professional perspectives or, alternatively, to analyze to what extent scholarship grows from personal experiences. This approach to academic autobiography links our notions about processes of self-inscription to the forms of production of historical and cultural knowledge. This form of analyzing autobiography, I posit, allows us to engage such diverse metaliterary issues as disciplinary border crossings, and to consider the nature of historical and creative inscription and how these help us understand the development of intellectual and cultural history in the twentieth century.

Jeremy D. Popkin’s *History, Historians, and Autobiography* offers a systematic analysis of historians’ autobiographies that examines theoretical connections between history and life writing.² He reads the autobiographies primarily to study the connection between historians’ experiences and their professional positions, a proposal that can be expanded. I argue that autobiographical texts by academics allow us to negotiate historiographical and intellectual tendencies of the twentieth century. Indeed, current scholarship is indebted to theories by Hayden White, Dominic LaCapra, or Clifford Geertz that foreground the narrative dimension of historical and, by extension, autobiographical writing. We comprehend that writers function not only as “scholars,” committed to objective reality, but as “authors” who project themselves in their texts. Widening the perspectives from which to view autobiographical projects by academics – reading them, for instance, as a source of intellectual history or as the performance of a racial or ideological position – grows from the new views about historical inscription. “Objectivity” is no longer the essential question, because the process of autobiography itself authorizes the author as the source of valid information. Jaume Aurell advocates a reading of academic autobiographies to discern the ways scholars construct our access to the past, to increase our understanding not only of history, but importantly, of the writing of history. Indeed, the practical and methodological links between history and autobiography are important: they share structural formulations that invite us to read

¹ Shirly Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1996). All subsequent references to this memoir will be cited parenthetically within the text.

them in conjunction, and decipher possible ways their enactments of events might be similar.\(^3\)

The new epistemological panorama blurs the distinction between the “scientific” and the “literary” author, recognizing the essential bond between the two, based on the narrative process that structures their projects. In this context, the academic’s validity lies as much in his or her authorial position as in the documentary evidence presented.

A comparative reading of academic autobiographies and scholarly work confirms, as Paul Valery states, “that there is no theory that is not in fact a carefully concealed part of the theorist’s own life story.”\(^4\) A number of texts by women in academe attest to this: Jill Ker Conway, the first woman president of Smith College, formulates *True North* (1999) as the kind of autobiographical writing she had noted that intellectual women in the early twentieth century were unable to write because they felt themselves circumscribed by the inherited scripts that governed women’s discourse. By placing her personal life in its intellectual, institutional, and cultural context, Conway produces a form of autobiography that allows her (and, by extension, other women) to blend into one seamless narrative the private and the public, the personal and the professional. Other texts include Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons* (1994), which describes her relationship with the French language as a tool for escape from the pain of her father’s death and her negotiations with contemporary intellectual life, and Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage* (1999), the account of the personal and professional itinerary of a woman of color who promotes the study of women and gender in Islam.\(^5\)

These academic autobiographies illustrate the idea that “we bring to our writing the unfinished business of our own lives and times … We live both the history we have learned through reading and research and the history

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we have experienced and inherited.”

Working within specific epistemic contexts, these women consciously negotiate the intersection between personal history and academic commitment, a vital subtext in their autobiographical performances.

Nancy K. Miller’s review article on academic women’s memoirs explains that this impulse reflects “a renewed urgency to add the story of our lives to the public record.” In other words, private stories support the articulation of public histories, and these autobiographies validate their authors’ scholarly concerns precisely because their personal stories reflect so meaningfully the intellectual issues they engage. Moreover, as Lim and other women academics deploy subjective accounts of their lives, they present themselves as objects of historical or sociological inquiry, protagonists of twentieth-century revisioning of women’s history and, significantly, of the narratives that articulate these events. As Helen Buss notes, “Lim’s memoir is concerned with both the construction of personal subjectivity and, as is typical of the memoir form, the wider implications of her own story”; the author thus uses her life story to validate and deepen our appreciation, in a sense, of her creative writing and her scholarly concerns.

