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## **Writing Diaspora on the Body: Embodied Memory and Relational Selfhood in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces***

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**Writing Diaspora on the Body:  
Embodied Memory and Relational Selfhood in  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces***

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## Introduction

In Malacca's humid afternoons, Malay, Hokkien, and English mingle noisily, thickening the air. A mother's silence and a father's violence enter the body with each breath of damp heat. In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, such sensory details no longer recede into background; they function as catalysts for the formation of subjectivity. They carry the imprint of colonial history, ethnic identity, and gendered experience, inscribing personal trajectories together with transregional histories upon the body. In this sense, "diaspora" is understood as a condition of subjectivity that unfolds on and through the body and within relations, rather than a mere label for population movement or identity.

In contemporary humanities and social sciences, "diaspora" has long expanded from a term tied to specific ethnonational histories into a general descriptor for cross-border mobility, multiple belongings, and complex identifications. Over the past three decades, scholarship has oscillated between typological frameworks, cultural approaches, and methodological reflection, while exposing several persistent problems: semantic expansion that dilutes analytic force; an emphasis on mobility and difference that risks romanticizing subjective experience; de-essentializing moves that do not necessarily address intersectional stratifications of gender, class, and legal status; and "decentering" narratives that often relapse into new forms of communitarianism and boundary-making. In response, the field has gradually shifted from defining diaspora to treating it as an analytic language and methodological frame. Yet without placing structural dimensions alongside an experiential anchor, the discussion is liable to slide once more into abstraction and semantic drift.

Accordingly, this article takes the body as an experiential anchor, shifting diaspora from an objectifying label to an operational methodological pathway. Building on Tölölyan's analysis of the tension between objective condition and subjective state,

and adopting Lily Cho's view of diaspora as a "condition of subjectivity," it grounds the theoretical tropes of spectrality, memory, and loss in bodily exposure and perception. That is, the body is not a private container but a site where external power and internal sensation are interwoven; here, unmourned losses and historical burdens leave analyzable traces. This point of entry also responds to the uneven development of embodiment-focused research within diaspora studies.

On this basis, the article takes Malaysian Chinese American writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* as its primary material (supplemented by her poetry and interviews). The aim is not to construct a generalizable model of diaspora, but to examine—beginning from the sensory scene—how diaspora, as a subjective condition, comes into being. Emerging from a multilingual, multiethnic colonial context, Lim writes across genres—poetry, fiction, memoir. Although she does not self-name "diaspora," her texts consistently register an "unstable sense of presence": a body not in the homeland, a language that is not the mother tongue, and memories long without a resting place. She states explicitly that the impulse behind the memoir is "to seize in prose those uncertain moments, yet certainly surviving as embodied traces" (2007, p. 26).

Accordingly, this study advances two interlinked questions:

- (1) How can diaspora be apprehended at the juncture of embodied experience and relationality, rather than remaining an abstract object-category or identity label?
- (2) In Lim's texts, how does writing function as a technique of listening—bringing embodied traces such as hunger, pain, and touch from somatic circuits into language and relational networks—in order to reposition the first person and to practice "home" as a capacity (moving as ability / home as practice)?

Methodologically, this study centers on close reading and narrative analysis, introducing embodied memory and embodied trace as its primary analytic tools: the former denotes mnemonic structures generated through body-world interaction that

can be reactivated in specific situations; the latter refers to the smallest identifiable sensory unit within the narrative. Full definitions and theoretical rationale are provided in Chapter 1, §1.3.

The thesis is organized as follows:

#### Chapter 1

Reconstructs the conceptual history and methodological trajectories of diaspora, tracing its expansion, revision, and critique, and articulates “diaspora as method” anchored in the body.

#### Chapter 2

Situates Lim’s transnational background and cross-genre/cross-cultural practice to show how the memoir becomes a lived site of diaspora, and establishes the analytic frame of “the body as bridge.”

#### Chapter 3

Moves into the experiential scene of the text to close-read three sensory circuits, demonstrating how involuntary returns sediment at the body–nervous-system level and organize the work’s affective logic and the emergence of subjectivity.

#### Chapter 4

Proposes two interlocking skill sets: the craft of writing (changing what/how is heard) and the craft of relation (women’s communities, neighborhood/civic practice, mother–child kinship) that together situate the “I” within responsive networks. Reinterprets home as practice / moving as ability, and shows how writing “reweaves the diasporic rope,” knotting inherited tethers to present propulsion into a new foothold.

## **Chapter 1**

### **A Spicy Name: The Knowledge Path of “Diaspora” from Term to Method**

As an important term in contemporary cultural and identity studies, diaspora in academic contexts has long exceeded its original etymological meaning. From a proper noun originally used to describe the dispersal of the Jewish people, it has, through historical evolution and scholarly redefinition, continually expanded until it became a general term describing various forms of transnational population movement. This extreme semantic expansion, as scholar Rogers Brubaker sharply points out, has led to the phenomenon of “‘Diaspora’ diaspora,” in which the meaning of the word “diaspora” is dispersed across semantic, conceptual, and disciplinary spaces. Therefore, the aim of this section is not to provide a final and universal definition of “diaspora,” but to trace its historical trajectory of conceptualization, presenting it as a contested and constantly reconstructed academic field, thereby selecting a cautious and analytically effective theoretical entry point for subsequent research.

This chapter will follow the developmental path of the concept, beginning with its etymology and pre-conceptual stage, tracing how diaspora gradually took shape within historical and intellectual contexts, and eventually emerged in the late twentieth century as an independent field of study. I will then outline the major theoretical divergences in its process of disciplinary institutionalization, particularly the tension between the typological approach and the cultural studies approach, as well as the subsequent critical reflections. By introducing the discussions of scholars such as Floya Anthias, Stéphane Dufoix, and Lily Cho, I will point out the multiple predicaments diaspora faces in contemporary contexts: the intertwining issues of semantic overextension, abstraction, and re-communitarization, which together make this term both indispensable and difficult to define with stability.

Finally, the analytical entry point proposed in this study is to take the body as the experiential anchor in response to the semantic overextension and methodological impasse in diaspora studies. This position no longer regards “diaspora” merely as a label for naming a certain group or type of experience, but understands it as an analytical path—a methodological perspective that begins from the site where embodied perception, exposure, and relationality are interwoven. This shift both acknowledges the materiality and institutional conditions of diaspora and refuses to fix it into a singular homeland narrative; it requires us to see migration and rupture not only as historical events within macro-structures but also as concrete experiences inscribed on the body. The body is both the site where external power operates and the vessel where memory and affect accumulate.

This approach provides a verifiable experiential entry point for understanding diaspora, and its analytical potential is most vividly manifested in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*: in her narrative, “diaspora” is a state of presence that is continually perceived and reconfigured by the body. This will serve as the point of departure for the following textual analysis, laying the theoretical background and methodological foundation for the study.

