

■ “Transformed by the Land’s Rolling Green”: Ecological Consciousness in the Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Abstract

A significant range of Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s poetry dwells on place and the fraught relationship between self and place: a relationship often expressed in terms of the land and the biotic community. This essay will focus on the ecological consciousness which underlies Lim’s poetry and the poet’s treatment of the nonhuman world as material reality which must be recognized as such and ultimately cared for. In her work, Lim interweaves identity, place and gender with ecology and reveals an environmentalism which has yet to be fully explored and appreciated by critics.

Keywords: ecological consciousness, identity, place, apocalypse, women, nature.

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In this essay, I will be focusing on the poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim and commenting on a previously unexamined aspect of her work, namely, the underlying ecological consciousness which inflects the physical world evoked in her poems. I will chiefly be showing how Lim's engagement with the palpable environment of lived experience and with ecological concerns is linked to her continuing negotiations of place and the relation between self and place. For Lim, the doubly dispersed Malaysian Chinese and Asian American, these fraught negotiations are closely related to "the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which [diasporic] displacement produces" (Ashcroft *et al.* 217-18). I hope to show that in her poems, Lim yokes the crisis of place and identity to the ecological crisis in creative and important ways and sets up a world in which self and culture are coterminous with nature. I will also discuss how Lim's environmental vision is refracted through her feminist lens especially in the way that place becomes for her a site of resistance to patriarchal modes of thinking.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim was born in 1944 into a Straits Chinese¹ family in Malacca, Malaysia. As a poet, novelist, short story writer and literary critic, she has produced an important body of work which covers a wide range of themes ranging from childhood and human relationships to diasporic, national and gender concerns. Shirley's literary career was launched with her first volume of poems *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* published in 1980 for which she won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, the first Asian and woman to do so. The poems here establish Lim as a writer who grapples with the hardships of relocation, exile and loss. She was twenty four when she left Malaysia for the United States where, as an immigrant and a woman of colour, she endured alienation and isolation and encountered prejudice and racism. Haunted by the infamous May 13th ethnic unrest in Malaysia², she also knew that she could never return to a

¹ The Straits Chinese are descendants of Chinese settlers who had made Malacca their home in the fifteenth or sixteenth century and who might have intermarried with local Malays. Born and residing mainly in the Straits Settlements of British Malaya (comprising Malacca, Penang and Singapore, all of which are strategically located along the Malacca Straits), generations of Straits Chinese (so-called because of their being born in the Straits Settlements) have made Malaysia their homeland. Historically, members of this community played important roles in the colonial state and in the formation of contemporary Malaysia. Considered model colonists by the British and renowned for their unique culture which blends Chinese, Malay and European cultural traditions, the Straits Chinese have always displayed an amazing cultural/national ambiguity and adaptability.

² The bloody riots of May 13th, 1969, erupted three days after the Federal Elections which saw non-Malay opposition parties gaining more ground in government. The ideal of national unity in a multi-racial country ruled by communitarian, race-based political parties was dealt a serious blow in the aftermath of these violent communal disturbances sparked mainly by the insecurities of the various ethnic groups seeking to safeguard their own communities' interests.

land in which racial politics made the vision of an equitable Malaysian homeland virtually impossible to realize. Socially and politically-engaged (and, as this essay will argue, *ecologically*-engaged), Lim continues to leave her mark on the literary landscape of Southeast Asia and America.

In Lim's oeuvre, there is a cluster of so-called nature poems. These poems, which centre thematically on animals, plants, shells, elements, seasons and other wild or natural phenomena, have been assessed as mainly celebratory pieces which express the wonders and mystical qualities of the natural world (Means xix). Edwin Thumboo reads the "series of fauna poems" as "enlivened by an empathy with the subject that reveals the poet's state of mind" and as "[going] beyond objective description to reflections on human behaviour and attitudes" (Thumboo xviii-xix). The critical position may well be that Lim's literary engagement with nonhuman nature and environment as a whole ends there insofar as the fictive world re-created in the poetry is not meant to mirror the real, historical world beyond the text and insofar as the natural world plays a largely metaphorical role and is a construct of the poet's imagination. The thorny question of mimesis and referentiality calls into doubt the similarity between fictive environmentality and environmental materiality. However, as Laurence Buell argues, every text is "environmentally embedded at every stage from its germination to its reception" and although "[l]anguage never replicates extratextual landscapes, . . . it can be bent toward or away from them" (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 44, 33). Buell theorizes that an individual text possesses its own "environmental unconscious" which refers to a work's perception of environment which is often reduced by other preoccupations. The "environmental unconscious" is also "a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 22). In Lim's universe, this awakening to the physical environment is traceable not only in the self-evidently nature-oriented works but also in poems which are not overtly "about" nature but which yield environmental subtexts of critical significance. In a green reading, even the "fauna poems" are not concerned merely with abstractions but also with the material and objective reality of animal life.

At this juncture, it should be stated that existing scholarship on Lim's work falls almost exclusively under the broad rubric of "postcolonial" criticism with emphasis on the "multiple identities of the Asian American" (Tay 290) and transnational, "Asian-American diasporic" readings (Partridge 147). Postcolonial approaches problematize Lim's Asian-American identity and her status both as an ethnic minority and a woman of colour. Lim herself is a professor of Women's Studies, researching in the area of ethnic literary studies. Eddie Tay notes: "As

an Asian American woman, Lim's identity is liminal as she is doubly marginalized by race and gender. Thus she is able to write on behalf of women of other cultures who are in equally marginal positions" (304). Tay also points to how Lim's works "exemplify a poetics of liberation and articulate a selfhood that renders the strictures of a nation-bound identity irrelevant" and how, in Lim's situation, "the external world defines the home" (289, 301). This study will focus precisely on the features of Lim's "external world" and suggest that it is Lim's underlying consciousness of the interconnectedness and interdependence (or ecology) of things which enables the expression of a place-sense that crosses national and cultural boundaries while maintaining a sense of attachment to places as a whole. In the "greening" of Lim's verse, it can be safely said that "place" in Lim's verse chimes with Yi-Fu Tuan's definition of "place" as "a center of meaning constructed by experience" (152), and that far from a reductive reading of places as abstractions, Lim bridges the gap between place as metaphorical, imagined environment and place as a matrix of "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold 204).

