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The Diasporic Imagination

Asian-American Writing

Vol. 1 Interviews and Creative Writing

edited by

SOMDATTA MANDAL

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Locating Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview by Nina Morgan

Santa Barbara, California
April 25, 1999

NM: Your latest book of poetry, *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say*[1], ends with a group of poems that locate you in California and in the process of "learning to love America." What are the lessons of these kinds of locations, of locating as an act?

SL: That's a good question. There are a number of aspects to the act of locating. The first is will. You have to *will* yourself, willfully identify yourself in a way that has the power of agency. But that raises problems. Readers can read this willfulness as an absence of spontaneity because location is deliberate and a deliberative process of identification. Many of us still tend to theorize or under-theorize identity as a non-constructed *essence*. At the same time, locating oneself may lie outside of will if one accepts one's pre-constructed location. It could be an act of recognition, acknowledging where one finds oneself. Are acts of recognition acts of agency? I don't believe they are simply that, but they can lead to later action that can lead to acts of power.

NM: What are, in your academic work, the useful theoretical frameworks, the useful terms in analyzing cultural production?

SL: It's hard to put both my creative and my academic hats on simultaneously. Modern cultural production—television, other media, the World Wide Web—are creating new processes of learning and aesthetics. I'll just talk about literature. Among some of the frames that one deploys is the frame

of evaluation. How does one evaluate what is given in a book—fiction, poetry—that has a claim to a certain kind of status? What is the conceptual framework? We all have some evaluative reference. Postmodern critics, the general reader, the reviewers for *The New York Times* share different frames. There are shared beliefs on what deserves that claim. With a novel, there are attributes of style, qualities of simulacra. Whether it is the conventional notion of realism or the newer notion of cultural signifiers, there is a shared belief that these texts matter; they tell us about the culture we live in, or they do something with language that is innovative, exciting. In an act of evaluation, we ask, what matters? What does this book signify? In what ways does it signify? For me, language matters. Here, I'm talking about English. The shape of the sentence, the vocabulary, the rhythm of the syntax, the precision of the language choice, sequential arrangement, wit. I do not like only one kind of writing; I like a range of styles. Language is not separable from style or rhetoric or structure. Structure is not separate from thematics or from that old-fashioned word, content. The first thing that grabs me about a work is its use of language. If the work is awkward or dull, even if it treats important political issues, I find it hard to re-read that work with pleasure.

NM: I want to ask you about theory and your connection with theory because you are very much a self-conscious writer. For a larger audience, what are the theoretical questions that need to be asked today with regard to literature?

SL: What are the questions that need to be asked and by whom about literature? For whom? If you are a book reviewer, it's pretty standard: What is this book about? Why does it deserve reviewing? What makes it better than those other books? What has this writer done in the past, and how does this continue or develop or change the trajectory of this writer? What is its contribution to the tradition that the reviewer has set it in? Reviewers have standard questions to cover in conventional book reviews. If you are looking at a text in terms of the larger, philosophical issues of lan-

guage, you have to ask different questions. If you are looking at the text for more specific socio-linguistic issues, how is English used in this text? What does the writer do with English that will tell us something about the pluralisation of identity? About the ways in which globalization has now effected these kinds of societies in the way language comes to be imaged differently? That is, there are different questions depending on *for whom* and *for what* that reading is all about.

NM: So, for an Asian American who has written an autobiography, for the theoretical discourse that is surrounding Shirley Lim's work—the postcolonial questions—

SL: Oh dear. [*laughter*]. What are the important questions to ask while one is reading my memoir? Is that what you are saying?

NM: Yes.

SL: To use that word locations that you had used earlier, it depends what location the reader is in. I had certain questions in mind when I was writing the memoir. One major question was, what kind of memoir did I wish to write? Did I want it to be an autobiography? For example, I was very aware and I was anxious that the memoir would conclude as a story of survival and triumph. Unfortunately, it has been read and reviewed as such. I don't like that, but what can I do? But I was conscious of that problem, and I tried to avoid it. Thus, I was reluctant to write the American part where the success and triumph appear, but my publisher insisted I write the second half of the life story.

NM: Is this a personal response to success and triumph? Or is this a concern that you have about the genre of autobiography—an American story of success and triumph?

SL: My ambivalence was not personal; it was a writer's response. It wasn't the book that I wanted to write; I felt that I had not thought enough about issues of success. I did not believe that I had understood the whole complexity, the complication of the problem that accompanies what people think of as a narrative of success. I could examine that problem in a critical manner, but I couldn't write it in my memoir. I don't think that my memoir in the second half succeeds

in bringing up this complexity, the problematizing of what *seems* to be superficially and really more fundamentally also a trajectory of success in the United States. It is also the narrative that is most attractive and appealing to American readers who like it that the memoir offers this uplifting, affirmative American identity at the end.