## **1.1 The Discursive Emergence of Diaspora: From Etymology to Discipline**

### Etymology and the Pre-conceptual Stage

Before becoming a concept in the social sciences, the term diaspora had already undergone a long and complex history of usage. Stéphane Dufoix (2016) points out that the term can be traced back to the Septuagint of the third century BCE, where it did not refer to a specific historical dispersal event, but rather to an eschatological theological vision imbued with the sense of divine punishment. From the Middle Ages to the early modern period, diaspora gradually detached from its Jewish context and was adopted by Christian communities to describe dispersed faith-based

collectives, also acquiring, in the context of evangelism, the meaning of an “organized network of scattered believers.” It was not until the early twentieth century that scholars such as Simon Dubnow first attempted to detach diaspora from the Jewish experience, expanding it to refer to a general ethnic phenomenon of “maintaining cultural ties while living in a different location,” thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent social science research. Thereafter, diaspora developed along diverse disciplinary trajectories: geographer Maximilien Sorre spatialized the concept; anthropologist Abner Cohen introduced the notion of “commercial networks”; and political scientists Kenneth Minogue and Anthony D. Smith incorporated it into the theoretical framework of “nationalism.”

In the 1960s, the term diaspora rose to prominence rapidly due to three major events: the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of 1964–65, which brought the notion of the “African Diaspora” into academic and political discourse for the first time; the passage of the Hart–Celler Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, which structurally opened the door for non-European immigrants to enter the United States; and the 1967 Six-Day War, which spurred an “ethnic re-diasporization,” motivating multiple groups—including Armenians, Greeks, and Chinese—to reorganize their diasporic identities through renewed transnational commitments.

Against this historical backdrop, diaspora acquired new vitality in the African American context: it was no longer merely a passive condition describing exile and suffering, but was transformed into an active naming strategy emphasizing racial solidarity, cultural revival, and global identification. During this period, diaspora became both a rallying cry within Black communities and a keyword in emerging disciplines such as Black Studies. The pursuit of “Black pride” and the desire to reconstruct buried histories ultimately contributed to the establishment of “Black Studies” as an academic discipline in U.S. universities in the late 1960s (see Rojas 2007). These intertwined social and political conjunctures propelled diaspora to a central position in both scholarly and social imaginaries.

## The Conceptual Formation and Disciplinary Institutionalization of Diaspora

Thus, although the academic use of diaspora can be traced back to the 1930s, it was not until the late 1970s that systematic efforts toward its definition and categorization truly began to emerge. Prior to that, most usages remained at a preconceptual stage—that is, while experiential descriptions and metaphorical applications existed, clear theoretical boundaries and consensus had yet to be established.

By the late twentieth century, diaspora studies gradually shifted from a marginalized and semantically loose usage to an institutionalized, interdisciplinary field of research. Dufoix (2016) points out that this process did not begin with the cumulative study of a particular group, but was instead organized through “the unifying force of a concept.” In the 1990s, with the rise of globalization, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies, diaspora was widely applied to describe ethnic mobility, identity reconstruction, and cultural connections beyond the nation-state. Key milestones included the founding of the academic journal *Diaspora* by Khachig Tölölyan in 1991, the publication of Robin Cohen’s *Global Diasporas* in 1997, and the release of the *Encyclopedia of Diasporas* (2005), all of which significantly enhanced the term’s legitimacy and stability within the academic system.

Cohen (2022) points out that one important marker of the renewed activation of the diaspora concept was the founding in 1991 of the academic journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, with Armenian American scholar Khachig Tölölyan as its editor-in-chief. In the inaugural issue of *Diaspora*, William Safran published a groundbreaking article that significantly advanced research in the field. Van Hear (1996), in *New Diasporas*, a book belonging to the same publication series as Cohen’s first edition, used the phrase “mass exodus” in his subtitle—an expression that already anticipated the large-scale population displacements of the contemporary era.

Indeed, the 1990s marked a peak period for the study of diaspora. Early systematic

efforts to define and categorize the concept were largely concentrated in this period. Scholars at the time were deeply influenced by the “prototypical experience” of the Jewish diaspora and sought to establish a set of universal analytical criteria by distilling its core characteristics. Among them, Safran’s (1991) contribution was especially notable: he proposed six criteria that have since been regarded as a foundational text for diaspora studies. Unlike Safran’s checklist-style definition, Cohen (2002) proposed a more inclusive typological framework, extending the concept to a wider range of non-prototypical groups. He divided diasporas into five main types: victim, labor, trade, imperial, and deterritorialized diasporas. This typology sought to capture the diversity of motivations behind the formation of diasporic groups, thereby avoiding the tendency to subsume all diasporic experiences under trauma or exile.

However, despite their pioneering significance, these early typological approaches were also subject to criticism for their inherent limitations. They often grounded diasporic identity in a “fixed, mythologized” homeland, exhibiting a clear “homeland-centrism” and “essentialist” tendency. Such an analytical path not only struggles to capture the cultural innovation and identity reconstruction of diasporic communities in their host societies, but also, due to its exclusivity, fails to accommodate groups that do not meet all the prescribed criteria.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the diaspora concept still holds undeniable significance. It not only connects historical experience with theoretical innovation, but also provides a shared problem space for anthropology, sociology, history, political science, and literary studies, making it a “methodological nodal word” with a high degree of interdisciplinary openness.

## **1.2 The Contested Trajectory of the Diaspora Concept—Semantic Crisis and Theoretical Revision**

### The Crisis of Semantic Overextension

As the concept of diaspora gained rapid academic traction and widespread circulation after the 1990s, its analytical efficacy faced unprecedented challenges. As early as 1995, Donald Akenson warned that the trend toward indiscriminate use of diaspora could “completely destroy its semantic boundaries,” reducing a term once laden with historical trauma and collective memory to “a vague synonym for any form of population movement,” and even turning it into a “linguistic weed.” Once diaspora can be applied to any group, at any time, in any condition of mobility, its critical force as a tool of social scientific analysis inevitably collapses. Evelyn Hu-DeHart likewise described this phenomenon as a “revival of identity essentialism,” in which diaspora is no longer employed to deconstruct fixed identities, but rather becomes a romanticized reproduction of “belonging,” “roots,” and “collectivity.”

It is precisely because of this trend toward conceptual overextension that, in order to maintain analytical rigor in research, it is necessary to clearly distinguish diaspora from closely related but conceptually distinct terms such as transnationalism and migration. First, migration is a broader concept describing the movement of populations, whether voluntary or forced, but it does not necessarily involve the collective identity or long-term connection to a homeland that is characteristic of diaspora. Diaspora, by contrast, refers to a specific form of “transnational community” whose members, through the experience of migration, develop a shared sense of identity and belonging, and maintain sustained connections with their homeland or with other diasporic communities. Therefore, not all migrant groups constitute diasporas; the term only gains analytical validity when a group meets the core elements of diaspora—collective memory, identity, and transnational ties.

Second, the terms diaspora and transnationalism are often used interchangeably in academic discourse, but they are not synonymous. Transnationalism is a broader concept referring to familial, social, cultural, or economic connections that transcend national borders, whereas diaspora can be understood as a specific form of transnational practice. In his work, Dufoix (2016) clarifies the boundaries between these terms through “semantic and theoretical discussions.” He critiques the tendency within the transnationalism literature to “go beyond the nation-state,” pointing out that diasporic communities maintain complex and often contradictory political relationships with nation-states. To more precisely describe these emerging political formations, he even proposes alternative terms such as trans-state and ultrastate. These concepts aim to address political spaces that exist both within and across national borders, such as those formed by groups that refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the current regime in their country of origin.

