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Within the critical framework of cosmopolitanism advanced and refined in the past decade, this essay aims to demonstrate how Lim's Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands brilliantly captures the complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions of cosmopolitanism and also poses further challenges to this issue.

The Intricacies of Cosmopolitanism: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Among the White Moon Faces

MINHAO ZENG

The flowering of academic memoirs across continents since the 1990s is receiving much attention. Scholars have been enthusiastically charting the relationship between the private/personal and the public/professional in academic memoir writing. Gillian Whitlock, for instance, contextualizes the self in the academic memoir by looking closely at a number of childhood memoirs by British women professors. She suggests that the construction of the self in these memoirs is closely related to the intellectual vocation of these women memoirists as the first generation of feminists in post-war Britain, and that their childhood memoirs are heavily mediated by "disciplinary competences and protocols" (340). Cynthia G. Franklin, in Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University of Today, explores how academic memoirs by humanities professors have engaged in many important issues in the academe such as identity politics, feminism, and disability studies. In her chapter
about postcolonial studies, Franklin examines at great length how academic memoirs of travel, diaspora, and exile have participated in scholarly discussions of cosmopolitanism, which is of particular interest to my essay. She argues that many academic memoirists who write about movement across racial, ethnic, and national lines often unconsciously succumb to “exclusionary frameworks for cosmopolitanism” (25) in their intimate disclosures, and that their problems—the complicity in the European imperialistic version of cosmopolitanism, the unawareness of their own privileges, the lack of attention to the networks of power that sustain cosmopolitan ideologies, and the failure to deal more fully with identity politics as an intersectional concept that embraces all categories such as nation, race, ethnicity, class, and gender—actually reflect the many limitations of cosmopolitan studies in the 1990s.

Franklin’s argument is convincing and instructive. But during the period when she was busy writing her book with the materials gathered about the 1990s, significant changes occurred to the contours of many issues that concern the humanities. In the case of cosmopolitan studies, cosmopolitanism as an analytical tool has gained much force and rigor through lively dialogues and debates during the past ten years. In what follows, I first trace the collective efforts to strengthen cosmopolitanism by sketching three important turns in cosmopolitan studies since the new millennium, and then closely analyze the Malaysian American writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* within this theoretical framework. Lim’s memoir has received some approving mention from Franklin, but only in a piecemeal fashion. I give it a more thorough discussion as an exemplar of academic memoir by minority writers in interrogating cosmopolitanism. Though written before the surge of interest in redressing the limited vision of cosmopolitanism in the new century, Lim’s memoir already staged a brilliant rehearsal of what would happen in cosmopolitan studies in the following decade. By unravelling two important narrative threads in Lim’s life stories—the writer’s experience of living in multilingual cultural worlds and her interaction with people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds—I try to show, first, how Lim’s memoir avoids the common problems Franklin points out in academic memoirs of travel, diaspora, and exile, and, second, what further challenges Lim poses to the issue of cosmopolitanism.

In the face of injustice, inequality, and violence emerging from globalization processes, the last decade has witnessed a cascading interest in the vision of a world community of manhood in which sameness and difference are dealt with harmoniously. Across the humanities and social sciences, there have emerged intense efforts to understand what cosmopolitanism means for research and our contemporary society.
These efforts have brought about three important shifts in research perspectives: from cosmopolitanism of the elite to cosmopolitanism of everyman; from the single Kantian ideal of world community to cosmopolitanism in its plural form; and from discussing cosmopolitanism on a normative level to bringing it down to earth.

Traditionally, cosmopolitanism was often associated with the people who are socially privileged and geographically mobile, but such understanding has begun to wane in the past ten years. Ulf Hannerz, in an essay published in the mid-1990s, discerns a marked link between the cultivation of a cosmopolitan orientation and specific occupations of such people as businesspersons, journalists, and diplomats (see “Cosmopolitans”). A little less than ten years later, in another essay, Hannerz remarks on the increasing trend of turning to “non-elite modes and sites of cosmopolitanism” (“Cosmopolitanism” 75). Some scholars push the idea of attending to the mundane activities of the non-elite further by bringing to focus the lives of the underprivileged. Shail Mayaram, for example, proposes that cosmopolitanism can be found in the city’s “fortressed neighborhoods and ghettos that house the working-class poor, refugees, and migrants” (xiv). Disagreeing with the bleak view that the urban slum is a Darwinist jungle, Mayaram argues that “new subjectivities, coalitions, and alliances relating to interethnic relations” can arise in multiethnic city slums, and he celebrates this form of cosmopolitanism as “subaltern visions for democracy, citizenship, and justice” (24).