NM: What part of you contends that your story, on a human level, *isn't* uplifting, inspiring?

SL: The part of me that says that my story is not my story alone. An individual's story "testifies" to an experience, *if* (as frequently happens) it is taken as an ethnic American narrative that represents the story of an entire community. To read the memoir as a triumphal narrative is to distort what it is supposed to represent. This memoir is not so representative. It may be accurate, in some manner, to my personal, individual life, but what I am questioning is how much an individual personal life should be taken as representative. I would write it differently now in that I would weave in other materials. Perhaps I'll succeed in my novel because I can do more in a novel. I can take what seems to be success and show its shadow. This success may not be what it seems to be because there are other stories not told, the stories of the costs and losses in the very same story.

NM: I think the costs and the losses, however, from the readers' point of view, are always present in your work.

SL: Ah, thank you.

NM: For example, the wonderful poem about your father's picture in your wallet ["Father in China"] is always a moving poem because the truth of the matter is very clear and very painful: the loss is very real.

SL: And then you have the credit card next to that picture.

NM: Right.

SL: So you have the gain of the credit card—

NM: —and the bank accounts. But the distance and the time and the familial connections, all those great costs of what you trade are, I think, clear and powerful, and it's interesting that you fear that readers will not hear that or see that in your writing.

SL: I believe some readers do. Despite that, I think many readers will see the early losses, but later may read the conclusion as a celebration: "Aha! You've come through!"

NM: You have "overcome." [*laughter*]

SL: That's right. [*laughter*]

NM: The next question of how you want to be read by others is probably a hard one for a writer to respond to, but it's a necessary question because under the strains of publishing, course assignments, book choices, the decision to label you—or put you in certain camps—is an important one. Are you "all" Asian American writer?

SL: [*laughter*].

NM: Are you "the Voice of the Commonwealth," as you have been called?

SL: [*laughter*]

NM: A woman writer?

SL: I have a standard answer to that question, and it's a facile, not a serious, answer. I don't care what I am called as long as I am read. It's true, to get back to your question of location, that I have *re*located myself. When I was much younger, I had wanted to be a *Malaysian* writer, a *great* Malaysian writer. I don't think I will ever be seen as *the* Malaysian writer anymore, unless politics change in Malaysia. There is some grudging acceptance that I'm a writer who is from Malaysia. A number of Malaysians of Chinese descent are proud of me. I receive wonderful letters. They say I speak to them as Malaysians who are outside the country already or who feel they need to live outside the country. Sometimes I play with locating myself as a diasporic Malaysian or Asian writer. But when my son was born, I immediately saw that I needed to make the connection to this country. It was pure, willed sentiment. I know that's an oxymoron. But I felt a strong, maternal bond with my son, and I realized that this maternal bond could only be politically secured were I also politically secured as a *citizen* in the United States because my son was born an American citizen. When I became naturalized, I felt a strong sentiment of maternality, and out of that sentiment, I willed

the sentiment of citizenship.

NM: Your attachment to place is connected to the maternal?

SL: Very important. My strongest attachment to an American place has come in California—very recently. I came to the United States in 1969. I think this is probably a pretty common, if not universal position for recent entries in the United States: you feel dislocated. There may be some who feel immediately at home, but that was not true for me. I continuously felt out of place, no matter where I went. Even in Santa Barbara, I occasionally feel out of places at some points. For example, at the recent conference [Women Transforming the Public: An International Conference, April 23-25, 1999, University of California, Santa Barbara], I attended a session on feminist political action committees, featuring the Santa Barbara Women's Political Committee. All of the speakers were white women. One of them told about coming to Santa Barbara five years ago, receiving immediate outreach from the committee and feeling welcomed into the community. Listening to them talk about working together politically, I grew angry. I was angry then because I have lived in Santa Barbara for ten years, and I have never received such a welcome from these same women. Now, why should I expect the same outreach from this women's political action committee? I don't, except for the fact that these speakers used the word "feminist" to describe their work. I was outraged. If they had said, "white women's action committee" I would have accepted it, but they said they were feminist Santa Barbarans. I expressed myself with some anger, and they were defensive, but I thought it was a useful discussion.

NM: Because you are the Chair of Women's Studies, were your feelings in part generated from a sense that you want them to know that you exist?

SL: Actually, I don't care that they don't know that I exist, but I don't want them to claim the word "feminist" uncritically. To me, that's false consciousness. At least if they wish to claim the word feminist, then I'm going to question them on their use of the word. I recognize that such "feminists"

are limited, that they can only do what they can do, that they are trying their best to improve the world and to push progressive democratic ideals. At the same time, I want to push them further. That's the dilemma for people of color: we recognize good will, but we also recognize when good will is blind and does not recognize when it does not extend to certain groups.