It was this very reflection on, and critique of, the above typological paradigms and the conceptual overuse of diaspora that prompted a profound shift in diaspora studies. Scholars gradually moved away from treating diaspora as a homogeneous, static entity and instead began to understand it as a dynamic, fluid social process. For example, James Clifford (1997) introduced the concept of “roots/routes,” offering a powerful challenge to traditional homeland-centrism. He argued that the essence of diaspora lies not only in attachment to the “roots” of a homeland, but also in the “routes” that traverse geographic boundaries, producing mobility, networks, and cultural hybridity. Rogers Brubaker (2005) also advanced a more systematic critique of the proliferation of the concept, advocating that diaspora should be understood as “postures, projects, and practices” rather than as a preexisting entity or demographic fact.

However, this “de-essentializing” theoretical approach itself also faces new challenges. Phil Cohen points out that although scholars such as Clifford, Appadurai, Rey Chow, Avtar Brah, Gilroy, Katharyne Mitchell, Khachig Tölölyan, and Robin

Cohen have advanced *diaspora* as a “de-centered identity” concept within the context of cultural studies—and have used its mobility, relationality, and difference to address the limitations of the typological approach—this very approach has its own theoretical difficulties. He criticizes that diaspora has become “one of the buzzwords of the postmodern age,” a “portmanteau word” applied indiscriminately to political exiles, economic migrants, White settlers, Black populations, and even intellectuals, thereby losing both its distinctiveness and critical edge (Cohen 1999, p. 7). Without the intervention of structural analysis, such a positive semantic turn may obscure the realities of migratory inequality and systemic exclusion.

In 1996, sociologist Floya Anthias published a critical article that systematically assessed efforts to conceptualize diaspora, marking the starting point of this critical trajectory. She noted that diaspora had already become “a mantra in the academy,” yet often failed to fulfill the analytical function it was supposed to have. She criticized diaspora theory for focusing too heavily on the cultural expressions of “origins,” “belonging,” and the “pain of dispersion,” while neglecting the underlying social structural conditions—particularly the roles of class, gender, and state mechanisms—in the formation of diasporic subjectivities.

Floya Anthias distinguished two main academic trajectories in the use of the diaspora concept: the typological path, represented by Robin Cohen, which treats diaspora as a “descriptive typological tool” emphasizing the identification and classification of its characteristics; and the cultural path, represented by James Clifford, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy, which regards diaspora as a social condition.

Anthias concludes that both approaches share a primordialist vision of ethnicity and are “incapable of treating the question of intersectionality”—that is, the importance for diaspora studies of social stratifications linked to class, gender, trans-ethnic alliances, and relations of power. She argues that only by taking into account the

intersecting effects of multiple factors of identification can the concept of diaspora truly constitute a “heuristic advance.”

Dufoix (2016) synthesizes the critiques of Akenson, Anthias, and Phil Cohen, identifying three main manifestations of the semantic crisis of the diaspora concept: first, “conceptual overinclusion,” in which diaspora is generalized to refer to any form of population movement, thereby losing its distinctiveness; second, “pansemism,” in which diaspora becomes a rhetorical signifier carrying emotional appeal rather than analytical function; and third, “simplification through overuse,” in which researchers either essentialize diaspora as a specific ethnicity, culture, or sense of belonging, or render it entirely fluid, thereby hollowing out its concrete historical, social, and political structures.

Although the three do not reach a consensus on whether the concept of diaspora should be abandoned, retained, or reconstructed, Dufoix (2016) points out that it is precisely these critical reflections that have provided the groundwork for subsequent theoretical renewal of the concept, pushing it toward a structural, intersectional, and critical conceptual turn.

### Theoretical Revisions of the Diaspora Concept

Against the backdrop outlined above, a group of scholars adopting a “regulatory” stance toward the concept of diaspora gradually emerged. They sought to preserve the analytical potential of the concept while addressing the problems of overgeneralization, functional weakening, and semantic blurring brought about by its theoretical expansion. This genealogy does not represent a unified camp, but rather a convergence of diverse theoretical positions and problematics, ranging from internal revisions within typological approaches to transformations at the methodological level.

The first category involves the self-narrowing of the typological approach and the establishment of safeguards. William Safran has consistently emphasized that the concept of diaspora should maintain its connection to the “prototypical experience,” particularly the historical trauma, homeland attachment, and political sentiments exemplified by the Jewish diaspora. He warns that if diaspora is used indiscriminately, it will, “like a rubber band,” lose its analytical tension (Safran 2004, p. 9). Although Robin Cohen proposed the more inclusive idea of the diasporic rope, he has likewise upheld the principle of “self-restraint,” stressing that the heuristic value of the diaspora concept depends on the limitation of its scope of application

If the typological approach seeks to stabilize the explanatory power of the diaspora concept through definitional criteria and classificatory systems, another response places greater emphasis on “vigilance in usage.” This perspective is represented by scholars such as Khachig Tölölyan and Dominique Schnapper, who, while acknowledging the heuristic value of diaspora in critiquing the nation-state and deconstructing the orthodoxies of identity, also caution against its tendency toward overgeneralization within “humanist” theoretical frameworks—namely, an excessive focus on subjective perception and cultural trauma, while overlooking diaspora as a concrete social structure and a form of institutionalized network (Dufoux 2016, p. 424).

In his 1996 reflection, Tölölyan argued that the concept of diaspora had become “unbalanced in the poststructuralist context,” with research increasingly focused on identity, subjectivity, and the politics of boundaries, at the expense of an understanding of the historical experience and organizational structures of diasporas. He maintained that, while preserving openness, it is necessary to return to the dual nature of diaspora as a concrete social formation and an institutional structure, so as to prevent it from degenerating into an overly symbolized “universal critical sign” (Tölölyan 1996).

By contrast, Schnapper (2008) places greater emphasis on the “neutrality” and “conditionality” of diaspora usage. She argues that the concept retains its analytical validity only when a diasporic group, while remaining in a dispersed condition, continues to maintain some form of transnational institutionalized ties—whether objective or symbolic. Otherwise, its indiscriminate use risks blurring the distinction between diaspora and ordinary ethnic communities or migrant groups, and may even weaken its theoretical potential to reveal the reconfiguration of modern forms of sovereignty. The core feature of this type of response lies not in rejecting the conceptual efficacy of diaspora, but in advocating a critical awareness of its semantic boundaries and historical referents (Dufoix 2016, p. 425).

As one of the defenders of the diaspora concept, historian Kim D. Butler represents a form of “critique from within.” She does not deny the theoretical value of diaspora, but raises operational concerns about the typological paradigm established by Safran and Cohen. Butler argues that the recent “sexiness” of the discourse in academia has led many scholars from other fields to “package their own research as diaspora studies” in order to reap theoretical dividends, causing the field to become increasingly inflated in definition and more ambiguous in practice (Dufoix 2016, 267). In response, she advocates for the establishment of an “epistemology of diaspora studies” with methodological guidance to counter the erosion of theoretical boundaries brought about by its popularization. Unlike Safran’s elaborate six criteria or Cohen’s multi-type classification, Butler proposes a more concise “checklist” standard, seeking to preserve the clarity and applicability of diaspora as an analytical tool. This model emphasizes that diaspora is neither an ethnic identity nor equivalent to any form of mobility, but should be understood as “a framework for the study of a specific process of community formation” (Butler 2001, cited in Dufoix 2016, p. 268).

