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In Praise of Limes, Poets, and Mentors: A Conversation with Shirley Geok-lin Lim

By Noelle Brada-Williams, Transcription by Elizabeth J. Asborno

As a guest of the Center for Literary Arts at San José State University, Dr. Shirley Geok-lin Lim read from her poetry collection, *In Praise of Limes.* The Director, Dr. Selena Anderson, introduced her with the following words:

> Born in Malacca, Malaysia, Lim was raised by her Chinese father and attended missionary schools. Although her first languages were Malay and the Hokkien dialect of Chinese, she was able to read English by the time she was six. At ten her first poem was published in the *Malacca Times*. By eleven she knew she wanted to be a poet. She earned her BA from the University of Malaya and her PhD from Brandeis University. Lim considers herself primarily a poet, although she has written books of short stories, criticism, three novels, and a memoir. Her debut collection, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, won the Commonwealth poetry prize, a first for a woman or a person from Asia. Her other collections include *Ars Poetica for the Day*, *The Irreversible Sun*, *Do You Live In?*, and *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems*. Her many awards and honors include a Fulbright Distinguished Lecturer Award, two American Book Awards, and the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States Lifetime Achievement Award and the Feminist Press Lifetime Achievement Award. Lim was a professor of English and a chair of the Women's Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She retired in 2012 after more than two decades of service to the school.

The event was conducted on Crowdcast during a very sultry late-summer evening in California. After her poetry reading Dr. Lim participated in an interview with the editor of AALDP.

AALDP: It's such a treat to have you here. I'm not telling you anything that you don't know, but for the benefit of the audience, I want to say how much, what a profound impact you've had as a teacher, as a scholar, on myself through my career. Not just in terms of my scholarship and teaching but in terms of mentoring. You've been my role model for how to mentor others.

Needless to say, I would not be doing what I do today without starting out in your class of Asian American literature in 1992—I'm not going to do the math—

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Shirley Lim: Thirty years ago!

AALDP: In the preface to your new collection, *In Praise of Limes*, Dana Gioa notes that "in the specialist world of the university, you can only be known for one thing," and because you have become a major voice in Asian American feminist studies, your work as a creative writer was marginalized. You have been a very successful scholar, memoirist, novelist, and poet. How do you think of yourself, and how do you define yourself now that you have retired from UC Santa Barbara?

SL: I began as a poet. I wrote my first poem when I was nine or younger and had my first poem published when I was ten. As we age, we return to our roots, right? Leaves don't fall far from their roots, and I haven't fallen far from my roots. But, above all, I think of myself as a writer. For me, academic writing was a haul; all that research, the citations. I hated doing footnotes; it just drove me crazy. But it's still a craft; it's still writing. I tell my graduate students, my undergraduates, writing a paper is a craft. There are conventions you can learn and do well. I think of myself as a writer above all. I told the CSUSJ group I met at 4:00 p.m. about a dean who wanted to recruit me very badly, who invited me to his university to give a talk. He said to me, "You know, Shirley, writing in all those different genres, you're a jack of all trades and master of none." Did I accept his job offer? Although he wanted to recruit me, he believed I should have specialized.

AALDP: One thing I keep in my office is this picture of you and me with Jade Snow Wong. A friend had given me a frame with a quote from Maya Angelou: "Rainbows are people whose lives are bright shining examples for others." You're the only one I could fit in that frame. So I keep that—

SL: It was Jade Snow Wong?

AALDP: Yes, it was in her pottery shop. This was two years before she passed—so that tells you how old the photograph is. I have a picture of my husband and Toni Morrison that lean against it, and these are all my loves right there: literature and my family.