Another widespread endeavour in current cosmopolitan studies is to challenge the Kantian ideal of world community. In the past two decades, the Kantian cosmopolitan project has come under siege from all sides due to its exclusionary vision of universalism and its imbrications with the colonial and imperial enterprise. The most recent wave of fierce attack was fired by four English scholars: Nina Glick Schiller, Jackie Stacey, Galin Tihanov, and Gyan Prakash, each of whom delivered a speech entitled “Whose Cosmopolitanism?” during the 2009 launch festival of the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures at Manchester University. Glick Schiller suggests approaching cosmopolitanism as “a coming together without disregarding disparate, multiple pasts and presents,” which is “different from the contemporary invocation of European humanism, either secular or Christian.” Prakash posits that we should “learn to speak of cosmopolitanism in its plural” and stay aware of both the internal conflicts within each cosmopolitanism and external collisions between one another. Tihanov urges us to look beyond Kant’s idea of perpetual peace, which often embellishes cosmopolitanism with a “positive” genealogy, and to “reveal the ‘negative’ genealogy of cosmopolitanism in a body of ideas that rationalize the universality of human nature in terms that are not necessarily optimistic and ameliorative.” Stacey cautions us that the claimed tolerance toward difference may enact precisely the
opposite, and that we often project our own ambivalence about cosmopolitanism onto the “undesirable” others of “non-cosmopolitan” cultures.

Finally, scholars also feel an imperative to descend from the philosophical plane of cosmopolitanism and commit it to concrete realities. Sidney Tarrow, for example, advocates thinking cosmopolitanism not as a purely cognitive concept, but in actually existing human terms. Zlatko Skribis and Ian Woodward suggest viewing cosmopolitanism as “a set of practices and useful dispositions, grounded in social structures, and observable in common place folk settings and practices” (734). Similarly, Fuyuki Kurasawa champions a notion of “cosmopolitanism from below.” In the following analysis of Lim’s memoir, we will see how these trends in cosmopolitan studies are captured in the life writing of one of the most acclaimed Asian American women writers.

In 1989, Lim accepted the invitation by Florence Howe, the helmsperson of the Feminist Press, to contribute to its Cross Cultural Memoir Series. She later revealed in an interview that her spirits sagged after she finished the first half of the book about her life in Malaysia, and that she even admitted to Howe her reluctance to go on with writing. In response, Howe listed two reasons for Lim to continue: first, Malaysian women can learn a great deal from her story; second, it is an opportunity to explain to the Americans what the life of Asian Americans is like. Howe’s encouragement injected into Lim renewed momentum. Lim says in the interview that unlike composing poetry, she started the memoir not for herself (“Why do I need to write myself a memoir? I’ve known the contents already” [Chang 373]), but in large measure for her fellow Chinese Malaysians. She intended the memoir to help Chinese Malaysians learn about what they have experienced in the past. Her original wish was that after reading this memoir, her Chinese Malaysian readers would say, “This book is just about the life of Chinese Malaysians!” rather than “Bullshit! It’s all made up by her” (317). By the time she completed the second half of the memoir about her life in America, as Lim further discloses, she had also realized that she was writing not only as a Malaysian and for Malaysians, but also as an American and for Americans. The American part of her literary identity, though existing in her body already, had long remained hidden and unexamined; writing a memoir like this for the first time helped her open the door to this equally precious portion of her memory.