In considering Lim's poetry, I identify three interwoven strands of environmental reflection. The first concerns the role and significance of place in Lim's literary imagination and the question of place-attachment. In my discussion, the concept of place is conflated with the concepts of dwelling and home because although all three may not necessarily be interchangeable categories, they can be said to be variations of the same theme. The second area of ecocritical interest is Lim's treatment of ecological degradation, human complicity in this process and her vision of eco-apocalypse. The third reflection relates to how Lim's feminist perspective influences the way in which nature is represented and mediated in her poetry. Lim's poetry may be categorized as ecofeminist to the extent in which it links the domination and oppression of women with that of nature and presents a means of destabilizing and resisting the master discourse which excludes, denigrates and asserts control over both women and nature.

Place, Dwelling, Home

While it is a given that Lim's portrayal of environment is a poet's imaginative construction, "[a]sserting that 'nature' is an idea is far from saying that it is only an idea, that there is no concrete referent out there in the world for the many human meanings we attach to the word 'nature'" (Cronon 21). In fact, the imagery in Lim's verse points to a world in which the human and the natural realms

interpenetrate at both abstract and concrete levels. In "Summer Bugs," the speaker encounters an insect world which occupies her "lair" and compares her very body to a plant invaded and overrun by a community of teeming, voracious bugs:

. . . I am bitten in my lair

By bugs; see long-legged spider daddies

Wobble like old men to the table.

Pale green sandflies hop in bed, half-tease,

Half-jaws, clipping summer flesh. Sable

Furred mites burrow in yellow stems;

Colonies of white flies have massed on

The drooping palm. Every hour the sleazy hum

Of munching, sucking, mating. I am gone

To sleep, sick as a potted plant chewed

By golden bugs hurtling in my blood. ("Summer Bugs", *Monsoon History* 109)

The interplay of metaphor and description here seems to suggest that potted plants possess human bloodstream; insects indulge in activities common also to humans, namely, "the sleazy hum / Of munching, sucking, mating"; and the human observer/animal gets drawn into the life cycle of bugs by offering "summer flesh" for the insects' feeding and copulating frenzy. The simile "like old men to the table" hints at a shared feast while the sandflies "hop in bed" subsuming "bed" into their natural habitat, all of which suggest that while nature is indisputably a human idea, the idea is capable of reclaiming its territory, so to speak, so that both nature and culture feed off one another, metaphorically and literally, in a reciprocal relationship. "Summer Bugs" is reminiscent of Australian poet Les Murray's poem "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" in which humans, animals and insects, "sharing the land," intermingle, and in which "Mosquito and human share the same dance" (Bate 66-67): "mosquitoes are / always living in there: / they float about like dust motes and sink down, . . . / . . . the males feed on plant-stem fluid, absorbing / that watery ichor; / the females meter the air, feeling for the warm-blooded smell, needing / blood for their eggs . . . their tune comes to the name-bearing humans, who dance to it and / irritably grin at it" (Murray 126). In both these poems, the permeability of human skin and cultural spaces effectively breaks down the socially and dis-cursively constructed divide between culture and nature, inner and outer, the poetic and the literal.

In "Monsoon History," where Lim's paradigmatic homeplace of Malacca in peninsular Malaysia is given due focus, biotic and abiotic forces also pervade the human dwelling as cultural and natural spaces overlap and impinge on one an-

other. The human dwelling of “Nonya and baba”³ or Mother and Father is saturated with monsoonal moisture. As in “Summer Bugs,” the profusion of insect life in this poem is located within the human domain where insects, snails, clouds and “tropical water” are counted as members of the household or *oikos*:⁴

The air is wet, soaks
 Into mattresses, and curls
 In apparitions of smoke.
 Like fat white slugs furred
 Among the timber,
 Or silver fish tunnelling
 The damp linen covers
 Of schoolbooks, or walking
 Quietly like centipedes,
 The air walking everywhere
 On its hundred feet
 Is filled with the glare
 Of tropical water.

Again we are taken over
 By clouds and rolling darkness.
 Small snails appear
 Clashing their timid horns
 Among the morning glory
 Vines.

Drinking milo,
 Nonya and baba sit at home.
 This was forty years ago.
 Sarong-wrapped they counted
 Silver paper for the dead.
 Portraits of grandfathers
 Hung always in the parlour.

.....
 . . . the air ticks
 With gnats, black spiders fly,
 Moths sweep out of our rooms
 Where termites built
 Their hills of eggs and queens zoom
 In heat. We wash our feet
 For bed, watch mother uncoil
 Her snake hair . . . (“Monsoon History”, *Monsoon* 17-18).

³ A Straits Chinese woman is called a “nonya” (sometimes spelt “nyonya”) and the men are known as “baba.”

⁴ *Eco* is derived from the Greek *oikos* which means “household.”