If Butler’s critique aims to refine the operational boundaries of the diaspora concept, Yasemin Soysal’s questioning strikes more fundamentally at its very theoretical foundations. As one of the earliest scholars to introduce the notion of “postnational

citizenship,” Soysal (1994) challenges the conventional understanding of diaspora as deeply embedded within the framework of the nation-state. She argues that mainstream diaspora theories—whether the classificatory systems constructed by Cohen, Van Hear, and others, or the continued “homeland–identity–belonging” tripartite narrative—unwittingly reproduce the nation-state model, with their theoretical assumptions still grounded in identity construction based on “state,” “nation,” and “sense of belonging” as fundamental units (Dufoix 2016, 268). Such a nation-state-referenced view of diaspora, she contends, is unable to adequately describe the rapid reconfiguration of ethnic structures in Western societies, nor to address the multiple states of belonging manifested by individuals in transnational mobility (Dufoix 2016, p. 269).

Furthermore, Soysal (2000) criticizes the diaspora concept for being rooted in “naturalizing metaphors,” such as “roots,” “kinship,” and “soil.” These images turn diaspora into a “trope for nostalgia,” reinforcing a temporal understanding of identity that treats it as a stable entity to be remembered and invoked, rather than as an ongoing, intersecting process.

Yet Soysal’s de-essentializing attempt can hardly avoid re-invoking the imagined community of an ethnic group, thereby falling into a new narrative of imagined belonging. For example, Aihwa Ong points out that while the “denationalizing” potential of diaspora is worth affirming, in practice it easily slips into tacitly endorsing and reproducing the unity of “Chineseness” (Ong 2003, p. 87). Regardless of how thoroughly it is deconstructed, the use of diaspora faces a paradox: in breaking national boundaries, it often simultaneously delineates new internal boundaries, thereby re-communitarizing diaspora itself. In other words, such a decentered imagination may in fact generate a new “imaginary community,” whose sense of boundaries and mechanisms of belonging are no weaker than those of the nation-state. As Dufoix (2016) summarizes, the transboundary practices of diaspora come “at the cost of re-bordering beyond the borders,” rendering diaspora itself a bounded field.

It can be seen that diaspora in the contemporary context is marked by an intersection of multiple tensions: the semantic overextension and expansion have weakened its analytical efficacy; the emphasis on mobility and difference often lapses into a romanticization of subjective experience. At the same time, the revisions advanced by typological and critical approaches, while aiming to avoid essentialism, have struggled to fully illuminate intersectional differentiations such as gender, class, and legal status. Efforts toward decentering, in turn, frequently slide in practice into new forms of communitarization and boundary reconfiguration. These tensions intersect and overlap across different contexts, rendering the discussion of diaspora all the more complex.

Against this backdrop, an increasing number of scholars have sought to move beyond the classic question of “how to define diaspora,” shifting their focus toward its potential as an analytical language and methodological framework. As Robin Cohen candidly admits: “Yet, as we have acknowledged, our wriggling semantic fish is difficult to hook, net and fillet. The lateral explosions of meaning of the word, covering many aspects of belonging, identity and solidarity, have proved difficult to capture” (Cohen and Fischer 2019). In their view, the three cornerstones of traditional definitions—diaspora dispersion, homeland orientation, and a shared group identity—are “at best, a simplification, a starting point,” and cannot account for the complex and diverse generative logics of diaspora. From a constructivist perspective, a new generation of scholars has gradually broken away from established frameworks, no longer fixating on who counts as diaspora or to whom it belongs.

In his genealogical account of the diaspora concept, Dufoix (2016) points out that the term is no longer merely a naming tool for a particular type of historical experience, but has gradually evolved into a theoretical metaphor for revealing the logic of contemporary identity politics, the reconfiguration of the global order, and the formation of relational subjectivities. Particularly in the context of the “Black diaspora,” diaspora has become a key term for resisting Western-centric narratives

and activating the historical memory of ethnic groups, thereby generating some of the most intense debates over its semantics and methodology. Diaspora has been reinterpreted as a fluid, conflictual, and differentiated positional signifier that not only articulates difference, but also foregrounds the tensions between differences. As Brent Hayes Edwards emphasizes, diaspora is “not about sameness—not even a ‘changing same’—but about difference” (Edwards 2001, p. 46). Samir Dayal similarly argues that diaspora offers a subjective position of non-singular identity—less “both/and” than “neither/nor” (Dayal 1996, p. 51). Katharyne Mitchell also regards diaspora, hybridity, and creolisation as “subversive sites” that disrupt the binary structures of the modern nation-state, bearing the subjective sensibilities and experiential fields of “unstable states of belonging” (Mitchell 1997, p. 533).

In this sense, the analytical significance of diaspora does not lie in whether it can accurately “name” a particular group or experience, but in how it operates as a semantic field constantly under contestation, revealing the tensions of subject formation through processes of translation, displacement, and reconstruction. What it exposes is the continual fragmentation and regeneration of individuals and groups in conditions of positional uncertainty. Yet, as the trajectory of diaspora studies shows, such an analytical approach—if lacking concrete experiential anchors—may once again risk falling into abstraction and semantic overextension.

### **1.3 The Turn to the Body**

#### From Objectification to Subjectivity

Khachig Tölölyan (2012) analyzes this dilemma as a tension between the “objective existence” and the “subjective condition” of diaspora. He cites Lily Cho’s (2007) argument that “diaspora is first and foremost a condition of subjectivity, rather than an object of analysis,” acknowledging the crucial role of subjective memory in shaping diasporic subjectivity. At the same time, he cautions that an exclusive focus on

subjective experience risks romanticizing transnationalism; thus, the “object of analysis” perspective cannot be entirely abandoned.

In fact, Cho’s argument does not deny the materiality of diaspora; rather, she critiques the excessive objectification that characterised diaspora studies in the 1990s and 2000s. She contends that scholarship of this period often treated diaspora as an objectified unit of analysis, privileging statistical data, political effects, or transnational structures, while frequently obscuring its affective, spectral, and historically burdened dimensions.

Against this backdrop, Lily Cho proposes a theoretical turn in diaspora studies that departs from traditional objectifying approaches. She argues that diaspora should be understood first and foremost as a condition of subjectivity, rather than simply an object of analysis. For Cho, diasporic subject formation is not solely the outcome of quantifiable socio-historical processes, but is marked by the long genealogies of displacement and dispossession. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of subject formation and Marianne Hirsch’s framework of postmemory, Cho emphasises that diasporic experience is rooted in deep racial memory and in the spectrality of sorrow. Such experience manifests both as mourning for an unspeakable loss and as a yearning for possibilities yet to come.

Unlike the binary oppositions common to conventional trauma narratives—perpetrator/victim, wound/healing—Cho invokes the notion of “obscure miracles of connection” to suggest that diaspora is not merely the continuation of a wound, but also a generative site for new forms of relationality and identity. Building further on Butler’s account of subjectivity, she underscores that subject formation is never self-sufficient, but is continually produced through the dual processes of being called into being by, and internalising, power. For the diasporic subject, this compelled turn does not take place within a stable and continuous sense of belonging, but unfolds within contexts of belonging that are constantly fractured and reset. Thus,

diasporic subjectivity is always marked by a tension: looking back through loss and memory, while being shaped into a new subject in the very act of looking back.