Titling her book An Asian American Memoir of Homelands (emph. mine), Lim expects it to provide an index to both the experience of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and of Asian immigrants in America. To strike chords with these two groups of people, Lim positions herself as an ordinary Chinese Malaysian and Asian American. Yet, though there is no flagging of her accomplished side as a scholar, her serious interrogation of
class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in relation to her own positionings, as I will show in this essay, is very much in tune with the top agenda in today's humanities and also indicative of her research interests in post-colonialism, feminism, and ethnic studies. With an academic's critical eye, Lim subjects herself to personal and public scrutiny and gives her life account enriched dimensions. A key thread that runs through her narrative is the marginalization and alienation Lim's delicate antenna has been sensing all along. This sense of marginalization and alienation is not the result of one single force, but of multiple, intersecting power relations across space and time. In Eleanor Ty's words, "Lim is othered in various ways" and otherness is a "recurring motive" in her memoir (86): first in Malaysia, as the only girl isolated by her brothers, as a woman in a patriarchal society, as an ethnic minority person suffering from racial extremism, as a colonized subject under British rule; and, later in America, as a visibly different Asian immigrant, as an eccentric woman poet in a mediocre white, middle-class, suburban college, and as a woman scholar in the male-dominated academe. Highly conscious of her otherness, Lim regards herself as "having had my being always already on the margins of circles of power" (Writing 39). In the following discussion, I will explore how Lim, often perched on peripheral subject positions, interrogates cosmopolitanism through the narration of her multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural experiences. The discussion consists of two parts, each investigating Lim's cosmopolitan outlook through an important theme in the memoir: the writer's multilingual experience and her interaction with people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Strategically astride the Straits of Malacca, a vital trade route linking the East and the West, Malaysia has long been coveted by foreign powers; the centuries-old history of foreign settlements by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Japanese, though bitter, has worked the Malaysian population into a highly cosmopolitan mix. The population's diversity is reflected in the assorted languages spoken in the country. The memoir's prologue about the writer's names suffices to give us a glimpse of the heterogeneous languages and cultural heritages in Malaysia. The writer's family name is Lim, corresponding to the Chinese character lin, meaning "woods." This single Chinese character has been transcribed into varied English spellings by Anglophone bureaucrats in the British colonial government in the Malay Peninsula—Lim is just one of them. As a marker of the level of seniority in the family hierarchy, Lim, as with all other females of the third generation in her grandfather's line, has been given the same middle name Geok, the Hokkien (the dialect of South Seas Chinese) version of the most common of Chinese female names, yu, meaning Jade. Lin used to be the writer's first name, the personal name that helped distinguish her from her many girl
cousins. Lim’s English-Hokkien-Chinese trilingual father called her Shirley out of affection for the American child movie star Shirley Temple. At eleven, when Lim was baptized into Catholicism, she momentarily chose to follow the name of the virgin-martyr Agnes of Rome. During the same brief period, she also opted for Jennifer, the name of both Saint Jennifer and the Hollywood actress Jennifer Jones. For people living elsewhere, this would be completely baffling; but for Malaysians, as Lim comments, “language mixes and mix-ups were Malayan everyday reality. Your own name tripped on your tongue, a series of hesitations, till you stopped noticing the hesitations, and the name flowed as yours, as a series of names” (3). Looking back upon her life in Asia, Lim remarks that for Malaysians there are just “too many names, too many identities, too many languages” (4). Here Lim connects names and languages with identities because, in her view, names are not empty labels used merely to single out a person from the crowd; rather, they go deep into the person’s very identity. As Lim also realizes that, in a colonial society, the possession of names, languages, and identities is often a mixed result of personal choice and forced imposition, which has been achieved through less than subtle infiltration of European cultural and religious imperialism at all levels, the issue of paramount importance for her shifts from “Who am I?” to “How can I prove that I am not who I am?” (25). In other words, Lim is concerned with how to shake off the identities welded onto her through names and languages despite her reluctance and discomfort, and also to refashion them according to her own will and desire.

The memoir treats us to an exuberant display of minutiae in which Lim and her fellow Malaysians exercise individual initiatives to negotiate a dense array of affiliations and fashion their cosmopolitan identities through language appropriation. Elana G. Shohamy, in her research on language policies, contends that language, as a manipulative tool, has been used for “a variety of political agendas in the battle of power, representation, and voice” (22). Within colonial contexts, language is inextricably interwoven with colonial expansion. When deployed as a means to perpetuate the mentality of colonization, it “turned from being a free communicative means of interaction into a closed stagnated system” (25). Colonizers project the language they use as a transcendental kingdom and set fixed linguistic rules for the colonized to follow; the colonized are expected to strike out for that perfect linguistic kingdom but are supposed to never reach the shore. Robert Phillipson puts forward the idea of “English linguistic imperialism,” which he regards as a subtype of cultural imperialism dovetailing with economic imperialism and scientific imperialism promoted by Western countries to maintain structural inequalities at the global level. Despite their usefulness for critics, such views suffer from their deterministic tendency to ignore
the agency, resistance, and appropriation of those who are often scripted as passive victims. Here I tentatively propose the notion of “linguistic cosmopolitanism,” by which I do not mean to downplay the negative effects of the monolingual project of the West, but to draw attention to how the language of the West has been taken up by the colonized for the purpose of self-definition and self-fashioning.