In this poem, the memory of home is one of sensations stimulated by the environment. Much more than that, however, the poem's underlying ecological sense is driven by the recognition that human inhabitation does not occur in a purely cultural space and that human emplacement entails a form of inter-species accommodation with the unheralded occupants of the land. In any case, Lim's sensuous portrayal of summer in America and monsoon in Asia emphasizes the sensory and visceral experience of both these seasons (an experience shared by all the species) and the close proximity and interrelatedness of the human and the nonhuman in a particular habitat. As sentient beings performing rituals unique to each species (nonya and baba "counted / Silver paper for the dead"; "Small snails . . . Clashing their timid horns" as they mate) and inhabiting a common lair ("our rooms / Where termites built / Their hills of eggs" ["Monsoon History" 17]), there is a sense that it is the shared physicality of the experience on a shared land which creates the sense of place. Seen in this light, mother's "snake hair" becomes a strikingly apt metaphor for the union between animal and human life.

At the same time, such a place-sense is also temporal when it is reconstituted as a distant memory or dream of the ancestral home in Malacca as the final stanza of "Monsoon History" seems to suggest:

The air is still, silent
Like sleepers rocked in the pantun,
Sheltered by Malacca.
This was forty years ago,
When nonya married baba. (*Monsoon* 18)

Eddie Tay remarks that in Lim's poetry, "home, often a metonym for homeland, is depicted as belonging to the past, accessible only through infrequent visits, dreams and memories. The home becomes a site of nostalgia, as in the case of 'Monsoon history'" (297). In "Summer Bugs," there is a similar suggestion of a dreamed place with the difference that the home is now America: "I am gone / To sleep, sick as a potted plant chewed / By golden bugs hurtling in my blood" (*Monsoon* 109). The dream motif recurs in her other poems of place: "In a dream the sailors motionlessly / Rocking in the eye of the moon. / We dream like grey gulls blown inland, / Or as one-eyed ships, blown, spying / The bright-shelled peninsula" ("Crossing the Peninsula" *Monsoon* 20); and "Crossing the China Sea, we see / Other sailors, knee-deep in padi, / Transformed by the land's rolling green. / We cannot enter their dream" ("No Man's Grove" *Monsoon* 37). Lim has also asserted that "[t]he whole of a person is of sights, sounds, smells, motions, tastes, a community of sensations we call country" (Lim, "Tongue and Roots" 302). In "Learning to love America," the speaker declares that "countries are in our blood and we bleed them" (*What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* 74). It does

appear that Lim's mapping of place is ostensibly poetic or metaphorical in which the body becomes the figurative embodiment of one's place/country/dwelling, both spatial and temporal.

Nonetheless as Neil Evernden argues, "once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the 'environment,' then ... we imbue it with life" and subsequently, "the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher. Metaphoric language is an indicator of 'place' – an indication that the speaker has a place, feels part of a place" (101). Incidentally, as a dweller of Californian landscapes, Lim evokes the geography of her new home as a land which conflates the literal with the metaphorical and nullifies the human tendency to see itself in natural objects and natural phenomena simply because place and the self cannot help but intersect in such dramatic environmental conditions:

The pathetic fallacy does not operate here, where even the homeless feel blessed by a natural landscape that admits everyone, as cheap as common dirt and beyond human pricing. In Santa Barbara the sun shines from a brilliant sea-blue sky on hillsides fragrant with wild mustard, sour grass, and sage; the surf beats its creamy foam against hundreds of open coastal beaches, a continuous delight, even if the earth were to roar and buildings pancake, floor on floor, even if ash were to rain from exploding homes in hidden canyons.

(Among the White Moonfaces 346)

It can be argued that in Lim's verse, identity, like place, is not merely inflected by a purely cultural consciousness but also by a sense of affinity with the land and a sense of dwelling in the land, that is, by an ecological consciousness. Lim confesses that her volume of poetry *Crossing the Peninsula* "came out of an intense love and longing for a certain kind of landscape" and that "[a]s a child, [she] was very much . . . physically within the land" (Interview with Nor Faridah 306). As Evernden asserts, "There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place" (103).

Greg Garrard notes that "[d]welling is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work" (108). In "Monsoon History," "Crossing the Peninsula" and "Greenhouse Effect in New York," the memory of the Malacca Straits does not only evoke the cultural, the historical and the national (the Peninsula is also a recognizable political unit, i.e. West Malaysia) but also grounds itself in a bioregion with its own climate, ecosystems, atmosphere and topography. The history of Malacca's ascendance (and by extension the Malay Peninsula) is a history of trading links within the Malay Archipelago and between China and the rest of the world. The Malacca Straits which functioned as a geographically

strategic waterway and the monsoons which enabled the sailing vessels to call on its ports to trade in, among other things, marine produce ("sweet oysters / And mother-of-pearl" ["Crossing the Peninsula", *Monsoon History* 20]), influenced the history of the society which thrived in Malacca. However, both in "Crossing the Peninsula" and "Monsoon History," the poems' concerns go beyond human history to embrace the environmental history of "monsoon / Climate" ("Crossing" 20). In "Crossing the Peninsula," Lim's consciousness of place and the relation between self and place is inflected with a consciousness of environment. The natural rhythms of the sea, sky, moon and monsoonal downpours "Through days, through years" ("Crossing" 20) are fundamental to her memory of this particular place *as place* and her own history within it. Here is "Crossing the Peninsula":

First, the sea, blue heart pulsing,
Spilling stars, nuts, and sand
On Tanjong Bunga. Rocks, their sides ringed
By wave, where we went footed as crabs,
Toes like white fish washed under,
Hunting shorewards for sweet oysters
And mother-of-pearl. Then sky
With swift light changing to rain.
The humming breakers push by,
Recede, run in again
Through days, through years. It is monsoon
Climate, the migrating season
When nets and boats come home to shelter.
And all night the water beats heavily.
Salt falls from our hair and traps
In a dream the sailors motionlessly
Rocking in the eye of the moon.
We dream like grey gulls blown inland,
Or as one-eyed ships, blown, espying
The bright-shelled peninsula. ("Crossing the Peninsula", *Monsoon* 20)

The expression "When nets and boats come home to shelter" speaks of place as a dwelling to which labourers of the sea return for shelter. In "Monsoon History," "fishers pull / From the Straits after monsoon" and can be counted with those "Sheltered by Malacca" (*Monsoon* 18). The monsoon is also identified with "the migrating season"; the peninsula and its rich and varied history of human migrations and diaspora are evoked here. Lim's own migratory seasons as evinced in her trope of "crossing" necessitate an examination of what home and dwelling mean to her whether it is home conceived nationally, geographically and bioregionally as in "Crossing the Peninsula"; or home as contained within the four walls of a house complete with rooms and parlour as in "Monsoon History";

or even home considered globally as in “Greenhouse Effect in New York,” a poem I will turn to later.