Specifically, I want to ask of Lim’s work, what relationships can we establish between her personal life and intellectual commitment? Can we argue that the academic’s disciplinary training functions as a technology for shaping one’s life writing? To what extent can we say that academic fields are chosen autobiographically? Is there a personal agenda in her intellectual or creative commitment to a topic or field? Can we claim that academics function (consciously or not) autobiographically, even as they write as literary scholars or poets? Recent developments in cultural studies suggest that cultural products – academic books among them – are highly performative; they construct as they recount. Can Lim’s scholarly work be perceived as a performative act, rather than as primarily objective analysis?

The analysis will focus, fundamentally, on Among the White Moon Faces and Lim’s scholarly work. I want to show how the consequences of the multiple migrations Lim had to grapple with as the child of a Chinese diasporic

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9 Many of the arguments I make about the connections between Lim’s memoir and her scholarly work could reasonably be made about the links between her creative writing and her memoir. Because of space constraints, I will focus only on the scholarship in this paper.
community in British-influenced Malaysia and as immigrant adult in the United States become the driving force of her creative writing and academic concerns. In her own words, Lim’s work falls into the “tradition of writing by transnationals of multiple diasporas” and these texts “construct a confrontational relation between place and identity and compose a tradition of ‘global literature’ complexly differentiated from the tradition of nationally bounded and divided identities that has conventionally organized our understanding of ‘world literature’.”

Clearly, Lim views her own creative, scholarly, and personal writing as a part of this tradition of global literature. I explain, based on the memoir, how Lim deals with these issues creatively and intellectually through narrative structure and focalization. Further, I signal crucial intersections within her diverse production, highlighting the connections between her personal concerns, creative writing, and professional theories. Specifically, this essay attends to Lim’s affirmation that despite the multiple genres I write in, they all compose a recognizable set of concerns and territory. This territory, whether set in Malaysia, Singapore, the United States, Hong Kong, or “anywhere,” as one of my recent poems has it, is really ontological; that is, it has to do with questions about the relation of an individual to the exigencies of making sense of itself in the world.

Lim frequently draws our attention to the autobiographical character of her critical work, as she explains, for example, in the preface to her Writing Southeast/Asia in English:

Part One: “Positioning the Subject,” examines the relation between the critic’s multiple and shifting subject positions – women, Chinese Malaysian, Asian, post-colonial – and certain cultural texts. The four chapters construct an autobiography vivified by books, as befitting the life of a bookish woman, to put to question propositions of gender, racial, language and national identity.”

The preface to Nationalism and Literature underlines the same connections between life and theory:

The two forces that I had felt keenly as a child and young adult growing up in Malaysia were those of Western colonialism and emergent Asian nationalism. The first gave me the English language which equipped me to study writers from countries not my own … It has also inevitably shaped my judgements, even my choice of works to examine … The second still evolving phenomenon has

12 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Writing Southeast/Asia in English: Against the Grain (London: Skoob Pacifica, 1994), xi–xii.
influenced my revisionary approach to literature, my resistance to my own colonialist childhood and education in Western social values and ideals of language achievement.\textsuperscript{13}

As she demonstrates in several of the essays in these volumes, the story of her reading life and intellectual concerns is the story of her life; her analysis of other diasporic or transnational writers a strategy for self-understanding. Writing a memoir provides her with the opportunity to examine her life and work from the opposite perspective: after decades of using scholarly work as the prism through which to read her life, she embarks on a life-writing project to illuminate her academic commitments.