As one of the many examples of how English has been appropriated by Malaysians, Lim tells the reader that when the English word “Romeo” is exported into the tropical soil, it sloughs off its tragic hue in Shakespeare’s play and metamorphoses into a Malaysian image of male freedom and romance. With new shades of meanings, “Romeo” is not only an English word but also a Malaysian word, “recognized equally by English, Malay, Indian, and Chinese speakers” (1). Lim also speculates about her father’s intention to name her after Shirley Temple, who looks starkly different. Lim interprets it as her father’s daring experiment to distinguish his daughter from dozens of similarly named nieces “duplicated for a domestic future” (3). As Lim reflects upon the British nursery rhyme “The Jolly Miller,” which she learned to sing aloud in childhood, she wonders how she, as a girl, came to accept the disorientingly unfamiliar British figure in the poem. The jolly miller, who cares for no one and for whom no one cares, is unthinkable in Malaysian society, where “everyone was surrounded by everyone else” (64) like seeds in the pomegranate, and where caring is not a concept that needs to be emphasized. For little Lim, the significance of this poem lies in the message that caring can be a voluntary choice. In hindsight, Lim realizes that by committing this poem to memory, her younger self tried to seek seams of corruption in her own familial/gender/native culture and to “break out of the pomegranate shell of being Chinese and [a] girl” (65), the racial and gender stigmas she carried in Malaysia. The language of the colonial West is a chain on Lim, but it has been transmuted into the weapon “with which to wreck [her] familial culture” (65). These instances of the local appropriation of the English language reveal the fragility and instability layered within the Eurocentric cosmopolitan order, which is supported by the promotion of the monolingual English project. In appropriating the language imposed by the British Empire, Lim and her fellow Malaysians are working to transform the language from “a colonial intrusion” to “a postcolonial free-for-all” (187) and to take over the cosmopolitan project from the colonizers’ hand.

Lim’s cosmopolitan identity takes a clearer shape when we see her navigate the world through language. When she reads English books in her childhood, Lim discovers a world outside Malacca and writes letters to her imaginary pen pals living elsewhere in the world, whom she thinks are reading the same books. Coming across
William Blake’s “to see a world in a grain of sand,” she projects herself as that grain of sand and feels an immense potential to materialize that image of the universe through language and poetry. Later in her life in America, as Asia geographically recedes into the distance, Lim uses the English language to maintain her ties with Malaysia. Ever since her college years in Malaysia, Lim has been troubled by alienation from the actual Malaysian world she sees in the writing of the pioneer English-language Malaysian writers because she always perceives a vital connection between the Western language she has mastered and her “specific local existence” (76). It is not that Lim feels her Malaysian world through a Western lens, but that the language she has learned in the specific historical situation and the force of the language itself help her get close to the things that give texture and depth to her Malaysian experience. For her, English is a tool she uses to reconstruct all that arouses sensuality in Malaysia: tropical climate, flora, fauna, food, and people. Though she writes in a Western language, her words are overflowing with a palpable Malaysian presence. Lim lived in California during the time she was writing her memoir. California, according to her, “is perhaps the closest thing possible to moving home for Asian Americans” (228), for it is the frontier for immigrants from the other side of the Pacific and has the largest population of Asian Americans in the country. Writing the memoir has actually helped her realize the possibility of staying in touch with this distant continent. At the end of the book, Lim recalls the message she has learned from her mother: “Home is the place where our stories are told.” Telling her stories about Malaysia and America, Lim finds herself overcoming the alienation she has felt in both places. The memoir ends touchingly: “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). By this moment, Lim is no longer a displaced person who feels alienated in both her native country and the country of her present residence. Instead, she is both retaining her old roots in Malaysia and growing new roots in America. Firmly she holds these two roots and confidently straddles two continents. Lim’s cosmopolitanism does not mean homelessness or rootlessness; rather, it means showing strong allegiances to multiple places. With these multiple affiliations and commitments, Lim acquires an empowered cosmopolitan feeling of home.