In Lim’s poetry there appears to be a discernible tension between place-attachment and place-detachment; a situation brought about by the fact that home has become increasingly unsettled and subject to relocations across national and cultural borders and geographical expanses (especially true in Lim’s case). For Lim, the issue of place-attachment is rendered problematic not only by her own ambivalent and critical treatment of place but also by the reality that places change and are never static. In “Visiting Malacca,” the persona confesses: “I am losing / Ability to make myself at home” (*Monsoon* 32). So much has transpired in the interim to both house and occupant. Lim’s position echoes bell hooks’s statement that

home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become . . . (148)

In “American Driving,” the speaker is driving in no particular direction through a “caucasian countryside.” Prompted by the experience of an alien land, the driver transports herself to an Eastern fantasy landscape, “Aladdin’s garden.” Then the dislocation hits her: “My mother’s hand is reaching / From fat autumn clouds. “Where / Are you going? Who are you?” / She moans through windowed glare” (*Monsoon* 66). “But I drive on . . . I drive forever” (*Monsoon* 66-7) is the answer as the disconcerted driver realizes that her journey is a perpetual drifting and that neither the destination (i.e. “where”) nor the self (i.e. “who”) is fixed. In this context, place, dwelling and home seem transient and the quest for a home-place assumes a metaphysical, abstract and allegorical nature. If this were the case, what do Lim’s fraught negotiations of dwelling as a “landscape of memory” (Garrard 108) suggest about the palpable, actual experience of dwelling in the land or on the earth itself? And how does one reconcile the claim that Lim’s poetry is environmentally-engaged in its specific treatment of place with Lim’s declaration that place or territory “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, with or without others” (Interview with Mohd. Quayum 96). It does seem clear though that the individual’s task of “making sense of itself *in the world*” (my emphasis) inevitably returns us to that tangible world or country of “sights, sounds, smells, motions, tastes” (Lim, “Tongue and Roots” 302) and hints at an attachment to a more universal sense of place/country if not to Malaysia or America in particular. As a matter of fact, in her memoirs, Lim asserts that

"[w]e tell stories to bind us to a spot" (*Among* 347).

One way in which Lim ponders over the bond between the self and the (home) land is evident through her depiction of seashells both as poetic image and simply as seashells, especially ones displaced by destructive acts of humanity. In *The Poetics of Space*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard remarks that "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (5) and in his phenomenology of the inhabited shell, he concludes that humankind, animals and plants, "[a] man, an animal, an almond, all find maximum repose in a shell" (125).

Arguably, the "bright-shelled peninsula" is a powerful evocation of a home in which one dwells or used to dwell in complete safety and serenity. In the poignant poem "Shells," the shells "fished from Sabah sea" and peddled by the sad salesman are "ancient homes" which "gleam / Abandoned to light and placeless; bereft" (*Monsoon* 104-05). The hollow and dislocated shell "where none or little life is left" (105) symbolizes the deep sense of loss and placelessness which accompanies the removal of oneself from "a homeland, an ancestral plot" (Lim, "Tongue and Roots" 298). Laurel Means notes that the "'peninsula' thus becomes a trope of identity with a Malaysian past, 'crossing' it symbolizes its loss and the necessity for 'espying' it only through memory, as if in a dream" (xv). In this respect, the obvious postcolonial bent in Lim's works asserts itself in that a "major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft *et al.* 8). Bachelard also proposes that "[t]hrough dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate" (5-6). Seen in this light, the speaker who dreams of the shell-peninsula is dreaming of the dwelling-places in her life. On a purely symbolic plane, the inhabitant evicted from its shell-home mirrors the migrant's plight, and a shell dislodged from its ocean habitat represents the migrant who is plucked from her natural environs and rendered placeless. As a migrant who has known exile and who thus can empathize with the placeless shell, Lim has this to say on the issue of migration and the implied condition of exile (either voluntary or enforced) and estrangement:

Exile immediately presupposes the sense of involuntary removal; it connotes dispossession, displacement, discontentment. As removal from an original and significant place, a homeland, an ancestral plot, it implies movement from inside, with the sense of wholeness, integrity, shelter, belonging, empowerment, to outside, with the multiple negative associations of being outcast, of ostracism, marginalisation, estrangement, enfeeblement, rootlessness, disintegration, and loss.

("Tongue and Roots" 298)

Inside the shell is shelter and wholeness; outside it is danger and fragmentation. If anything, the shell metaphor serves to heighten the insecurity of exile and intensify the longing for home. As Yi-Fu Tuan observes: "Attachment to place would not have found expression but for the fact of exile: home becomes vividly real only when juxtaposed against its contraries – foreign country and journey" (30).

On a material, extra-discursive level, however, shells and, by extension, the entire ecology of the sea are vulnerable to human excesses. To be sure, the trade in shells points to the forcible removal of biota from a supportive ecosystem to which they belong. Tourism creates the demand for these "Jewels of water" and the persona duly purchases a "rosy conch" and a shell of "spider / Shape" from "a sad salesman." The dubious transaction takes place "in a less than deluxe /Hotel":

Full of despair he brought a spider
Shape, energy cased in spiny lime:
A fort with prongs and spikes advancing there
Through liquid silence! Out of water,
Ferocity lost its face, became the care
Of maids to dust, collectors' item.