NM: Inhabiting this place that you inhabit right now, you are showing in your writing a response to the vegetation, the color of the pink underside of rosemary as you follow Neruda—

SL: The landscape of California.

NM: If there are some feminists, as we've just now discovered, who have not "seen" you, walking along with Neruda—

SL: Thank you. [*laughter*]

NM: What is your claim to this space now?

SL: It's imaginative. Benedict Anderson was one of the first to use the term "imagined communities." Salman Rushdie then wrote a series of essays called *Imaginary Homelands*[2]. The first inhabitation takes place in the imagination. In *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare noted that. When you are born into this space, it enters into your imagination in infancy. As an adult, to return to what I was saying earlier, such claims entail a certain willfulness, a self-consciousness; that is, a self-reflexivity. I'm claiming this space through the imagination, and that's why it's important for me to write those poems about California.

NM: Does that mean you've left the imaginative space of a poem like "Pantoun for Chinese Women"?

SL: Yes and no. In the lecture I'm writing for MIT [Massachu-setts Institute of Technology], I talk about inhabiting more than one cultural world, sometimes almost simultaneously—it's a freaky place to be in. The act of bridging seems to imply a progression: you start on one bank and walk across a bridge to get to the other bank. This is not what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about the act of bridging. I'm talking about being in an intersectional space where you could be flashing in and out, from one to the other. A number of

people inhabit those kinds of conditions. These conditions can only be analyzed as a kind of phenomenology. To be in a very American space and then flash to another space—that happens frequently because I travel a lot to Asia. I hop back and forth across the Pacific. If I wanted to, I could be back in Asia, in my hometown, in two days. The experience is of continuous geographical movement. This simultaneity of experience can perhaps be best explained through a phenomenology of language.

NM: It does seem to be a kind of modern condition—that simultaneous existence that we are living at all times in all places, somehow—

SL: —or more than one, anyway.

NM: Five years ago, we were talking about that condition as "fragmentation." But you're talking about it as something very different.

SL: We can't talk about it as fragmentation anymore because too many people do it all the time. If you have an American who's a lawyer, an international lawyer, she is bobbing back and forth across the Atlantic, with her laptop. If she is based in New York, she will carry with her the notion of her identity as a New Yorker, but let's say her company wants her to keep an apartment in London—to work three months in London, three months in New York, and if she accepts that assignment, she will be going back and forth each time. She gets up in the morning when she's tired, goes out and says, "Oh, is this a London cab or a New York taxi?" I don't see that as fragmentation. It means that in fact our sense of ourselves and where we inhabit gets stretched differently, becomes elastic in different kinds of ways. Someone might say that this woman about to have a nervous breakdown or suffer a schizophrenic break. All this is too much for her to handle. Or that she is juggling too many balls in the air. But now, we say, "Okay, this is the way it is; this is how I live. How do I arrange my life?" You accept it—and some people enjoy it.

NM: Have you come up with a metaphor for this phenomenon? For this sentiment?

SL: This phenomenon is not limited to my experience. A Chinese American novel written by Lin Tai-Yee, *The Eavesdropper* was published in the early 1950s. Lin wrote about a male character who had come from China to New York, and she described his feelings of geographical disorientation as a "shuttling." Today we have air shuttles. We don't have to book a ticket. You can get to the airport in Washington D.C., put in your credit card and get on board the shuttle to New York or Boston. *The Eavesdropper* was written in the middle of the twentieth century about a Chinese from Shanghai who finds himself in Long Island. This was the imagined condition of the *emigre* or refugee. Lin had already used the word "shuttling" in the 1950s, and I do not have to invent it. Our recognition and perhaps our acceptance of this shuttling is more pervasive now. We call the character a shuttler, instead of a migrant or a traveler, but that's not my term.

NM: Right. Somebody else's term, but with the desire to understand a postcolonial identity—

SL: Or a certain kind of postcolonial identity. Some people might say that's a privileged identity. It's the frequent flyer, the shuttler, the person who gets all those frequent flier miles who shuttles back and forth whether as a lawyer from New York to London, or as an academic from Tokyo to San Francisco.

NM: Well, let's say that the lawyer is perhaps getting a little bit of the sensitivity—the effect—of the identity, of the existence, of the life of someone who is constantly negotiating multiple cultures or multiple imagined spaces. Apart from her rarefied existence—maybe we are not all doing that kind of shuttling all the time—but in light of that kind of existence, how do you think "culture" is effected by that simultaneity? Is it a pluralism that we accept?