Reading the memoir, however, we will also notice that Lim’s interaction with the English language occupies a leading presence in the book, which in a way eclipses the writer’s linguistic cosmopolitan identity. We may expect a cheerful image of the writer shuttling between different languages and dialects—English, Hokkien, Malay, Mandarin Chinese, and Cantonese—but the opening narrative about the writer’s multilingual personal experience fades into background after the first chapter. In fact, even
in the first chapter, instead of seeing Lim swimming proudly among different languages, we are introduced to her constant frustrations. Lim lived in a Hokkien environment until the age of five in her grandmother's house, but with a limited vocabulary that is only enough to support a child's world, Lim holds no affection for Hokkien and even feels excluded by Hokkien speakers. Lim is more conversant in her mother's tongue, Malay. Her memory of her mother speaking Malay is full of tenderness and subtlety: "Her baba Malay—the Malay spoken by assimilated Chinese—the idiomatic turns of her ethnic identity, was a waterfall whose drops showered me with sensuous music" (12). Unfortunately, her mother abandoned the family in her childhood and thus prevented her from going deeper into everyday Malay. English is the language of most familiarity to Lim, but in America her Asian accent often marks her as an alien. These self-revelations of unhappy encounters with different languages add complexity to the neat image of Lim's multilingual cosmopolitan appearance. We would also like to ask: as language shapes one's thoughts and as Lim's education is British and her working language is English, to what extent does this background affect her challenge of European conceptions of cosmopolitanism? Though Lim, as a scholar, tries to maintain objectivity throughout her memoir, the difficulty in deconstructing the West in which one has membership—partial, if not full—and vested interests inevitably surges up. In the later example of Lim's account of her experience with Puerto Rican immigrants in New York, we will see how her subjective positions and personal interests impinge on her self-examination.

What adds to the intricacy of this linguistic cosmopolitanism is Lim's own account of the difficulty in fully portraying a multilingual world in memoir writing. Technically, Lim feels that the need for "a more progressive, linear, developmental, and positivist narrative" of her memoir, a memoir expected to encourage Malaysian women and Asian American women, does not allow much space for the presence of "different languages in a common discourse [English]," and that she is reluctant to turn to bricolage as an easy way out. Moreover, even if the "linguistic noise" and "multilingual interiorities" are successfully accommodated in the memoir, Lim is afraid that the reader will feel uneasy with the linguistic shifts between English and sharply different Asian languages ("Im/Possibility" 42). That being said, Lim remains hopeful that eventually "a new aesthetics of modes of imagination and literacy" will make it possible to write outside the realm of monolingual discourse and bring alive the individual's multilingual experiences (47).

In Lim's memoir, the complexity of cosmopolitanism has also been brilliantly explored through another issue, the coexistence of different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. To describe the situation of living together, Doreen Massey coins the
word “throwntogetherness,” an appropriation of Heidegger’s idea that we are all thrown into the world with neither prior knowledge nor individual option, and that our being in the world is a “thrownness.” In the same fashion in which we come to this world, Massey implies, we come to live with each other in a particular place. People’s comings and goings make a place “an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories” (151); the uncertainty and contingency associated with multiple social identities and unequal social relations give that place a highly political character. As a place is inevitably a site of negotiation, the challenge we face today is not “How do I live in a place?” but “How do we live together?” Lim probes this question by going beneath the seemingly smooth fabric of coexistence and uncovering the underlying inequalities, tensions, and conflicts.