I was wondering—I've always kind of known that poetry was your true identity. I knew that, particularly when we were hosting writers from other countries, because, depending on what continent we're on, how people see you—your definition—changes. I remember a conference at Santa Clara University where you hosted a bunch of Singapore poets, and they treated you as their national treasure, the writer, while your many students think of you as Professor Lim. It was interesting to see these different hats you wear. But as a student working with you, you never made us feel like "Oh, this is just my day job," or "This is just part of what I do." I felt you poured everything into all your different identities. That has always been something I really admired in you.

I'm wondering, when you're working on your creative writing, is it possible to leave the role of the scholar, or do you hear multiple voices at one time when you're writing?

SL: I do shed the scholar voice because, for me, the kind of scholarship that gets published nowadays is not always a pleasure to read. Some research papers are full of theoretical terms. The sentences are long and cumbersome, and they digress, and one has to plow through endnotes and appendixes. For me, such "stylistics" undermine the pleasure of the work for the reader. However, I do try in my prose not to write as a poet. Any editor would tell you that poetry—unless it's a poem novel—will kill the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*—a dated text by now—is like the Bible for me. The Bible is ancient and is good enough to take out every day. Why not take out Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*?

AALDP: I agree with you on Bakhtin. We got to talk a little bit before this interview about the impact of the pandemic on you. What has been its impact on you as a writer? I personally wanted to hide under my bed, but for many creative people I know it has either been a dearth of creativity or it's been this fluorescence. I'm wondering—obviously you have this new collection—how did it feel? Did it allow you more time with your thoughts, or was it jarring?

SL: What affected me more than the pandemic was my retirement in 2012. I retired despite some colleagues' demurral because I wanted to write. Teaching, which I also love, took all the oxygen out of the room. I couldn't write when I was teaching. It's one or the other. I had to make a decision, and retirement was easy for me. I always had the callback to teach a course annually, but such teaching is voluntary.

What the pandemic did was to change my reading patterns. This change occurred recently. Because of the lockdown, I didn't socialize in people's homes. Instead, I socialized on Zoom. In this way, I joined the American Association of University Women, the Westchester New York branch, because one of my dearest friends who's six years older than me is a member. She invited me to do a reading for the poetry reading collective, all retired professional women, and I fell in love with the group. The women read the kinds of poets that normally I don't take the time for. For example, the last poet we discussed was Ada Limón, the new Library of Congress poet. She is the second Hispanic and the first Hispanic woman selected for the honor. I wouldn't have read her poems on my own. She doesn't write poems the way I do, and I learned a lot from listening to the women discuss her work. We also read a poet I had wanted to read deeply, Szymborska, who won the Nobel Prize a number of years ago. When I told the poetry reading group, you should read Szymborska, I was able to get into her work very deeply. We meet on Zoom once a month for about two and a half hours; we read poetry not to publish, not to teach it, but because we love it. That's the best way to be in a book club. I learn so much from these women.

I also became acquainted with Carl Jenkins, an online poetry lover, who posts poems almost weekly, by poets whom I usually had disdained. But because Carl posts their poems and comments on what he sees in them, I have opened my mind to their texts. At first I thought Carl was a graduate student trying to get a university job. I tried to mentor him, emailing him messages like, "Have you thought of putting this on your résumé? Maybe you could teach in a community college as you are so active online?"

Finally, he wrote, "I thought you knew that I'm a retired corporate lawyer," adding, "I never took literature classes when I was in the university except one reading course. When I retired, I just fell in love with poetry. And I read and now I post every week some poet that I like."

AALDP: This week I assigned my own students two of your poems, "Learning to Love America" from your 1998 collection and "Things That Make Me Happy" from *In Praise of Limes*. My students were particularly intrigued by the shift in tone at the end of "Things That Make Me Happy." Would you read it for us, and then we can talk about it?

SL: Yes, this is where Szymborska comes in.

Things That Make Me Happy

That I rise at 3 a.m. to write.
That everywhere is full of poems,
not just in America.

That I am reading Wisława Szymborska.
That there are more of her poems
I have not read and will read.

That the women who gifted me
spite to keep their hate burning
are still alive to keep me warm.