Paid and bore both home, dead trappings
Of beauty which should have best been left
Alone, alive in bottom ground, unseen
By fisher or diver. Trawled by strings
Of human-kind, these ancient homes gleam
Abandoned to light and placeless; bereft.

The peddler shut his shop, hotel
Ran down. Permanent is the theft
Of beauty. Day by day, dragging
The world for possession, symbol, shell,
Amulet to keep as if a real thing
With life, where none or little life is left. ("Shells", *Monsoon* 104-05)

The stark tone of the poem underscores the desolating and almost meaningless "theft of beauty" in an industry which will ultimately pay the price of such permanent devastation: the "sad salesman" is "Closing business" and the hotel "Ran down." The last four lines convey a forceful indictment of the incessant human commodification of nature and the folly of accumulating barren fetishes and symbols at the cost of the environment.

Shells in Lim's poetry function as trope, but they also reflect Lim's earth-centred concern for things which, like the rosy conch, are beyond anthropogenic construction and manipulation: "designed in stipples, / Pearly bands not pink nor any color / Mixed by mind. As if a spirit had roofed / Independently the merest

paint for / Ocean light and weightless ripples" (104). I have implied earlier in the essay that it is the ecology of places which dominates Lim's memory of home. In the poem "When," the speaker reminisces over childhood days spent on the beach with sea, stars, moon, pines and breeze and the wonder of "so much sea" and "the enormous starry clarity / Of sky" (19). The place of childhood is the place of true environmental awareness, of a sentient being emptied of thought, just watching, staring and imbibing the circumambient sensations: "It was a child's preoccupation / To stare at the yellow coin of moon, / To crumble pine needles between thumb and finger, / Not thinking anything particular, to linger, / Watching the trees bend in the wind, sea dance" (*Monsoon* 19). In her memoirs, Lim reflects on the effects of the sea of her childhood and identifies the sea with the mother she never knew:

The sea was always a visual shock to me, the waves of the Malacca Straits slapping gently and unceasingly against a slopping gritty beach. Something about the sun shining on such immensity excited me. I was afraid of the water but in love with its sensation. . . . I lay in the water as it ran down the sand ridges and murmured over and over again to myself, "The sea is my mother, the sea is my mother." (*Among* 55)

To be in love with the sensation of the water and the other sensory stimulation that the ecology of the sea offers is to be in love with the source of this stimulation. In "I Remember," the beachside memory is revisited after a significant time lapse but this time, the vividness of the childhood place proves difficult to capture since "Where she had been / Then, there is no recognition" (*Monsoon* 35). Nevertheless, "child and sea" remain an inseparable twosome in the landscape of memory so much so that figural expressions like "where we went footed as crabs, / Toes like white fish washed under" ("Crossing", *Monsoon* 20) seem almost natural in a world where "child and sea" inhabit a common ground, are drawn within the same frame and are inextricably paired: "I see her, now, the scene of a scene, / Planted eminent as the sky, / As sea she had enclosed in eye" ("I Remember", *Monsoon* 35).

The attachment to place seen from a child's responsive viewpoint is however not idealized and does not slide into a sentimental environmental determinism; in fact, the sonnet "When" ends on a nonchalant note which suggests the keeping of a respectful and unsentimental distance on the child's part: "Till you knew it was time to be home soon, / And straightaway left with no backward glance" (*Monsoon* 19). With ecological consciousness comes the implicit need to conserve the land. Lim shows that the diasporic, nomadic self in "a restlessly migrating planet" (*Among* 342) is capable of a respectful, authentic and caring dwelling. The crossings made across vast spaces only means that her bioregional place-sense has expanded from the tropical land of the Malay peninsula to a land which

straddles two vast continents and beyond. To Lim, the land of fraught belonging stretches across the oceanic divide. To her, America and Asia are linked geographically: "I would choose to live and work in California, a state geographically bound to the islands of Southeast Asia in a restless rim of moving plates enclosing the gorgeous Pacific waters" (*Among* 342). Jonathan Bate stresses that the bioregion "is not coextensive with the nation" or with "the institutions of a state" (59-60). For Lim, the allegiance of the self is to the land and not to nation-states and gatekeepers of boundaries and this land is one in which time and space are compressed. This time-space compression has implications for the global ecosystem and environmental justice:

At the same time, the world has become a smaller world. At one time, to travel from Malaysia to London would have taken months, then weeks. Now, it takes hardly 12 hours. It's a smaller world not only for travel but in terms of consequences. Where people burn coal, another country suffers pollution. Where people eat too much meat, another country suffers poverty and they both are *related to one another*. *They are not separate*. The whole world has become one spaceship. What someone does has consequences on someone else living thousands of miles away. The more we recognise this new vulnerability of humanity, how we are vulnerable to each other, the better it is for all of us as a species. (Interview with Nor Faridah 312; my emphasis)

The spaceship metaphor is revealing for two reasons: first, the preoccupation with mobility. "Time-space compression refers to movement and communication across space, to the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this" (Massey 147). Lim's preoccupation with "movement and communication across space" is evident in her many poems which involve crossings, driving and flying. The second and perhaps more pertinent point is her perception of travelling in "one spaceship": the notion of a shared, contained planetary home to which humanity belongs, and the care and stewardship which are vital to the journey and wellbeing of this vulnerable spaceship. It can be argued that Lim is at home on earth even as she merges the regional with the global. Interestingly, in an implied parallel with the Asian-American identity she embodies, pollution and deforestation and their impact on social ecology are not place-bound but transcend political, national and regional boundaries as this next poem shows.