In the first half of the memoir, Lim’s critical examination of her experience in Malacca challenges the celebratory vision of pluralistic cosmopolitanism in Malaysia. Malaysia as a node of different cultures is graphically represented through the everyday material life of ordinary Malaysians. Lim’s mother, for example, is a Malay-native Chinese woman who speaks only Malay, but her banal aesthetic sense is anything but confined to her Chinese Malay world. She uses eau de cologne imported from the Rhine Valley, reads magazines on Hollywood stars, burns Indian incense, and worships Chinese deities. All these things circle in the material air in Lim’s house and provide the family with “comfort, interest, and security” (15). But such a scene of harmonious coexistence of different cultures, as suggested by the motley assortment of material objects of different cultural origins, is as deceptive as it is inviting. To begin with, during the time of British colonialism, there always existed a hierarchy between Western and non-Western cultures. Lim’s first-ever awareness of race-related cultural preference develops in her earliest years of formal education. Poignantly, young Lim perceives that the students who receive the most favor from the nuns at the convent school are white daughters of British plantation managers. Second on the racial ladder are Eurasian girls, many of whom are the offspring of interracial marriages between Portuguese settlers and native Malaysian women. Though Portuguese mestizos, they acknowledge only their Portuguese lineage and overshadow Chinese girls with their physical beauty and ease of manners. Inequalities exist within Malaysians as well. Malaysia has thirteen states and three federal territories, in which different ethnic groups reside. As a young girl, Lim has yet to grasp the highly disparate historical struggles of these states and territories under colonial rule. Maybe also because the writer doesn’t want to daunt her Western readers, whose knowledge of Malaysia is scarce, she offers no elaborate account of this part of Malaysian history. But her childhood recollection of the inequalities among ordinary Chinese Malaysians already speaks volumes for the unbalanced power relations within the colonized themselves. Perusing her parents’ wedding photo, taken when the British
ruled Malacca as one of their trade centres, Lim points out that the ornate robes her parents wore were the sign of their material sufficiency under British rule before the 1942-45 Japanese occupation. As native-born British subjects, Lim’s parents were automatically conferred higher social standing compared with immigrants from China, India, and Indonesia. When the British regained control of Malaysia after Japan retreated, all the Chinese, be they native-born or immigrants, were collectively marked as evil by the British colonial government due to Malay communist opposition to colonial rule. What distinguished more evil from less evil was whether the person had connections with Chinese communists. Lim clearly remembers how she was taught to hate Chinese communists in school and how she was forced to carry an identity card everywhere she went in Malacca in order to not be arrested as a communist during unexpected police checks.

After the British Empire lost its force and acceded independence to its colonies in the Malay Peninsula and the surrounding islands, a jubilant atmosphere prevailed in the region and optimistic discussions arose about the future of “a multiracial, multicultural, pluralistic democracy” (117); however, life as a marginalized Chinese in Malacca prepares Lim to be wary of such discourse of cosmopolitanism set in motion by the state. During the week of Singapore’s withdrawal from the Federation of Malaysia, a historic mark of the irreconcilable tension between Chinese-led Singapore and Malay-dominant Malaysia, Lim loses her virginity to a married man who is just an acquaintance. As a memoirist who tries to make sense of public history through the story of the self, Lim maps the dramatic change of the macro-world onto that of the microcosm of her own body: “I felt fearfully sad. The meaningless of my sexual encounter—the physical rupture in my body—with Rajan, the stranger I had chosen to initiate me in bed, appeared enlarged by the violent meaningfulness of the political split between Singapore, the city I was just beginning to know through my mother’s residence, and Malaysia, the country I implicitly loved” (122). In Malaysia, as a poor ethnic Chinese, Lim shuns both Chinese and Malay chauvinism, and regards the rivalry between the two as the sport of the elite. The final outbreak of the bloody 13 May 1969 race riot between Chinese Malaysians and Malay Malaysians takes away what little hope there remains for young Lim about a harmonious cosmopolitan Malaysia. Having experienced in person the vulnerability of a multicultural egalitarian ideal in the face of violent power contestations, Lim feels insecure in Malaysia “as long as racial extremists were free to massacre and burn” (135). She considers herself as “a passive and innocent victim of the conflict between elites and races” and yearns for social justice; however, she wants “social justice without having to struggle for it.” Young Lim gets credit for her heightened sensitivity to the undercurrents of power.
beneath the glossy surface of the coexistence of multiracial and multicultural groups, but she fails to see, as her adult self comments in retrospect, that social justice sometimes is “available only to those already privileged” (137).

The question of social justice in relation to privilege within the context of multi-ethnic and multicultural coexistence is taken up in the second part of the memoir, which recounts Lim’s life experience in America. Lim, “on the gender, racial, and national margins of a dominant society to the central ‘intellectual machinery’” (Buss 177), continues to be marginalized in various ways in America, but she, through continuous professional improvement, also rises to the status of the well-educated middle class, a privilege she briefly enjoyed in Malaysia before her father’s bankruptcy. Lim is highly aware that such a change in her economic standing infuses into her exploration of the issue of the coexistence of different racial and cultural groups an interrogative attitude toward her own class privilege. This self-examination features prominently in one of her most unique episodes in America, teaching at Hostos Community College in South Bronx.