That tomorrow is always a cliché,
a new page to be messed up, scrawled
with passing moments, and moments

can be stopped on a page to stand still.
That there are brothers to love, husband,
son, and strangers who reappear

to take on the name of family.
That there are worse times. That history
proves the worst we do to each other

will not destroy love for each other
in other times and other places.
That there is good coffee at breakfast

and good bread, and they will do for walking
in a city not yet destroyed.
That in the present drought and coming

great hatred, there will be mornings when
you cannot sleep but will count syllables
beyond malice to a place like secure.

When I can't sleep, I get up to write poetry. Or I lie in bed and think of the poem I've just written, and revise the scansion. I just wrote the stanza. Does it scan well? And I count the syllables because I do a lot of syllabic counting.

AALDP: You write from "the present drought and coming / great hatred, there will be mornings when / you cannot sleep." Those lines stuck with me because I felt they summed up a lot of my worries in the last couple of years, and why it is difficult to sleep: both thinking about climate change and how that might lead to greater climate migration and how we already have a lot of anti-immigrant feeling, and the pandemic has brought on—highlighted—so much anti-Asian violence and anti-immigrant violence in general. But my students also pointed out this kind of shift in tone in an earlier passage, "history / proves the worst we do to each other / will not destroy love for each other." That seems a very hopeful part, but then followed by a very ominous moment. I wonder, when you closed your reading with the final poem in the collection, how do you see the role of art? Is it to give us hope? Is it to warn us? Where do you feel your role as a poet lies?

SL: I think that we humans, all of us, poets, activists, teachers, mothers, children, young children particularly, teenagers particularly, because it's their futures, have to be hopeful. My future is almost over. But for your son, Harper, his future lies ahead. Harper has another fifty years to catch up with me, fifty more years. His future and horizon lie ahead. Harper should be ringing the alarm bell, not just me. It's not up to just poets but to every conscious American to say, "Here's the alarm bell." Let's not have air con. Let's open the windows, use fans. My husband tells me fans use very little electricity. Or stay hot. Don't take the car. I walk three and a half miles to Trader Joe's to shop, back and forth. That's a lot of walking for someone my age. But it's going to help save Harper half a day in his life maybe. We all need to sound the alarm; all of us need to be activists, even if the only thing we can do is to write a check. The simplest thing to do is to write a check. But also march, write letters to the editor, share articles. I'm always posting on Facebook articles from the *Atlantic* that are excellent. So yeah, it's not the job of just a poet like me.

AALDP: You've always written about the natural world. In "Learning to Love America," you talk about tasting fresh artichokes. But in this collection, not only the titular limes but so many of the poems lean into nature, especially the tangible natural world. I think particularly of such details in "Gopher Stones," about the stones the speaker takes home to use to make drainage in her herb pots. I love that detail. Do you feel your recent work has moved more into nature, or do you feel like this is part of a longer trajectory of your œuvre?

SL: My first book, *Crossing the Peninsula*, is full of details from nature situated in Malaysia. I wrote many poems when I was in Singapore, some, for example, about the way the sun spins and other particulars. When I was in Hong Kong, I wrote very little about nature because Hong Kong is such a built city; I wrote poems about shopping

malls, about buses and crowded streets. I tend to write where I'm at. But when I'm happiest—I do love, love, love Hong Kong—but when I'm happiest is where I'm living now, where nature is all around me. The Japanese have a term, *shinrin-yoku*, which means "forest bathing," to immerse yourself in a natural environment. We humans evolved from a core attuned to nature. Even in the city. New Yorkers love Central Park. In their little apartments, they buy potted plants for their apartment windows. Charles Bukowski wrote, "the only things I remember about / New York City / in the summer …. on many / of the window sills/sit pots of geraniums" ("all that"). I think practically every poet will have some poems where nature comes in.