The tone of \textit{Among the White Moon Faces} is that of a valedictory – writing the memoir as she is about to turn fifty, Lim seems to want to lay some ghosts to rest: the stories of her parents and her ambivalent attitude towards them; the conflicting loyalties she has felt towards the ethnic groups she has belonged to, been classified into, or chosen; the way emotional attachment to an imposed imperial language may be interpreted as betrayal and how, indeed, her choice of language disconnected her from her nation, among other things. All these issues, in a sense, may be summed up in her struggle to claim a “memorialized homeland” (\textit{AWMF} 232): its definition, changing shape, and the possibilities we have to create homelands as we move. Indeed, the subtitle of the Feminist Press edition of the book signals the centrality of this notion: \textit{An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands}, in the plural, a grammatical category that already challenges the general idea of a single homeland.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the plural becomes a statement of fact as Lim foregrounds her notion that her history of multiple migrations authorizes her to possess (or claim) more than one homeland. The narrative thus describes this process of palimpsestic attachments to the notion of home and, inextricably

\textsuperscript{13} Shirley Geok-lin Lim, \textit{Nationalism and Literature: Literature in English from the Philippines and Singapore} (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1993), iii.

\textsuperscript{14} The book’s Singapore edition, published the same year, is subtitled \textit{Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist}. This title has specific ethnic and political connotations in Malaysia and Singapore that are lost in an American edition. As Pin-chia Feng explains, though the differences reflect publishers’ marketing concerns, they also display “her different locational identities – she is a Nyonya, ‘a Malayan-native Chinese woman’ just like her mother …; a feminist who breaks away from tradition in Malaysia; and an Asian American who is negotiating with her many homelands in the United States. The identity of ‘Shirley Geok-lin Lim’ is changing as she is writing about herself in different geographical locations, and these changes best exemplify her diasporic identity that is at once fluid and creolized.” Pin-chia Feng, “National History and Transnational Narration: Feminist Body Politics in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s \textit{Joss and Gold},” \textit{Contemporary Women’s Writing}, 1, 1–2 (2007), 135–50, 141; internal reference omitted.
connected to this, the place of the English language in the places she calls home, one of which is her own writing.

The date of the memoir is important in the context of my proposal regarding the interconnection between Lim’s scholarly work and her autobiography. Her academic monographs, *Nationalism and Literature: Literature in English from the Philippines and Singapore* (1993) and *Writing Southeast/Asia in English: Against the Grain* (1994), and numerous articles on similar issues, were published before the memoir and after she had already published five collections of poetry. She has published groundbreaking scholarship in three major fields: first, critical studies of Southeast Asian literature in English; second, women-of-color feminisms; and, third, Asian American literature. The titles of the monographs and a brief view of the titles of some of the articles, such as “First World ‘Expats’ and Expatriate Writing in a Third World Frame” (1994), “Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature” (1993), “Affiliation, Exile, and A-filiation: Migrant and Global Literatures” (1993), “Asian American Feminism and Anglo-American Hegemony: Living in the Funny House” (1993), and “Asian American Writers in Search of Self-Definition” (1986), among many others, leave no doubt as to Lim’s recurring intellectual concerns. Lim has also done significant critical work on Asian American autobiography and edited the volume of critical essays on teaching Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior.* Indeed, one might argue that Lim’s academic autobiography becomes the ultimate act of unifying, not only the personal and the public, but also her thematic and generic intellectual interests. The multiple strands of Lim’s personal history and research concerns are woven into a single narrative in her memoir.

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Lim’s position as an academic profoundly committed to issues of migration, homelands, languages, feminism, ethnicity, and postcolonial positionings shapes the form of the memoir. At one point, it appears that writing a memoir is an act of rebellion against the strictures and structures of academia because, she argues,

such institutions socialize, regulate, police, and domesticate … I am frequently disturbed by the incompatibility between the wildness I value and believe must be valued in women and by the linear cage of academic competition that structures universities. Do wild feminists live in universities? Can they? (AWMF 226)