"Greenhouse Effect in New York" is Lim's ironic treatment of global warming in which the inordinate humidity in a city situated in North America, the largest producer of greenhouse gasses in the world, transports her back in time and space to the familiar humidity of tropical Southeast Asia. The poet negotiates between nature and culture in representing a world in which places change and so too climate; the irony lies in how climate change has compressed her world.

The "usual heat" of the tropics is felt right there in "the closed / peeling kitchen" in New York. The ecological crisis becomes a catalyst for memories of place:

Today I wake up and it's
already eighty-two in the shade.
The weathercable bleats:
humidity is near tropical;
dew point set at seventy-eight.
It is too hot for coffee
but I make it anyway.

. . .

My coffee is instant. Its vapor
rises saturated with berries
from Sumatra, whose mountains lie
visible on the sharply strung
horizon of the Malacca Straits:
my Malacca Straits where
it is always eighty-two
and childhood's a fermented
dew point of denials
and tears. I breathe the roasted-
berry smog. It covers my cheeks
with the sweat of plantations,
a brown aroma from Southeast

Asia . . . ("Greenhouse Effect in New York", *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* 54-55)

In this poem, place-consciousness is induced by climatic conditions, and the human adaptation to climate adds an ecological dimension to the complex diasporic issues of place and displacement. The speaker's husband "is away in Finland" where "he will grow / even more Caucasian cool, / a Slav from remote winters / with a meaty manly texture / evolved for frigid conditions" and in humid New York, where "This is / [her] usual heat", she is 'home,' "returned to normalcy": "This is / my usual heat. I am my / usual self . . . returned to normalcy, / to rain-forest torpor / whose water swells and swells / in cumulus clumps. The sky / rumbles all day and night, like / vague threats a child overhears" (*What* 54-5). Greenhouse effect in New York is, in a sense, displacement effect or a reminder that "[her] usual heat" and "usual self" are tropical-monsoonal or are, at least, evolved for such conditions. Such heat in New York is thus "unusual." Climates, and not only people, have also become displaced; this displacement of nature can wreak untold havoc on a global scale. The poem not only illustrates how ecological crisis arouses mixed memories of a previous home, another self and a painful childhood ("childhood's a fermented / dew point of denials / and tears") but also calls attention to the unnaturalness of such a

crisis. Tellingly, it is the imagery of moisture in the poem which conveys the sense of anomaly which has afflicted nature: “Steam puffs from the shabby / kettle and not quite / evaporates” and “dew which is wet / but never cool” (*What* 54-5).

Still in America, the poem “Oranges” addresses urban poverty and the way in which human beings affect and are affected by one another in the extended land-community. The human subject of the poem is a fruit peddler who sells his oranges to passing motorists; he tries to sell a bag to the speaker on a busy Southern Californian street. The speaker sizes him up in this way:

A peddler, he does not care
 about supermarkets, take-outs,
 and factories manufacturing
 frozen orange juice. He has arrived
 from a field of open furrows
 and malathion sprays,
 from sleeping in a lean-to
 under the Los Angeles freeway
 beside a river of concrete. The waves
 of automobiles do not shock him.
 They no longer terrify. The June
 heat is saturated with petroleum fumes,
 but he smells the scent of his life
 under these emissions . . . (“Oranges”, *What* 80-81)

Although unmentioned, the peddler is most likely an immigrant from Central or South America trying to survive in a city of concrete and contamination. Exposed to the dangers of toxic pesticide and vehicular emissions, the peddler represents the less privileged and marginalized sector of society which, more often than not, is more vulnerable to the dangers of environmental degradation than the affluent. The poem sets up a stark contrast between the abundance of the fruit in Southern California, the wealth that the citrus industry generates (“a bounty visible / all over Southern California, / on trees heavily loaded / with fruit, thousands on thousands” [80]), and the deprivation that the peddler experiences. The poem also sets up a contrast between the peddler himself and the Americans who drive by him. The former is portrayed as animal-like: “[smelling] the scent of his life / under these emissions - sweat, hunger, / his male eagerness for night. / He is alone on the narrow island, / alone with the eddying / jaguars, cougars, and Broncos.” These wild beasts are ironically “enveloped in the taste of strange names: / Toyotas, Fords, Hondas, / Subarus and Volvos, / Volkswagen and Cadillac” (81). The American dream comes at great cost to nature and the presence of the “ecological” peddler amidst the consumerism, “waves / of automo-

biles" and "petroleum fumes" highlights the radical separation between the human and the nonhuman worlds in over-industrialized America. Sadly, the peddler's "feet are snagged in sacks / of oranges, the dream of oranges / now stale, stagnant" (81), and the ecological way of life is ominously endangered.

Apocalypse and the Grove which Belongs to No Man

In this next part of the essay, I will consider Lim's treatment of eco-apocalypse as well as how her feminism engages with her environmentalism. It is clear that Lim's spaceship houses humanity in a web of inter-relatedness which is, incidentally, the basic premise of ecology. In stating that peoples and countries in different parts of the globe, no matter how far apart, suffer the consequences of each other's activities, Lim suggests that they are causally connected: "They are not separate" (Interview with Nor Faridah 312). In a land where everything is connected to everything else, the spectre of ecological disaster must surely seem more horrifying, and, indeed, in "After Fall-Out" and "The Anniversary," Lim imagines a waste-land of nightmarish proportions. Lawrence Buell asserts that "the metaphor of apocalypse [is] central to ecocentrism's projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web" (*The Environmental Imagination* 285). Lim's apocalyptic vision owes less to the Biblical vision of Christ's Second Coming and more to the vision of cold-war catastrophe brought about by the fiery end of a nuclear holocaust as well as the decline of modern civilization as we know it; nevertheless, Lim's vision has a radical environmental subtext.