Building on this, the paper argues that the body is precisely the experiential site of this tension. It is not merely a private container, but a locus where external power and internal perception are in constant interplay. This perspective also offers a possible response to Floya Anthias's critique of both typological and cultural-analytical approaches. The core of spectrality lies in unspeakable and un-mourned losses, and it is only through the body's exposure and sensory engagement that such inexpressible experiences can leave their traces. As the experiential anchor that sustains this process, the body is simultaneously subjected to the forces of society, history, and power, and inscribed with perception and memory, thereby constituting the conditions for subject formation. In other words, it is precisely in this exposed site that the spectral and relational logics proposed by Cho become concrete, compelling diasporic subjectivity to return from theoretical metaphor to lived experience.

### The Absence and Limitations of Embodiment Studies

Within contemporary diaspora studies, embodiment as a research dimension has developed in a markedly uneven fashion. Compared to more traditional foci—such as cultural identity, language preservation, and economic networks—embodiment remains largely at the margins of the field. More notably, existing scholarship on embodiment shows a pronounced concentration on certain ethnic groups and specific cultural practices. Pioneering works such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (2003) have set the tone for much of this research, which predominantly centers on the dance and musical practices of the African diasporas. Within this body of literature, a substantial number of studies examine the politics of the body and mechanisms of cultural memory transmission in music forms such as salsa, reggae, and hip-hop.

However, this concentration also reveals significant limitations within the field. Other diasporic groups—such as Asian, Latinx, and Middle Eastern communities—have yet to develop equivalent bodies of scholarship on embodiment that can enter into sustained dialogue with the dominant frameworks. Where such studies do exist, they are often fragmented between literary criticism and anthropological research, lacking integrated analysis. Similarly, scholarship on South Asian religious conceptions of the body, while engaging the dimension of embodiment, tends to focus on religious practice rather than on the diasporic experience itself.

This configuration not only limits our understanding of the complexity of diasporic experience but also overlooks the diverse ways in which the body functions as a cultural vessel and a site of memory. Expanding the scope of embodiment studies in diaspora research—both in terms of ethnic groups and forms of practice—is therefore not merely a matter of filling a gap in the literature, but a necessary pathway toward deepening our grasp of diasporic complexity.

This paper contends that the significance of the body lies not only in its role as a cultural signifier, nor in its passive circulation between economic systems and social structures, but in its status as the origin point of perception—preceding conceptual operations and constituting our primary mode of engaging with the world. As Merleau-Ponty observes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “The body is our general medium for having a world” (1962, p. 146). The body is always in a state of radical exposure, incapable of withdrawal or substitution, and thus becomes an unavoidable site of interaction between subject and world. For diasporic subjects, the experience of migration and rupture is first and foremost registered at the bodily level, rather than understood through macro-narratives or identity labels. The primary locus of diaspora is the body itself—where memory, violence, and relationality intertwine in the continual formation of subjectivity.

### The Experiential Site of Relational Subjectivity

This logic of subject formation is not unique to diasporic subjects, but it becomes particularly pronounced in diasporic contexts, thus offering a highly illuminating experiential paradigm for understanding the making of relational subjectivity. Lacking long-term and stable attachments, the life trajectories of diasporic subjects often take the form of ongoing migration and relocation: the continual shifts in language, cultural practices, institutions, and identity markers make it impossible for them to rely on a single, homogeneous environment to sustain the self. Consequently, the formation of their subjectivity depends even more explicitly on the construction of relationships. This relationality is not an auxiliary feature, but a necessary condition for survival. Diasporic subjects must establish new connections with others, institutions, and cultures in order to maintain and generate the self within fractured and uncertain contexts of belonging.

In other words, their subjectivity is not formed naturally along a continuous temporal line, but is forcibly shaped through multiple crossings and restructurings. This process not only exposes the fragility of existence but also reveals the inevitability of relationality as the foundation of subjectivity. Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a further explanation: the body is the site where social and historical dispositions are sedimented and where practices are reproduced. Yet for diasporic subjects, these dispositions are often neither coherent nor continuous, but fractured and overlapping. Each intersection of cultural dispositions leaves a trace on the body, rendering the habitus of diasporic subjects multiple and unstable. The fluidity of these dispositions forces them to continually reconstruct their relationships with others and with institutions amid contradictions and tensions, thereby highlighting that subjectivity itself is a creation of relationality.

Malaysian Chinese American Shirley Geok-lin Lim once described the central dilemma of her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* as “the passage from one dark

complex habitus to another as complex and dark being” (2007, p. 37). This formulation itself reveals the body as both the site where socio-historical habitus is sedimented and the locus where a relational subject is compelled to be reshaped amidst rupture. Lim has never taken diaspora as the primary term of her self-identification, yet her writing consistently discloses an “unstable sense of presence”: her body is not in the homeland, her language is not her mother tongue, and her memory has no place to settle. It is precisely in this state of “unhoming” that the linguistic tension of diaspora implodes into the structural tension of writing practice—becoming the only possible way to “tell oneself,” as well as the very fissure through which the subject emerges.

Reflecting on her motivation for writing, she notes that the work did not follow the deconstructive currents of postcolonial theory, but sought instead to capture those involuntary memories that have persisted in surfacing as embodied traces. She emphasizes that “my body—the object of, subjected to, and subjecting others to physical acts—was the conduit to imagination.” In her view, “the formation of an interior consciousness of self” is inextricably linked to those involuntary mental images shaped by familial and public violence (p. 25). This account directly resonates with the theoretical impasse outlined earlier: diaspora becomes manifest in the very site where bodily exposure and the generation of memory converge. In other words, Lim’s memoir not only avoids the risks of abstraction and emptiness in diaspora studies, but also transcends the limitations of reducing it to a mere personal history, offering instead an embodied experiential site that responds to the dilemma identified above.

To avoid leaving the concept of “the body” at the level of intuitive description, this paper adopts embodied memory<sup>1</sup> as its analytical entry point. The theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Embodied memory refers to a cognitive structure generated through the ongoing interaction between the body and the world, oriented toward perception and action. Its output consists of embodied representations / mental models that can be reactivated in specific contexts. In textual experience, such representations often return involuntarily, as residual, fragmentary, and indexical traces that bring

mechanism for this draws on embodied cognition<sup>2</sup>. At the level of close reading, this paper uses the term embodied trace<sup>3</sup> to refer to the smallest perceptual unit that can be identified.

Based on the above definitions, this study takes Lim's memoir as its central object of analysis to examine how diaspora is experienced through the interweaving of embodied experience and relationality. This concept is not a neutral designation but a sensory experience with a sharp, even pungent, quality—it stimulates the senses while also touching the points of trauma. The subsequent chapters will further concretize this analytical entry point through Lim's memoir: in her narrative, the exposure of the body, sensory experience, and traumatic memory together constitute the narrative logic of diaspora. The next chapter will begin from the specific context and generic tensions of Lim's memoir, showing how it functions as an experiential site of diaspora.

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relevant others and institutions into the scene. Anchored in this perspective, the analysis can shift from the inductive abstraction of “macro-identity” to tracing how sensory fragments emerge, and further, to exploring how relations are generated (Lim, 2007, p. 29).

<sup>2</sup> Embodied cognition is an approach in cognitive science and philosophy which holds that cognition is not accomplished solely through symbolic computation in the brain, but is shaped by the ongoing interaction between body and environment (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). This view rejects the Cartesian mind–body dualism and emphasizes the inseparability of perception and action in the generation of cognition (Clark, 1997). As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue, bodily experience provides the basic structures for abstract concepts and patterns of thought, with the mind always embedded in a particular body and world.