The book’s chronological organization also echoes, in a sense, her trajectory from poetry to academic writing to memoir. It becomes, in Miller’s words, the “canonical chronology of the curriculum vitae: the life course of an education.”[17] The early chapters on her childhood are “laden with the evocative imagery characteristic of her poetry and short fiction,” while later chapters privilege the critical voice of the feminist, postcolonial immigrant scholar.[18] This structure corresponds to Gillian Whitlock’s observation about the way academic memoir

is frequently shaped in order to naturalize and confirm the professional identity and vocation of the narrating subject and to produce a pedigree of sorts. That is to say, it can work to invent continuities between past and present, to create and authorize what it perhaps only seemed to describe.[19]

Among the White Moon Faces highlights two aspects of the author’s personality: her obsession for reading and her compulsion to be a writer (she knew, from the age of eleven, that she would be a poet). From childhood, books were Lim’s form of escape from the “misery of my everyday life”:

The world around me vanished into the voices, the colors, and the dance of language. I gazed, dazzled, into the interiors that Malacca never held. Even the external world became bathed in the language of imagination … 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. (AWMF 74–75)

This description signals many of Lim’s concerns: apart from describing her passion for reading English literature, it also notes her perception of the gap between the world of her imagination and reality. The child’s consciousness of the disjunction between English and her Malayan world, and her role in

connecting them, validates the adult academic’s intellectual concerns. Lim shares with her audience details about the books she reads, the poems she memorizes, and the imagery that inspires her. References to literary traditions, styles, and specific authors provide a clear vision of Lim’s imagination and intellectual formation as the account of this passion explains the author’s professional choices.

Lim’s discipline as a scholar of literature directs the ways she inscribes these experiences, as Sue-Im Lee notes regarding her use of focalization. Examining the manner in which Lim focalizes specific anecdotes from her childhood, for example, reveals a crucial feature of her autobiographical performance: her insistence on not only recounting events based on memory and emotion, but returning to the accounts to reread them from a cultural or political perspective. On several occasions, Lim recounts an event first as a remembering subject and again as an academic examining possible meanings for that event. Her manner of rereading or re-evaluating her experiences, according to Lee, has serious implications in life writing. She argues that the shifting focalization we perceive in the text signals the different roles Lim assumes in relation to her memories, which in turn make her occupy different theoretical or conceptual positions: she is, thus, the writer of her story, the literary critic of her life as a text, and, finally, the critic whose analysis of the text structures her narration of her life as a text. These multiple voices intersect in the memoir, suggesting the intimate connection in an academic autobiography between private and public life, between the stories that make us and the discourses we negotiate as we look back on those memories.

A case in point: at birth, Lim received both a generational name and a personal name – her ming, “Geok Lin.” Her father, whimsically, perhaps, also names her after Shirley Temple, “Because we both had dimples. Because Baba had loved her in the movies in the 1930s … I thought Shirley Temple was an untidy child, burnt brown, with straight black hair, a Hollywood star whose fame ensured my own as a Chinese girl” (AWMF 2–3). She remembers how all her cousins answered to their Chinese ming – Ah Lan, Ah Mui, or Ah Pei, for example – but that “I was always ‘Shirley’ to everyone. ‘Ah Shirley,’ my aunts called me” (AWMF 2). This humorous recollection is
followed by her reflection on why her father would choose something so unusual for his only daughter:

It remains a mystery to me what strange racial yearnings moved Baba to name me after a blond child. I’d like to think he was not tied to the fixities of race and class, that this presumption was less colonized mimicry than bold experiment. Looking at the dozens of nieces duplicated for a domestic future, did he rebel for me? Although, unarguably, he has written in his neat English script my Chinese name on my birth certificate, he never called me anything but Shirley, a Hollywood name for a daughter for whom he wished, despite everything his heritage dictated, a life freer than his own. (AWMF 3)

Lim’s reading of her father’s decision, consciously or not, projects her own position on issues she considers important: individuality in the context of Chinese girlhood, the choice of English as a marker of identity, and the need to escape the strictures of poverty and Malay society. Using Lee’s theory, we can speak of the first moment of focalization as the memory of Shirley being called an unusual, in that context, name by her traditional aunts; the second moment is her awareness of the cultural specificity of an American Hollywood name; the third moment is her theoretical evaluation of her father’s decision.