The poem which deals explicitly with the end of times is "After Fall-Out." The poem is a jeremiad which deals with the world's end by radioactive fire:

What will become of us?
Our nerves fail with each year;
It's not as in the past.

Old powers venomous
War on. Our children fear,
What will become of us?

When once the seasons cast
Fresh flowers, birds appear:
It's not as in the past.

The bare earth's winds will gust
On cities, suns will sear.
What will become of us?

Our own creation's dust
 Extinguishes us here.
 It's not as in the past.

Our first vision's trust
 Is shattered, that mirror clear.
 What will become of us?

It's not as in the past. ("After Fall-Out", *Monsoon* 103)

This villanelle was written in the 1970s when the Cold War and the nuclear arms race made the likelihood of a nuclear war dangerously possible. The rhyming refrains "What will become of us?" and "It's not as in the past" repeated alternately at the end of each stanza and culminating in a final couplet in the closing stanza are particularly effective in building up the mood of anxiety, fear and uncertainty. The predictability of the form and its persistent, urgent cry of distress combine to intensify the bleak picture of future annihilation forecast by the speaker. This secular cataclysm brought about by "Old powers venomous" can and should also be read as an ecological warning. The imagery of fall-out, "The bare earth's winds will gust / On cities, suns will sear" and "Our own creation's dust / Extinguishes us here," aptly conjures the physical signs of environmental degradation where desertification, climbing temperatures and air pollution, "Our own creation's dust," paint a grim future for the earth. Nuances of Rachel Carson's eco-apocalyptic *Silent Spring* are evident in a barren landscape devoid of birds and flowers: "When once the seasons cast / Fresh flowers, birds appear: / It's not as in the past."

Lim's second apocalyptic poem "The Anniversary," published almost two decades after the first one, approaches the end times from an eco-feminist perspective. The poem distinctly melds ecological with gender concerns: here, the earth-mother is portrayed as a subversive force, revolting against her subjugation both as earth and as feminized earth by a decidedly patriarchal "he." Evoking gothic elements, images of decay and descriptions of unnatural portents, the speaker ironically celebrates the "world's fullness," a fullness which is paradoxically translated into a nightmarish and grotesque gestation of horrible things, and a "fullness" which has reached breaking point:

The world's fullness is gratefully
 more than you can admit. The seams
 pull taut, crotch aches, armpits peel
 back odors like onion layers,
 sliding pale skin on pale skin, till
 the moisture streams through uterus,
 pores, every way out, like smoggy
 summer rain. The smells! as tarry sizzles

Val Plumwood notes that “[o]ne essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously . . . given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women’s devaluation and oppression” (8). In this poem, Lim is not merely satisfied with assigning positive value to the woman-nature connection, but also suggests that like nature, women must resist simple categorization. Lim’s subversive feminized nature is presented as a complex entity which defies, overturns and resists uncomplicated male-oriented categorization. Indeed, in an earlier poem “In Defence of the Crooked,” the persona declares: “In nature nothing is simple” (*Monsoon* 107).⁵ In “The Anniversary,” nature is both “rivers of nutrients” and “aridity,” “air of his savoring,” “salt,” “sugar,” “blood,” “bile” and much more besides. Nature can be vengeful (“the mother’s smothering clasp”) and not the nurturing angel (“There / is no integrity in her mothering”). Therefore, by being “gratefully / more than you can admit,” the world’s fullness dramatizes the bane of anthropocentric-cum-patriarchal (i.e. exploitative) attitudes to nature: dangerous attitudes which, if left unproblematized and uncontested, can only lead to ecological catastrophe.

The poem ends with the recollection of “another breaking” in which “filaments forced / earthwards, plunged into the uncreated” (57). The ambiguity of this image is striking, linking the violent penetration or “breaking” of the earth with that of the female body. Kate Soper writes that “it is in the perception of the colonizer, for whom nature is both a nurturant force – a replenished bosom or womb of renewal – and a ‘virgin’ terrain ripe for penetration, that the metaphor of the land as female is most insistent” (*What is Nature?* 104-05). Seen in this light, Lim’s subversive and unruly female (waste)land can also be read as a site of resistance against colonial mastery as well as against the neo-colonial, patriarchal exploitation of the land.

Nevertheless, Lim does seem to endorse the connection of women with nature in poems like “Panther,” “Women’s Dreams” and “I Look for Women.” In the poem “Panther,” the “classic / panther” which “[Lies] by his sleeping side” is “sullen, female” and “lies all night unmoving” (*Monsoon* 112). In “Women’s

⁵ Lim tacitly acknowledges the ecological tenet which posits that in nature everything is complex and not quite so predictable and straightforward. In the poem “In Defence of the Crooked,” the speaker emphasizes her misshapen physique and irregular features with a deadpan matter-of-factness and denounces “straight things” in favour of the crooked, the unpredictable and the grotesque. In this poem, the speaker asserts that “In nature nothing is simple” and luxuriates in her deformity: “I am bowed, tangled; worse, / Not seeing straight”; “Mouth dragged down to the side; / Breast lumpier than the other”; “Nervous, I stutter. / The last toe and companion curl / Like callouses”; “My answer / Is twisted” (*Monsoon* 107). Apart from the implicit belief that “Uncertain humanity” takes its cue from the natural world, this poem also suggests that a defence of the crooked is tantamount to a defence of nature itself.