SL: A term used for such simultaneity is "flow." We talk about the informational flow—we have the illusion that the flow on the internet is instant, but our message goes through a host or gateway that might hold it for three or four days. Still, there is a flow of information. With a couple of strokes of a key, we cause a capital flow. We could have a flow

of millions of dollars within a few minutes or from one bank to another; a flow which could destabilize an entire banking system. So, yes, the ways in which we are imagining and constructing through our imaginations such economic, social, political, and financial structures and at the same time placing them within a circuit of movement, this flow can produce instability and can destabilize. Not that such instability needs to be inherent, but is always potential, as we have seen with the Asian currency crisis.

NM: The "flow" sounds circular. Is it different from the "diaspora"?

SL: There are diasporas and diasporas. The original concept was of people who had to leave their homeland and couldn't return. The Jewish Diaspora was the originating paradigm in some ways: "Next year in Jerusalem." Now American Jews can return to Jerusalem tomorrow. But they don't. The Jewish Diaspora is no longer a diaspora once the homeland is open. It becomes a different thing: immigration. Diaspora does not always entail the notion of circularity; it does entail the notion of separation. Circularity of flow is in some ways a later twentieth-century concept; it comes with radio waves, airlines, the internet, the way that capital now works in a very abstract yet materially consequential manner. In the same ways as our systems, both global and national, have been changed, so our imaginations have been changed. We have not thought theoretically enough on this transformation; many of us passively accept such changes. The term cyborg is often used to denote that machines have become extensions of humans; and that we are also extensions of machines. But we have not pondered on the metaphysical and teleological transformations rising from the changes in the ways we communicate differently from the past.

NM: You seem to be pointing to a new problem for literary aesthetics and representation.

SL: Yes. My son likes postmodernist writing—the most recent stuff—stuff I can't read. He loves Thomas Pynchon and David Wallace Lodge. Were I to make a huge investment in time I could learn to enjoy postmodern writing, and I

should stretch myself. But aesthetically I have been shaped by a different cultural condition. My son is of the twenty-first century. The music and productions that excite him are in many ways beyond me. He has a facility and quickness and an enjoyment of these qualities. I also possess facility and quickness, but not in the same way. He has a digitalized consciousness. He can plug into the web and into all kinds of machines. He's comfortable with all of them all going on at the same time around him. I don't have this digitalized consciousness. I have a literary consciousness. There exists a tradition of American cultural production that exhibits that transformation of writing in response to new technologies. I believe English departments need to start teaching those literatures, but it won't be me.

NM: Are those literatures devoid of culture, of ethnicity?

SL: I can't answer your question until I have studied those literatures. I suspect that it isn't so. Just because postmodern writing has a different formation does not signify that crucial questions about politics, race, color, ethnicity and gender don't appear. They may appear in forms that are not so recognizable. We may need other interpreters. Someone who has read only Jane Austen's novels all her life may never understand Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*; cannot see it within the tradition of women's writing. She may find Lessing's novel too political, too prosy. I find Lessing a powerful writer. When people tell me, "You write well," I think of Lessing. When they say, "You're very modest," I think of Lessing, and then of course I have to be modest! [*laughter*]

NM: You are talking about all those difficulties of creation—of audience, of imagining—as not being something isolated in any way, shape, or form, but which creates the universe as much as it is created by the universe.

SL: Oh, absolutely.

NM: What are you on the verge of creating?

SL: For the first time in my life, I have received a real writer's residency. I've been awarded a month in a writer's colony on Whidbey Island off the coast of Seattle, Washington. I'm

going to write my second novel. Perhaps if I have the time I will write some short stories. Or I could write my second novel using the short story structure. I need a lot of space and time to do the research to write a novel.

NM: Is this a project you've been thinking about for a long time?

SL: Oh yes. I began this novel about four or five years ago. I seem to have a problem completing novels. I started my first novel in 1978 and I finished it a few months ago. This first novel fits into my career trajectory in terms of my interests in postcoloniality, in Asia, and women's issues. It comes out of the work I've been doing my entire life.

NM: If your first novel is located around postcoloniality and womanhood, what about the second project?

SL: The second novel is placed in California. It has to do with class, race, and gender. In California, I've been an academic woman, but this novel is not going to be about academic women I need to imagine what it's like to be an Asian American in California in a life that's not my life because my life is so academic. The novel will be about that life I don't have time to live.

NM: So just when you're at the point with being comfortable with locating your own life in California, you are going to imagine—

SL: Another life in California, but I can only do that once I've made this decision that I'm located in California. And that's what I'll be writing, I hope.

NOTES

1. Shirley Lim, *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (New Mexico: West End Press, 1998).
2. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992).