As a young woman who takes advantage the British system of meritocracy to overcome poverty and enter college, Lim nonetheless cannot free herself from the strictures of Malaysia. Indeed she concludes, after seeing a job she was qualified for go to a Malay male colleague, “it became clear to me that merit was not the main criterion for professional status. In Malaysia, I would always be of the wrong gender and the wrong race” (AWMF 133). Frustrated by the glass ceiling, she leaves Malaysia for a Ph.D. at Brandeis. As Miller notes, though the journey is a frequent metaphor in autobiography, in many women’s academic memoirs “going overseas is both a literal requirement of a successful escape and a metaphorical vehicle for an internal displacement.”21 Lim knows well the price of this exchange – a sense of belonging in Malaysia for the professional freedom offered by the US, where she would hopefully be judged less by her identity as a Chinese women than by her ability. But she cannot leave all her frustration and isolation behind: in the US she continues to be an “other,” albeit in a different way from being a Chinese in Malaysia. Community is another vexed issue:

What had preserved me in Malaysia, the struggle for an individual self against the cannibalism of familial, ethnic, and communal law, was exactly what was pickling me in isolation in the United States. In the United States I was only a private person.

21 Miller, 991–92.
Without family and community, I had no social presence; I was among the unliving. (AWMF 155)

Lim repeatedly explores the nuances of her decision: her cultural commitment to Malaysia is tinged by her sense of enforced alienation from it; she grapples with her ambivalence when faced with the troubling connections between race, ethnicity, and class in the US. Her description of the identity she tries to perform when she looks for a teaching job illustrates her attempts, generally vain, to bridge these subtle configurations:

In my first few job interviews, I wore a green and yellow patterned Malay gown, a baju kurong, placing my foreignness in view, and determined not to be perceived as American ... I walked down to the basement of Hunter College where an African-American administrator, regally wrapped in a green and purple headcloth, questioned me about my political position in seeking greater support for blacks in The City University of New York ... How does one measure discrimination? (AWMF 169)

Once again, Lim shifts her focalization from a personal memory to a theoretically informed evaluation of her position. The contrasting experience of her relationship and developing perspectives on her Puerto Rican students at Hostos College and her neighbors illustrates how she struggles emotionally and intellectually with connections between race and class. Her commitment to educating disenfranchised minorities leads her and her husband to buy a house in a neighborhood of Puerto Rican immigrants, where they are harassed by their neighbors. Lim admits her embarrassment at her own unease, heightened by her belief that, as a woman of color, she could or should be part of this community: “I began to despair at my middle-class hypocrisy and fears, at the disparity between my political valuation of my Puerto Rican students and my discomfort with my Puerto Rican neighbors” (AWMF 176). The nuances of class and race are only part of the numerous issues she needs eventually to deal with. As she notes,

As an alien resident, I feared I was already asking too much. Too much acceptance of my British colonial accent, my brown color and Asian features. Too much tolerance of my difference: not white, not Jewish, not black, not Puerto Rican, the four groups whose needs and words filled the columns of the New York Times. A non-American, I could only hope to fill the interstices, foreign to all and mutable, like a small helpful glue. (AWMF 169)

I argue, nonetheless, that Lim makes her liminality itself a form of identity, and its analysis becomes the principal source of her poetic creativity and academic reflection.