<sup>3</sup> Embodied trace refers to the smallest perceptual unit identifiable in a narrative, typically emerging as an involuntary, fragmentary, and indexical sensory element (e.g., hunger, pain, or the absence of touch). Such traces are not merely descriptive details, but function as anchors that bring specific relational and institutional contexts into presence within the text. While they may be residual in form, their recurrence signals the embodied ground of memory and relation.

## Chapter 2

### Writing with Multiple Roots: The Memoir as a Site of Diasporic

### Experience

*Among the White Moon Faces* is divided into two parts. The first part recalls Lim's childhood and adolescence in Malaysia, marked by poverty, domestic violence, the absence of her mother, and a colonial education. The second part turns to her life as an immigrant in the United States, describing her academic career and family life there. This paper argues that Lim's memoir was written out of an urgency of experience: an attempt to capture embodied traces that emerge involuntarily in the body (Lim, 2007, p. 25), rather than to affirm a pre-established paradigm of identity. This mode of writing allows her to avoid abstracting her lived experience into a categorizable identity label, and to resist reducing the memoir to a mere record of personal history; instead, she treats it as a process of reconstructing the site of experience.

On this basis, before moving to a close reading of the text itself, this chapter first approaches *Among the White Moon Faces* from its external contexts, unfolding three interwoven lines of analysis. First, by examining Lim's transnational and multiethnic background alongside her cross-genre and cross-cultural writing practice, it reveals how she forges a distinctive narrative position at the intersection of the personal and the cultural. Second, drawing on the openness of the memoir form, it analyzes how Lim employs this genre within transnational and transcultural contexts to juxtapose private experience with collective history, thereby engaging with diasporic studies' debates on subjectivity and the representation of experience. Finally, it turns inward to the memoir itself, beginning with a close reading of the opening paragraphs, to show how the body and memory are juxtaposed and intertwined in language—thereby substantiating the analytical framework proposed earlier, namely, that the body is both a mediator of diasporic experience and a bridge connecting private memory with

cultural history, the individual with the other. Through this movement from external to internal perspectives, the chapter demonstrates more fully how *Among the White Moon Faces* (hereafter *AWMF*) constitutes a diasporic site that is at once concrete and open-ended.

## 2.1 Cross-Genre Writing with Multiple Roots

Lim's multiple roots are evident from her name alone. Her mother was Peranakan (Baba-Nyonya)<sup>4</sup>, and her father was a second-generation immigrant from Fujian to Malaysia. Born in Malaysia, she became a local Chinese Malaysian—a unique Baba-Nyonya replica. On her birth certificate, her name is recorded as “Lim Geok Lin,” a name taken from a list her grandfather had prepared for his grandchildren, intended to convey humility, “to make the children ordinary and alike.” Here, “Lim” continues the family lineage; “Geok” (玉), in Hokkien, marks her as the third-generation female in her grandfather's family; and “Lin” (玲) serves to distinguish her from her female cousins of the same generation.

Growing up in Malaysia, she also acquired an English name and a Christian baptismal name—“Shirley Agnes Jennifer Lim Geok Lin.” As she recalls in her memoir: “I tried writing my names down: Shirley Agnes Jennifer Lim Geok Lin. But after months of trying one or another, only Shirley stuck” (Lim, 1996, p. 12). Unlike her siblings, who went by their Chinese names, Lim was addressed as “Shirley” at home. The name came from her father's fantasy of the West, a “daughter” figure haloed with Hollywood glamour. This, in a way, seemed to open up a distinctive pathway to selfhood for Lim.

This multiplicity in naming is a microcosm of everyday Malaysian culture. Located at

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<sup>4</sup> Peranakan (Baba-Nyonya) refers to the descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago—particularly in present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia—between the 15th and 17th centuries, and married local Malay women. The term Baba typically refers to men and Nyonya to women. Peranakan culture is characterized by a hybrid heritage that blends Chinese, Malay, and, to some extent, colonial European influences in language, cuisine, dress, and customs.

a strategic crossroads in Southeast Asia and straddling the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia has long been an important transshipment hub, attracting traders and migrants from India, China, Arabia, and other parts of Southeast Asia. The long history of cross-regional movement and trade has fostered ethnic integration, forming a plural society rooted in Malay culture while incorporating Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, and British colonial influences. For individuals growing up in such an environment, the mixing of languages, religions, and customs has long been a “soil-like” cultural condition.

In her memoir, Lim recalls that upon first entering school, when an Irish nun called out “Geok Lin,” she froze for a moment—in the English school she was “Geok Lin,” while at home she was “Shirley.” She did not realize what this meant, because “Language mixes and mix-ups were Malayan everyday reality. Your own name tripped on your tongue, a series of hesitations, till you stopped noticing the hesitations, and the name flowed as yours, as a series of names” (p. 12). She lists the naming traces found on herself and her peers—“Chinese names, Malay names, Tamil names, English names, Portuguese names, Dutch names, Hollywood names, Roman names, Catholic names, Hindu names”—which, like strands of DNA, coil, adhere, and peel away, forming the material texture of multiple identities (p. 13).

Thus, Lim’s “neither/nor” position did not emerge only after transnational migration, but was embedded from birth in her bodily and linguistic experiences. This can be understood as a “third space”<sup>5</sup> generated prior to any cross-border movement, in which diaspora, for her, is not merely an identity drift after leaving the homeland, but a hybrid condition internalized into the structure of life from the very beginning.

Like her multiple roots, Lim’s writing also grows across diverse forms. As an author working across scholarship, poetry, fiction, and memoir, Shirley Geok-lin Lim has

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<sup>5</sup> The term “third space” is drawn from Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, where it denotes an in-between space produced in the encounter between cultures, disrupting fixed identities and enabling new hybrid forms of meaning and subjectivity (Bhabha, 1994, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 36–39).

consistently moved between genres while gaining wide recognition in the literary field. In 1980, her poetry collection *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize; in 1989, the anthology *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*, which she co-edited, received the American Book Award; in 1996, her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* won the same award. She has also published several short story collections and novels. Following these achievements, scholarly engagement with her work has grown considerably, broadly taking three interrelated directions: the first focuses on cross-cultural identity and diasporic experience (Gunew, 2002; Mok, 2014; Mayer, 2015; W. S. H. Lim, 2018, 2021), examining how she negotiates belonging and memory in multicultural and postcolonial contexts; the second adopts critiques of race, class, and gender (Kiao, 1997; Mukherjee, 2014; W. S. H. Lim, 2009, 2014), highlighting her resistance to identity labeling within postcolonial and migrant frameworks; the third centers on autobiographical narrative strategies (Powell, 2009; Davis, 2009; Zeng, 2013; Seidl, 2024), exploring how, in the tensions of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and gender politics, she constructs subjectivity through the interweaving of body, silence, and memory.

The fact that Lim can be studied from so many different dimensions is not only due to her multiple “roots” or her cross-genre practice spanning poetry, fiction, criticism, and memoir, but also because her writing constantly breaks through the fixed boundaries of culture and genre. These forms in her work are not discrete from one another; rather, they permeate each other in content, rhythm, tone, and sensory dimension, forming a structure of expression that is in constant negotiation and mutual resonance. As Powell notes, such “border crossings” (2021, p. 172) have become part of her identity. In Powell’s analysis, Lim “takes up residence in all these spaces” (p. 172) without avoiding the contradictions among them; Lim herself writes that “ethnic and gender identities are continuously negotiated in tension against each other” (1993, p. 591), and that writing itself is a process through which these identity strategies enter into dialogue. Thus, for Lim, “cross-genre” is not merely a matter of formal choice,

but a writing ethic consistent with the cross-linguistic, cross-religious, and cross-ethnic history of her life: shifting narrative positions and mobilizing different sensory channels to accommodate—rather than smooth over—contradictions.