AALDP: Sure. Obviously, we're in a post-Romantic era. In fact, I don't know if we ever left the Romantic era. I guess I really appreciate this collection partly because as a Californian and dealing with fire and drought and so on, I appreciate how many of the poems evoke the feeling of being in the midst of such environmental phenomena.

I have one last question and then we're turning the interview over to the audience. I'm interested in the forms of your poetry and how form figures in your writing process. Do you begin with form, or do you begin with a concept or expression and then move into form?

SL: Form and meaning are one and the same. You begin with a concept, but somewhere along the way the form is there in the mix. You think, "Oh, I'm going to write a villanelle; I'm just going to fool around." And the villanelle will emerge and some kind of playful content is going to appear. You cannot split apart form and meaning.

As a child, I fell in love with Victorian poems—Tennyson's "Break, break, break / On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" That musicality, the forms—the Victorians were all formalists. I grew up as a formalist poet. When I went to Brandeis for graduate studies, J. V. Cunningham, an epigrammatist, was supportive of formalism. Now, at a different age, I love Szymborska's work—I read her poems in translation—although she doesn't write in strict form. There's an openness in her stylistics. It isn't like with the forms of the sonnet, the villanelle, the pantoum, there's often a click in the closure. You know the poem is finished because the form is done. But when you write like Szymborska or even Ada Limón, you don't know where the form is going. And at my age today, I love that. Maybe it's because I know where I'm going to go, right? As I'm headed towards a closure, I resist it—"Oh no, the river is still running!" It's not going to end in a desert. So yeah, I'm growing, and I'm changing, and I'm surprising myself.

The interviewer then took questions that the virtual audience posted in the Crowdcast question-and-answer section.

AALDP: One of the audience members, Jess Irish, says, "Thank you for being here tonight. My questions are about process. How does your experience of writing poetry differ from writing fiction? Does your initial inspiration have a different feeling when the end product is a poem than it does for a short story?"

SL: Yes, that's a question that many ask because they are working in their heads with these two genres. The first thing I wish to note is that many great novelists, many novelists, begin as poets. Don't worry if you're thinking of working in these two genres. But they entail very different processes for me. I tend to write pretty short poems. The longest might be two or three pages, and even then it's often broken into sections. The short story allows me to open up and cover more content. Many of my short stories tend to plot towards an epiphany. I work towards a kind of closure the way the formal poem has closure. As a writer I get restless, dissatisfied, that I'm writing in forms that seem to be headed towards epiphanies. Even the open-ended short story is itself an epiphany in that it has no ending. The novel, however, commits you, like Bakhtin would say, to a dialogic imagination with four or five characters. A character pops in halfway through a novel that you never expected to appear, or a character dies three-quarters of the way through whom you didn't expect to die. That ability to twist and turn, to structure a prequel in a novel, just not a sequel, within the same novel, that playfulness which is possible in long prose forms as opposed to the playfulness that has to do with diction and form in a poem: the genres offer different pleasures. If you like writing, you'll be very reluctant to give up any of those pleasures, no matter what a dean may say about being "a jack of all trades and master of none."

AALDP: Speaking of deans and the academy, I have a couple questions here related to that. Karen asks, "What would you say to people who say that majoring in literature and the humanities at university is impractical, an elite luxury only afforded to the wealthy?

SL: Well, unfortunately, I just read an article, I think in the *Atlantic*, about the majors undergraduates regret most.

AALDP: I saw that.

SL: Those are the humanities majors. This issue has to do with the shift toward STEM—Science, Technology, Economics and Math. Yet when you are applying for medical school, the doctors who are looking at your application love to get a reference from a humanities professor. They don't want references only from STEM faculty because they're looking for doctors who have empathy, what you call a bedside manner. Except it's more than bedside manner; it's the ability to listen and to interpret what you hear, and to have patience with your patients. I heard through the grapevine that Google wants employees also from the humanities. My son did computer science in Berkeley; he loves math; he's a cybersecurity person, but he grew up—and Noelle, you've met him—loving huge novels like *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. He was a postmodernist, devouring books I didn't enjoy. He wrote a play that was performed by the UCSB drama department.