At the time the memoir was being written, Lim was four years into her employment at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This rise to a major research university brings her elation as well as misgivings. Lim responds to congratulations from fellow minority scholars with “skepticism, scraping against the grating insinuations of inequality.” As she sees it, the university, built upon the meritocracy of competitive research and scholarship, is “symbolically a male territory,” while the “domestic and feminized” community college is where nurturing teaching practices are most likely to occur. Looking back at her not-too-distant community college teaching experience, Lim cannot contain her gratitude: “My deepest socialization in the United States had been through the community college. Coming late to the United States, it was necessary for me to learn about American identities, and the community college offered fertile ground for an immigrant” (213). At her husband’s challenge—“Who do you think you are, an Emily Dickinson in Brooklyn?”—Lim’s immediate response is: “I thought I was more eccentric than that, a Malaysian woman teaching English and American literature to Puerto Rican and black students in South Bronx” (227). With this “eccentric” self-portrait, Lim is not trying to exoticize herself; rather, she points to the higher level of acceptance and acknowledgement of differences in American society, which was not available during the time when she was in Malaysia and for which she has been longing all these years. Indeed, Hostos has unfolded before Lim a cosmopolitan vista of “throwntogetherness,” though transitory and only on a miniature scale. Hostos is located in the Bronx in New York, within convenient reach of the city’s Puerto Rican
population. The opening of this college was a result of collective efforts of the Puerto Ricans in New York, who demanded greater access to higher education. Unlike her younger self, who dreams of easy social justice, it is clear to Lim that not only is the establishment of this community hard-won, but that her own employment as an Asian woman teacher is “earned on backs of the black, brown, and working-class activists” (170). Lim repays the bitter struggle of black and brown civil rights activists with her full devotion to her black and brown students: she sets up a writing centre, works with students late into the evening, invites students to a party at her home, and listens to their stories. After only a few weeks, her black and brown students “had grown closer to me than had my father’s children in Malacca” (172). This strong sense of kinship brings out a moving scene of communal cosmopolitanism between minorities across racial and cultural lines. It is real, but it is also fraught with the writer’s own ambivalences.

Unlike her white and Jewish middle-class liberal colleagues, who have every self-righteous confidence about their vocation for helping underprivileged students, Lim’s confidence is mixed with a deep sense of unease. Lim leaves Hostos after three years of teaching; this decision, catalyzed by the city’s budget crisis that threatens to close down the college, is actually the result of the many contradictions lying in her teaching practice that Lim herself cannot resolve. Meta-reflexively, Lim ponders over her reasons for departure. She leaves thoughts scattered around in this short episode, suggesting the disorienting jumble of the mind even years after this experience. Imposing strict emphases on grammatical rules and English writing formula on black and Puerto Rican students, Lim feels herself an accomplice of “the colonialist versions of higher education.” She poses a cluster of questions concerning the fairness of using the level of English to define the future success of Hostos students; these questions cast grave doubts over the righteousness of her teaching practice. After throwing out the series of questions in her mind, Lim tells the reader: “I left because I could not reconcile English literature and the deprivations of black and brown students. I believed that Hostos students deserved more, and I did not believe that teaching them English grammar was what they deserved” (183).

Lim’s questions about the rationale of running English courses in community colleges like Hostos for Puerto Rican students are well-taken. But here’s the rub: by saying that she is unable to bring together “English literature and the deprivations of black and brown students,” does Lim mean that poor black and brown students are automatically denied access to English literature? Has she forgotten that she was once also an economically deprived student, and that it was English literature that gave her peace and comfort in her most difficult times? Doesn’t she believe that there are possibilities, within the existing institutional framework, of transforming the English language
from “a colonial intrusion” to “a postcolonial free-for-all” for her students, just as what happened to her? Lim must have set out with this wish at the very start, but the weak English education background of her students dampens her spirits. Lim does not mention explicitly, or maybe she fails to realize even herself, that beneath her professed inability “to reconcile English literature and the deprivations of black and brown students” are the contradictions between, first, her belief in the creed of inclusiveness—to quote one of Lim’s colleagues, the community college is “a place where if you wanted to go we would have to take you in” (216)—and the value of nurturing teaching, on the one hand, and her often unconscious belief in the mechanism of the British elitist education based on impersonal academic achievement and exclusivity; and, second, between the difficulty of making English into a “postcolonial free-for-all” for these black and brown students in the short term and her personal need for a great career path and quick upward mobility that can allow her to escape the boredom of teaching the basics of English at Hostos.