One of Lim’s most excruciating dilemmas is her attachment to the English language and its literature, primarily because of the political implications of
this position in Malaysia, whose nationalist government policies effectively barred Lim from even being able to live there. As she explains, “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 criticize her own ideological formation and so to jilt her first loves” (AWMF 183). Lim, clearly a “decolonizing intellectual,” has to struggle with the political implications of her own passions. Joanne Leow posits that Lim’s “ability to make the language ‘her own’, to use it for her own ends, to try to express her life and conditions with eloquence and sophistication” is the “ultimate goal” of her autobiographical exercise. Indeed, her delight in the beauty of the English language and its poetry fills the pages of her memoir. An unconscious sociological reason might explain Lim’s attachment to English: the early experience of displacement between her mother’s language (Malay) and father’s (Hokkien), neither of which she spoke past the age of six, with their attendant cultural and emotional connotations for the child, may have led her to embrace a third language that provided not only beauty in the midst of poverty but the chance of escape. In an essay entitled “Chinese Ba, British Da: Daughterhood as Schizophrenia,” Lim writes of having to negotiate between the figures of two fathers and, by extension, two cultural–linguistic configurations – the British Empire gave her the colonial education that liberated her from the restrictions of her Chinese father’s “patriarchal privilege.”

Ironically, as Leow notes, “her diasporic roots already predispose her to becoming monolingual in the colonizer’s language, since she is unable to find any ‘home’ in the language of her racial and community history or that of her geographical situation.”

Lim’s examination of the disconnection between her lived reality and the images that the English language provided becomes another complex engagement with the personal and the academic, leading her to use memory as the basis for critical analysis. She is quick to point out the incongruity of the imperialist imagery that she embraced so readily: she notes that the feelings expressed by the “Jolly Miller” in the first English song she learned could not translate to Malaysian life, that nobody in Malaysia would ever dress in a flowing white gown or a pointy night cap like Willie Winkie, and that the way

she played at drinking tea by holding the cup’s little handle in the British manner implied that she was playing “so much with the tea set as with the picture [of a blonde English child] on the box” (AWMF 26). Her academic reading of these childhood memories highlights the cultural consequences of this form of education: “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” (AWMF 64). Deeply conscious of how colonial education transformed her – “We are all mimic people,” she explains, “born to cultures that push us, shape us, and pummel us; and we are all agents, with the power of the subject, no matter how puny or inarticulate, to push back and to struggle against such shaping” – Lim rejects passivity and uses English as a means of liberation from “that other familial/gender/native culture that violently hammered our only one shape for self” (AWMF 65). Nonetheless, she presents herself as “not so much sucking at the teat of British colonial culture as actively appropriating” what she needs to achieve her ends (AWMF 65).

This constant struggle for position in the face of ethnic or linguistic disowning by her own country, and her awareness of her classification as an immigrant in the US, structure much of the narrative. Eddie Tay, in his analysis of Lim’s poems, notes that she does not have the luxury of being completely situated within a particular canon of literature, whether Malaysian (though it is her birth country), British or American (though she writes in English), or Chinese (though she is Chinese), and is thus bereft of a cultural identity from which to write.24 Her commitment to English literature is articulated in terms that transcend colonial imposition because they appeal to her deepest humanity: “The physical sensation of expansion in the chest, even in the head, as I read a profoundly beautiful or mindful poem was conclusively and possessively subjective. The literature may have been of Britain, but my love of literature was outside the empire” (AWMF 120). Yet the most vivid example of the irony of the place of languages in Lim’s life is her winning of the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 1980, for her first book of poems, Crossing the Peninsula, the first woman and the first Asian to do so. This collection, which focusses on memories of Malaysia, was not recognized in the country because the poems were written in English. Lim notes incredulously, “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” \( (AWMF 187) \).\(^{25}\) The account of this personal frustration also illustrates how Lim uses her own life narrative as a text susceptible to critical analysis. This event clarifies one of the most dramatic contradictions in Lim’s personal and literary life: “To remain faithful to my origins, I must be unfaithful to my present. To be constant to my Malaysian identity, I must continue in the United States to be a stranger in a strange land” \( (AWMF 187) \).