Dreams," the "we," speaks on behalf of women who have to "match wits / Because we have not known dominion" and do so by "[Colouring] faces, [depilating] their arm-pits" (*Monsoon* 165). "We" ironically admit "[Delighting] in the effort to fit. / Being Mother Nature and our own creation" (165). Lim's woman-nature figures are often positive ones, empowered by a latent and volatile energy in spite of their lack of freedom and immobility, as in the lines from "Panther": "Immobilized / she crouches. She has fed / full of something, the fullness / films her pupils ... the head / is a bowl in which passions hiss / like acids and sulphurs" (112). In the poem "I Look for Women," the speaker looks beyond the atrocities and tragedies afflicting her "mothers and sisters" to see a symbol of hope, beauty and inspiration embodied in women as nature:

I read terrible stories -
Hate, rage, futilities of will -
And look for women, the small
Sufficient swans, showers of stars. (*Monsoon* 166)

In the poem "No Man's Grove," the convergence of ecology, place and feminism in Lim's work adds an important dimension to the piece:

Crossing the China Sea, we see
Other sailors, knee-deep in padi,
Transformed by the land's rolling green.
We cannot enter their dream.

The sea brings us all to jungle,
Native, unclaimed, rooted, and tangled
On salt like one giant tree.

We spring straight from sea-wave. We see
But do not see grey netted pliants
Shutting out the sun. Where sea and plant
Twine, mammoth croakers crawl on tidal zone.

Some will live in the giant's shade, bend
To the rapidly rolling horizon.
I choose to walk between water and land. ("No Man's Grove", *Monsoon* 37)

In the poem above, Lim puns on the word "mangrove" and synthesizes it with the expression "no man's land." The resultant neologism "no man's grove" is eminently striking: firstly, it is effective in evoking the history of migrancy since the mangrove jungle grows along the Malay peninsular shoreline and is perhaps the first sight that greets Chinese migrants arriving from across the seas. In this instance, *no man's grove* signifies an unoccupied, contestable site; it suggests a liminal, ambivalent space and land belonging to no one and it is this "tidal zone" that

the migrant with his/her ambivalent identity chooses to inhabit as expressed in the line “I choose to walk between water and land” (“No Man’s Grove” 37). Incidentally, the Malay word for homeland is *tanahair* which translates into “waterland.” Secondly, to say that the grove belongs to no man is also to say that it is not the exclusive preserve of *man*. In the poem “Brinjal,” the “ovaloid female, / pendulous” brinjal “[reminds] / anything in nature is woman’s / and man’s” (*Monsoon* 111; my emphasis). In “No Man’s Grove,” however, the masculine will-to-possess and dominate the land is implicitly interrogated.

Ecologically, the mangrove is a valuable family of plants and is synonymous with its coastal, saline habitat. Mangrove forest and swamp are unique ecosystems “Where sea and plant / Twine” in a life-supporting relationship. The confluence of sea and land creates a unique and fertile environment where organisms like mangrove and “mammoth croakers” thrive. The mangrove is an obvious symbol of the migrant’s condition. In choosing to adopt an “in-between” stance, the speaker enters into an ambivalent relationship with the new land. Nevertheless, no man’s grove can represent the site of an enriching cultural multiplicity and cross-fertilization despite the attendant hardships and conflict which may arise from this contact. Certainly, in the literal sense, the mangrove zone is the site of intense biological life and diversity.

So far, we have seen how Lim’s consciousness of place and identity is almost invariably encoded in environmental terms. In “No Man’s Grove,” there is the suggestion that the nonhuman landscape does not merely reflect and comment on the human condition, which in this case is the ambivalence of the migrant’s identity, but also has the power to transform society and affect its growth, its culture. The “we” observes that “Other sailors” have been “Transformed by the land’s rolling green” although the former’s place is not with these: “We cannot enter their dream.” The “land’s *rolling* green” (my emphasis) and the “rapidly rolling horizon” connote an ample landscape which enfolds the human inhabitants in its vast munificence even as they cultivate the land, “knee-deep in padi,” knee-deep in the green of the gender-neutral land which influences them and is influenced by them. It is the close alliance and entanglement between humanity and the land that the migrant longs for: to be like the jungle, “Native, unclaimed, rooted, and tangled,” and to be “knee-deep in padi.” Although denied this privilege, the newly-arrived sailors may yet be transformed by the mangrove, the “one giant tree” which provides vital sustenance and shelter from the elements to creatures which “spring straight from sea-wave” (*Monsoon* 37).

In conclusion, in Lim’s poetry, environment certainly *does* matter in poems which deal primarily with concerns of place, identity, society and gender simply because the poet does not envision a human world which is taken out of its earthly,

physical context. Although Lim asserts that her work is "de-territorialized, an ironic prior property for a writer to whom 'home' has been such a first-order question and thematic" (Interview with Mohd. Quayum 88), it is clear that her sense of territory and attachment to place embraces a much larger land-community. In the poem "Walden," the speaker reflects on the "funny man" Thoreau "awakening in Walden," solitary, self-reliant and a curiosity to his townspeople. In the fatigue of her town life, "Dead-tired, mid-week, four a.m.," the speaker mulls over that "Power of awakening" (*No Man's Grove* 77) in nature. In the poem "New England," she glories in the rhythms and colours of wild nature in fall (*Monsoon* 61). It can be argued that, by invoking the great transcendentalists and environmental heroes of modern times, Lim reaffirms her deep and visceral engagement with the countries and land-community of that one planetary space-ship, earth.

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〈來自土地滔滔綠波的轉化〉： 林玉玲詩作中的生態意識

摘 要

華裔美國作家林玉玲的詩作的一大部分建立在地域之上，以及自我跟地域的緊張關係，並敘以土地與生物社群來呈現這樣的關連。本文旨在探討林玉玲詩作所蘊含的生態意識，詩人對於作為物質現實之非人類世界的處理也將從這個方向聚焦、給予着視。林玉玲的作品混雜了生態、認同、地域、性別，顯露出一種尚未被完整探討、也未被評論家所賞識的環境主義。

關鍵字：生態意識，認同，地域，啓示錄，女性，自然