Lim is also faced with another dilemma, which she straightforwardly admits: “The disparity between my political valuation of my Puerto Rican students and my Puerto Rican neighbors” (176). While teaching at Hostos, Lim lives in a middle-class neighbourhood in Brooklyn, only an hour’s commuting distance to Hostos. But this distance, as Lim realizes, is enough to mark off “an already secured middle class” from “a dispossessed class” (170). Living in Brooklyn, on the one hand, she takes it as a moral and political responsibility to side with the underprivileged and accept the different cultural ways of her Puerto Rican tenement neighbours; but, on the other, she feels her privacy intruded and life unbearably disturbed by the Puerto Rican communal lifestyle. Lim resents her neighbours for their noisiness, but reason tells her that this resentment is politically and morally incorrect. She dreads becoming a racist as a result of her increasing intolerance toward her neighbours and despairs at her middle-class hypocrisy. As these entangled feelings begin to affect her work, Lim decides to leave Hostos. Retreating from this internal conflict, Lim preserves her hope for living together across racial and cultural lines before its eventual possible collapse in her own life; but, by doing this, she also frankly concedes her inability at that time to reconcile what she thinks she needs to do as an intellectual with what she actually feels in real life.

In Among the White Moon Faces, Lim positions herself as an ordinary woman, sometimes a marginalized person, and tries to connect with regular readers with a straightforward account of her experience from childhood to the present; this writerly decision and the actual contents about the writer’s multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural experiences make the memoir excellent material through which to explore
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Due to her unique life experiences, multidimensional perspectives, and unflagging self-questioning, Lim helps reveal the complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions of cosmopolitanism and also avoid many of the pitfalls her contemporary academics have fallen into in writing memoirs of travel, diaspora, and exile, including unconsciously fostering the European imperialistic version of cosmopolitanism, the lack of attention to power relations and identity issues, and writers' unawareness of their own privilege.

In narrating how she and her fellow Malaysians variously appropriate English for self-definition and self-fashioning, Lim demonstrates the fragility of the British colonizers' monolingual program as a key strategy to promote the imperialist cosmopolitan project. Using the English language to navigate the world and to acquire an empowered sense of home through multiple belongings, Lim transforms English into "a postcolonial free-for-all" and creates her own cosmopolitan vision. In the memoir, Lim also reveals the less shiny and even darker facets of cosmopolitanism: her uneasiness with different languages beneath her seemingly unified multilingual cosmopolitan image; and the tensions, conflicts, and power struggles between different racial and ethnic groups in Malaysia behind the state-sponsored discourse of multicultural cosmopolitan Malaysia. With regard to the issue of cosmopolitan bonds between ethnic minorities, Lim discloses how her own newly-obtained middle-class privilege in America, involuntary subscription to the British elitist education, and desire for upward mobility are the sources of the fraught nature of her close relationship with working-class Puerto Ricans in New York.

Lim's memoir also poses two challenges to cosmopolitanism. The first challenge, which arises out of Lim's not fully successful effort to bring out a multilingual cosmopolitan world in writing her memoir, is an aesthetic one: how to represent the individual's multilingual experience outside the realm of monolingual discourse? This question concerns not only memoir writing, but literary writing in general. We hope that new literary and linguistic experiments can equip writers with better strategies to represent a multilingual experience in a monolingual text. The second challenge, which stems from Lim's experience with Puerto Rican immigrants, is more of an experiential one: how far can intellectuals go beyond the limit of their emotions and feelings, subjective positions, personal privileges, and individual interests to live out their moral and political commitment? This second challenge is posed not only to intellectuals, but to everyone: how can we translate into everyday practice the ethical prescription of living harmoniously with different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups? We perhaps will never reach this hypothetical dreamland, but by exploring and working through the nuances, complexities, and ambiguities of cosmopolitanism, we can, at least, give this ideal a better articulation and take a step further toward the inviting horizon.
NOTES
1/ The interview was conducted in English and translated into Chinese for publication in Taiwan. As I translate the Chinese back into English, these may not be Lim's exact words.
2/ "Malayan" refers to the Malay Peninsula.
4/ The Malay is the largest ethnic group in Malaysia; Malay also refers to the language spoken by this group of people.
5/ The Federation of Malaysia was the name given to the 1963 political union of several British colonies in the Malay Peninsula, as well as Singapore and the island of Borneo. Singapore separated from Malaysia to become an independent republic in 1965.

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