In the United States, Lim’s experience of isolation as a graduate student and her growing self-awareness as a woman of color directs her intellectual interest towards the work of other immigrant writers. Indeed, her memoir – as many other academic memoirs – may also be read as the history of the development of the field of Asian American studies on two levels. First, it traces the real difficulties that early scholars encountered in their efforts to validate the discipline; second, it engages the development of the initial critical perspectives. Lim recounts how, after proposing to write a dissertation on immigrant literature, she is told by the well-known Jewish American scholar Philip Rahv that “there are no good immigrant writers, they write only sociology!” \( (AWMF 142) \). More than a decade later, another Jewish American professor “flayed” her in writing for a lecture she had given on Frank Chin and Kingston, saying that if they were the best she could come up with in Asian American literature, “in contrast to the splendid literature of China,” then “the field had nothing to say for itself” \( (AWMF 142) \). Lim’s tenacity in exploring and developing the discipline – she wrote many of the early groundbreaking essays, connecting issues of ethnicity with feminist concerns or genre, for example – gave her “a different space, one that promised, rather than denied community” \( (AWMF 227) \). Lim’s incursion into Asian American literature, in a sense, provided her with another homeland from which to write. After the experience of radical isolation during her first years in academe, she gained from this project a sense of community. From writers and critics like Elaine Kim and Amy Ling, Lim acquired a new perspective on scholarship and personal position: “I wanted to learn another life from them, finally place Malaysia side by side with the United States, and to become also what I was not born as, an Asian American” \( (AWMF 227) \).

In this narration, Lim evinces how academic autobiography realizes the intersection of the private and the public through a harnessing of academic

\(^{25}\) Ironically perhaps, *Among the White Moon Faces*, which engages precisely this ambivalence, won the American Book Award in 1997.
discourse for personal self-expression. As Shirley Neuman suggests, a coherent poetics of autobiography “would acknowledge that subjects are constructed by discourse but it would also acknowledge that subjects construct discourse.”

Lim engages the dialectic between the position of being acted upon – shaped by the paradigms of the world she lives in – and acting through her professional work, changing discourse in specific ways. The story of her incursion into ethnic literature builds the history of Asian American studies: this narrative of initial rejection, of defining boundaries and exploring new positions, of building a body of theoretical paradigms, embodies the trajectory not only of one of its leading scholars but of the discipline itself.

Thus the discipline, which focuses on the diasporic subject, explores the possibilities of cultural expression within that frame of experience.

Lim deploys two vital life events at the beginning and end of her narrative as the markers for her notions of personal homeland. At one end of the spectrum is the memory of how her grandfather’s funeral procession through the streets of Malacca gave her a profound sense of belonging to a people, a history, a place, and a tradition:

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. To have felt the familiar once is always to feel its absence after … It doesn’t matter that the family is lost, and that the town has been changed long ago by politics and economics. Every other place is foreign after this moment. (AWMF 20)

This account, early in the story, is then followed by recurring experiences of displacement: a linguistic one, as she shifts from the Malay she is told she chattered as a child with her mother and maternal family to the Hokkien spoken by her father and his family after her mother abandons them, to the English learned at school that becomes the language of her imagination and expression; a familial one, as her family’s wealth and status are eroded by her uncles after her grandfather’s death, leading them to poverty; an ethnic displacement as she engages the place of the Chinese in Malaysia in a time of growing nationalism; and the immigrant dilemma of identification after she moves to the United States.