AALDP: Oh, I remember.

Alina Astralskya asks, "Where did you graduate, and what did you major in? How was your college experience?"

SL: I graduated in 1967 with a BA at the University of Malaya, then a very colonial university. I was the first student in the history of Malaysia and Singapore higher education to get a first class in English literature, an event that was reported in the papers!

AALDP: Wow.

SL: The university's final exams were graded by Cambridge and Oxford professors, as the British didn't trust Malaysians and Singaporeans to uphold disciplinary standards. When I was awarded the first class, a British department lecturer called me in Penang from Kuala Lumpur to say, "I want to congratulate you. You got the first class." Then he added, "You know, Shirley, you can fool some of the people all of the time. You can fool all of the people some of the time. But you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

AALDP: What did he think that you had done to get it?

SL: He thought I didn't deserve the first class. This is what I face all my life as an academic and a writer. Maybe it's just my age, and you younger people have a slightly easier time, but I doubt that's completely true.

AALDP: His attitude reminds me a little bit of your poem, "Things That Make Me Happy," and the lines "that the women who gifted me / spite to keep their hate burning / are still alive to keep me warm." I wonder if that lecturer could be one of them.

SL: What hurts is that we women are supposed to be sisters, supportive of each other. But some of the people who've been meanest to me have been women. Is this also true for the women who are listening in, or does my truth come as a shock? You expect women friends to be supportive, but one will badmouth you. Or report something about you that's scandalous. Or share something you've asked her to keep a secret. You'd think I would wish they were dead. But I don't, because their meanness motivates me.

AALDP: Right, right. No, they are like that lecturer who undercut your achievement.

SL: I was always a reader and a writer, so he did not motivate me more, but his words were hurtful at a moment when I should have been happy.

AALDP: Some of the women's meanness might be their consciousness of being in an also-ran position. I think racism works that same way in this country, where someone feels put upon, and looks for an Other to position themselves higher than.

SL: These women—I have three in mind—I've been lucky I can think of only three, all from Malaysia and Singapore.

AALDP: Good, I don't know any of them then!

SL: Yeah. I have seldom been treated in a similar manner by American women of any ethnicity. I've been very, very lucky. *In Praise of Limes*, in fact, is dedicated to two of my American sisters, Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Nina Morgan.

AALDP: That's good to know. So, are there more questions we have from the audience? Karen says, "What a powerful answer to the question about what value the humanities, literature, and art bring to STEM and the world." Another says, "A wonderful, inspiring example of how life's work becomes much richer for immersing oneself in both the humanities and arts and STEM. Thank you." In response to what women do to each other to make themselves bigger and you smaller, Karen says, "Internalized patriarchy, like internalized racism and internalized homophobia, can produce the most hurtful attacks, as a fearful response to self-preservation and envy." I agree with that.

Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you. It's like talking to Taylor Swift—you have been so productive during the pandemic.

SL: I'm working on my twelfth collection of poems, most of them coming out of New York. I had four hundred poems that I organized into three collections. Those that covered Santa Barbara and California were collected in *In Praise of Limes*. I kept the New York poems for the twelfth collection, originally titled *Zigzagging*. But I have changed the title to *Dawns Tomorrow*, which will be launched in January 2024. *The Hudson Review* accepted my ekphrastic poem, which appears in this forthcoming collection, about my studying one of the Hudson River School of Painting masterpieces hung up at the New York Metropolitan Museum. The poem is about a painting that celebrates an American landscape and, in so doing, American genius. *The Hudson Review* wrote to say, "Thank you so much. We really love the poem; it's so vivid. But you have to assure us that this poem is not going to be published before December 2023. And if you have a problem ...." I can put the poem in now. That's the publishing world, right?