This multiplicity is explicitly stated in the subtitle of the memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. Tölölyan (2012) has discussed the constitutive role of the home/homeland binary in the construction of diaspora studies. He argues that, rather than prematurely fixing “home” as the ancestral “homeland,” it is more productive to understand it as a practice repeatedly reconfigured through chosen affiliations, situated between local dwelling, citizenship, and transborder attachments.

In this sense, the “homelands” in the subtitle is an explicit declaration of the non-one-to-one correspondence between “home” and “homeland”: it resonates with Lim’s native condition of multilingual, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic hybridity from childhood, while also signaling her redefinition of “homelands.” For Lim, “homeland” is not a single, stable point of origin, but a field with both geographical coordinates and sensory dimensions: it encompasses the place of birth, the sites of migration and settlement, and is continually rewritten and re-perceived through language and embodied experience. Situating “homelands” within relationality and embodied memory not only expands the imagination of “home” in diaspora studies, but also offers a pathway for understanding how diasporic subjects negotiate their location amid multiple roots and cultural contexts.

## **2.2 Memoir as Method: Negotiating Representation in Diaspora Writing**

Among the various writing paths, the memoir holds a special place for Lim. As Powell notes, “While she is well known for her poetry and her feminist commitment to Asian American literature, it is her memoir, through its self-reflexivity and calls to action, that uniquely contributes to Lim’s activist agenda” (2021, p. 160). Lim has

also mentioned that, although she has written more poetry and fiction, people tend to be more interested in her experience of writing a memoir (2007, p. 23). For this reason, the memoir is not only a point of entry for studying Lim but also plays a central role in shaping her literary and academic standing.

Although Lim does not agree with defining her memoir as an “academic autobiography,” it is undeniable that *Among the White Moon Faces*, with its accounts of graduate life, degree attainment, teaching, and academic writing, has resonated strongly within the academic community. Willard-Traub (2003) argues that the “relationship between writer and reader” established in the memoir fosters “material connections...[and] consequences.” Miller (2009) observes that “She speaks directly to readers, implicating readers in her story”; for memoirs like hers, readers are not only moved but may even feel that it is telling the story of their own lives.

This immediate resonance between reader and text is closely tied to the characteristics developed in the historical evolution of the autobiography/memoir genre. Especially in the writing of diasporic subjects, the memoir often combines privatized sensory narration with public political reference, and its narrative form provides a space for articulating cross-cultural experience.

This characteristic can be explained through the genre history of autobiography and memoir. From the perspective of their historical evolution and formal shifts, the traditional autobiography takes the author’s entire life and its relationship to the times as its narrative core, and has long been associated with public identity or spiritual transformation—from the public oratory of ancient Greece and Rome to Augustine’s Confessions. It was a form of writing reserved for “first-class citizens,” excluding women, children, and slaves. The memoir, by contrast, focuses more on individual memory, feeling, and emotion. While often used by politicians and military leaders to record public events (as in Caesar’s Gallic Wars), its narrative tone is generally more intimate and sensory.

In the early twentieth century, British writer Steven Reynolds proposed the concept of “autobiografiction,” which blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction. It emphasized fictionalized treatment grounded in genuine spiritual experience, aiming to capture what Joyce called “epiphanies” or Woolf’s “moments of being.” Although this form still retained a certain binary separation between spirituality and corporeality, it offered marginalized groups such as homosexuals the possibility of moving between fiction and reality, generating the self through role-play. From the mid-to-late twentieth century onward, with the rise of the civil rights movement, feminism, postcolonialism, and postmodern theory, the scope of subjects and the formal boundaries of autobiography/memoir expanded significantly. No longer merely the public record of privileged classes, it became an experimental space for marginalized groups to claim discursive power and reconstruct subjectivity.

In diaspora literature, authors are often pre-positioned as spokespersons for “homeland experience,” with their works expected to represent—and even solidify—a group’s cultural memory and identity imaginary. However, this spokesperson role is the product of both readerly expectations and market mechanisms. In response to such a reductive identity framework, some diasporic writers deliberately adopt rhetorical and narrative strategies that transform their own situatedness into a subjective condition onto which readers can project themselves. Through a recognition mechanism of “this is, in fact, you as well,” distant readers can bridge geographic and cultural differences to engage with the text. This strategy bears methodological affinities with certain core feminist propositions—such as “woman is a situation”(de Beauvoir, 1949/2011) and “the personal is political”(Hanisch, 1970). Both embed individual experience within broader structural relations, thereby granting private narratives a public political and ethical dimension.

However, this study does not seek to use Lim’s memoir to argue that diaspora is a universalizable or transferable model of subjectivity. Rather, it treats the memoir as a site of experience under conditions of extreme dispossession and exposure: when the

subject has lost almost all external supports, how it is generated in rupture and migration, and how it reconstructs itself within new relational networks. This perspective not only echoes the earlier theoretical discussion on “the subject formed in relation,” but also underscores another value of individual experience—through embodied and finely detailed narration, it renders visible and names those forms of structural violence that seep in slowly, remain difficult to detect, yet continue to operate.

### **2.3 The Entry Point of Memory**

Lim (2007) notes the scholarly attention to her memoir and observes that this, in itself, reveals a common presupposition about life writing: we expect memoir to possess a higher sensory density than fiction, approximating a form of self-exposure that “relives” experience in the act of writing. Drawing on Steven Robins’s *Silence in My Father’s House*, Lim (2007) summarizes this as “the relationship between the body and memory,” as if the story had already been inscribed in the narrator’s nervous system, awaiting the moment to be recalled and given shape in language. In the opening of her memoir, Lim leads the reader into this embodied experience by following a trajectory that moves from the distant to the near, from the macro to the sensory. She (1996) first recounts her migration path, from Malacca to New England, to Brooklyn, to the New York suburb, and finally to Southern California. On the surface, this is a transformation from hunger to plenty, from poverty to comfort. Yet she points out that in this process she has “become transformed, and yet have remained a renegade.” Here, “renegade” refers not only to being an outsider in an objective sense but also to a subjective resistance to complete assimilation. She describes this inner core as “the unmovable self situated in the quicksand of memory,” like “primeval creatures fixed in tar pits”—a childhood forty years and twelve thousand miles away, preserved yet not fossilized. This imagery renders memory as a tangible, weighty presence: even when trapped by historical and geographical conditions, it still retains the potential to exert a counterforce on one’s present

identity.

This unassimilated core renders her life “a parallel universe played out in dreams, in journeys home to Malaysia and Singapore, and in a continuous undercurrent of feelings” (Lim, 1996, p. 19). Dreams, homecoming, and emotional undercurrents constitute an experiential layer parallel to her American life. Lim further points out the paradox of the immigrant experience: “The irony about a certain kind of immigrant is how little she can enjoy of the very things she chases” (p. 20). Even when escaping the first life, the second remains “oddly secondary” (p. 20), as it lacks the experiential anchors rooted in infantile sensory memory and early emotional intensity. It is precisely this absence of embodied grounding that continually reactivates the tactile, painful, and affective traces of childhood within the context of migration and rupture.