At the other end is one of Lim’s most interesting juxtapositions of the personal with the public/political: her revised approach to the notion of


27 See my article “Academic Autobiography as Women’s History: Jill Ker Conway’s True North and Leila Ahmed’s A Border Passage,” Rethinking History, 13, 1 (March 2009), 109–23, for further examples of this idea.
“homeland” after the birth of her son in New York. Indeed, it appears that years of academic inquiry on nationhood and affiliation do not solve the dilemma as apparently effortlessly as the birth of her son does. Now the mother of an “American baby,” she notes that I became an American politically with the birth of my child. I may have been a blackbird, flying into Boston as a disheveled traveler uncertain whether I was choosing expatriation, exile, or immigration. But I had no such doubts about my unborn child. He would be an American child of Jewish and Asian descent … I wanted my child to possess the privileges of a territorial self, even as I had as a young Malaysian … In this desire, I marked myself as a U.S. citizen, and I finally began the process for citizenship. (AWMF 194)

The birth of her son thus requires her to finally realize in her own life many of the issues that she had, until then, engaged primarily on a theoretical level. For Lim, the “myth of assimilation became a pressing reality as soon as I brought my son home from Northern Westchester Hospital,” and she acknowledged that though it “may have been important for my imagination to maintain the distance of the resident alien, but I wanted something different for my son … I wanted for him to have a pride of belonging, the sense of identity with a homeland” (AWMF 197). By giving birth to an American, Lim wills herself to become one, emotionally and politically. Yet, ever conscious of the fluidity of these categories, Lim critically notes of the multiple identities of the Asian American, that the “naturalized American … is proud to be an American now, just as simultaneously there is in him those other selves that will always escape being only an American.”

Drawing on the experiences of family death and birth – one that moves her away from a changing Malaysian Chinese world and the other that establishes her as the mother of an American – as the markers of her search for a homeland, Lim observes, “Setting out from a nation that denied people like me an equal homeland, I find myself, ironically, making a home in a state that had once barred people like me from its territory” (AWMF 230). For Lim, repossessing the world means not only performing in words the multiple pasts for the purpose of her self-understanding in the present, but also repossessing the world in an intellectual sense so that she may help effect a “world civilization.” This combination of a personal, intellectual, and ethnical agenda for self-performance is typical of memoirs by academic women.

29 Buss, Repossessing the World, 177.
Further, we might argue that the memoir itself becomes another occasion of birth, as Lim writes herself into an existence that seeks to harmonize the radical imperatives that her history of multiple journeys demanded. Asking herself, in an essay, how she wants her writing viewed, Lim says she hopes that her works will be read within “both Malaysian/national and US/transnational frames, the Third-World intersecting with a late-capitalist First-World, frame.”\(^{30}\) The last words of the memoir – “Listening, and telling my own stories, I am moving home” (\textit{AWMF} 232) – become precisely that act of reclamation, through the power of the personal narrative which, in Lim’s hands, has become a multiply layered creative intellectual manifesto.

The questions I posed at the beginning of this essay centered on discerning the structure of the relationship between Lim’s personal life and intellectual commitment – how disciplinary training might shape her life writing, how her academic concerns might have been selected autobiographically, and the autobiographical nature of her scholarship. These questions, which we ask ourselves when we explore possible discursive meanings in academic autobiography, therefore compel us also to revise of our notions of historiography, literary analysis, and, ultimately, authorship. As Aurell explains,

\begin{quote}
rereading academic texts through the prism of autobiographical narratives extends the possibilities of historiographical interpretation. By highlighting the personal experiences and epistemological processes that governed the development of the historical text, we enable ourselves to perceive more clearly these texts as writerly acts that limn the boundaries of scholarship and interpretation.\(^{31}\)
\end{quote}

Reading Lim’s autobiographical text as a performative act in a specific epistemological context illustrates how the reflexive self promotes an identity that participates in the discourse of intellectual and cultural history. \textit{Among the White Moon Faces} demonstrates how, increasingly, academic women’s life writing functions as social and cultural analysis by harnessing personal experiences as the frame for theoretical understanding.

\(^{30}\) Lim, “First World ‘Expats’,” 18.

\(^{31}\) Aurell, “Autobiographical Texts as Historiographical Sources,” 442, original emphasis.