In this process, Lim’s multi-layered heritage, her cross-genre and cross-cultural writing practice, and her relational subject formation converge in the memoir. Thus, the memoir not only records individual history but also constructs an embodied site, affirming the analytical framework outlined earlier: the body serves both as a mediator of diasporic experience and as a bridge linking private memory with cultural history, and the individual with the Other.

## Chapter 3

### The Scene of Embodied Memory

Before there is memory of speech, there is memory of the senses.

— Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*

Unlike the previous two chapters, which approached the topic through the histories of terminology and genre, this chapter returns to the sensory entry point of experience, using Lim's own reflections as an opening to trace how sensation precedes narration and is "heard" in the act of writing. As the preceding chapters have shown, Lim's memoir distinguishes itself from both the abstraction of diaspora studies and the singularity of personal history by redirecting our attention to an embodied scene of experience—a place where sensation and relationality occur. As Lim states, she seeks to capture "involuntary mental images" that survive as embodied traces and force themselves into consciousness; the formation of an interior consciousness of self is closely intertwined with violence at both familial and public levels; and the body, as she writes, is not only the site upon which acts are inflicted and enacted but also "the conduit to imagination" (Lim, 2007, p. 25). In other words, experience is inscribed by formative violence and returns involuntarily, thereby shaping the emergence of subjectivity and poetic imagination.

Following the first chapter's argument about the relational subject, in the context of diaspora the subject does not grow naturally in a continuous, homogeneous environment but is compelled to take form between multiple fractured habitus, becoming visible only through entanglement with others, with institutions, and with language. Accordingly, this chapter closely reads how such embodied traces are summoned and "listened to" in writing—beginning from the level closest to the skin, to examine how memory intrudes not as a panoramic sequence of events but as sensory fragments of hunger, pain, the absence or presence of touch. These are

retained at the level of the body and the nervous system as perceptual imprints, capable of being reactivated again and again.

This chapter takes Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir as its object of close reading, examining how the body functions as a medium of memory and how its sensory forms shape the affective logic of textual experience. In the memoir, memory does not return as a panoramic sequence of events but is inscribed onto the body through involuntary sensory flashbacks; experiences of violence are embedded in the body and nervous system. As Aleida Assmann (2011) observes, the body is a "container of memory," carrying pre-linguistic experiences and leaving resonances in the sites of repression. Lim's writing actively summons these returns that surface through touch and interoception, tracing three sensory circuits: first, the mother's haunting presence in absence; then, the containment and violation of the Father's Arms; and finally, the awakening of the female body. In this way, her work resists integrating sensations into a single linear narrative, allowing them instead to retain their distinct textures within gaps and delays.

### **3.1 The Mother's Haunting Presence**

If memory has an original site of occurrence, then for Lim it is the body that was never caressed:

Doesn't every infant, cradled in human arms, sucking on a mother's breast, fix its loving gaze upon the eyes above? Yet I have no memory of that primal bonding, no memory of hugs, kisses, physical affection, the kind of comfortable, safe bodily pleasure taken and felt in the presence of a loved other. (Lim, 1988, p. 49)

From the very beginning, Lim never established an "inhabitable place" through tactile experience. Within the paradigm in which every infant is held in gentle arms, her

body retained no trace of this foundational intimacy. The repeated no memory of followed by a chain of nouns (embrace / kiss / touch) renders intimacy into concrete, sensory actions—only to erase them one by one, as if the relationship had never occurred in the first place.

In a rational retrospective, Lim attributes part of the cause to wartime pregnancy and childbirth: extreme hunger and exhaustion severely constrained maternal–infant care at the material level (pp. 49–50). Yet understanding does not erase the body’s memory. In her recollection, the mother–daughter relationship is gradually reduced to gazing: “I remember us as brushing images, as gazes, sensations, and stories. I remember my mother as a woman I gazed on.” Face replaces the tactile breast; intimacy is downgraded from being enfolded to being looked at. She asks whether this rupture stems from an infant’s innate coolness or from the mother’s incapacity (p. 54). Whatever the answer, “no-touch” and deprivation are taken in through the body and come to constitute the sensory structure of childhood. This substitution of perception will return later, when the mother in the mirror reappears like a ghost.

The mother’s departure was also entangled with hunger. After Lim’s father was swindled out of his savings, the family was suddenly impoverished and moved into her grandfather’s house. Lim recalls her first true experience of hunger—“For the first time in my life I felt hunger... an emptiness that left me giddy and weak”—and that she “remained hungry for almost two years” (p. 59). During the week before leaving, her mother took her every day to her aunt’s house for a single slice of bread with orange marmalade. The hungry Lim “was absorbed by the sandwich” (p. 65), scarcely noticing the tears welling in her mother’s eyes. Thus, on the day her mother left without saying goodbye, Lim’s first sensation was not sadness but the absence of that slice of marmalade bread. Hunger had taken precedence over feeling, crowding out the emotional register of her mother’s departure.

After her mother’s absence, this place in her life became a complete void: “Mother

became a huge silence. We never spoke of her to Father, nor to each other. She was forbidden, someone who was not dead and also not alive” (p. 70). It was only after the age of twelve that Lim occasionally received short letters from her, “but her notes said very little, and the money gave me a tick in my side, like an ache, reminding me of something about my last few mornings with her at Second Grand aunt’s house” (p. 70). In Lim’s memory, the mother always appears bound to deprivation: the unheld infancy, the leave-taking overshadowed by hunger, and the emotional vacancy that persisted for years thereafter.

The fear and loss of appetite upon her arrival in the United States reactivated this sensory circuit. She recognized her mother’s face in the mirror: “But my mother’s face continued to stare at me out of the mirror. To come so far, and to find myself swallowed by my mother!” (186). The simultaneous presence of a familiar yet fearsome hunger and the mirrored face involuntarily brought the unfinished mother–daughter relationship back through an interoceptive–visual pathway. As Cathy Caruth (1996) points out, traumatic experiences often cannot be absorbed or integrated at the moment of their occurrence but instead return in the form of “belatedness.” Similarly, van der Kolk (2014) notes that trauma is stored in the body in non-verbalized form and can be unconsciously triggered through certain “sensory fragments.” In this mother–daughter line, the harm was not caused by a single act of violence but by the long-term deprivation of touch and nourishment, a form of absent or structural violence that carved an irreparable imprint into Lim’s body.

This imprint of deprivation rendered Lim’s feelings toward her mother into an unlearnable love:

“I did not learn to love my mother, who left us when I was eight, though she is perhaps more to be pitied than my father... But as her daughter, when I think about her, I feel instead a stubborn resistance against pity and forgiveness, an adolescent resentment that will not grow up” (44).

As she writes, “Certain hurts are amputations” (269). This violence does not leave a wound to be healed but an amputation that cannot be restored. Even when they later shared the same living space as adults, Lim “squirmed” (269) in her mother’s presence and even felt that “She was a stranger” (269)—a strangeness that marked the resurfacing of that same sensory circuit.

### **3.2 The Father’s Arms: Containment and Violation**

Unlike the mother’s deprivation-shaped violence, the father’s body entered memory with a love that was solid, bordering on fierce. It was both a warm embrace and a source of fear. Lim recalls a childhood experience of swimming with her father and her siblings:

I remember one splendid Sunday morning when we four children, Beng, Chien, Jen, and myself, clung to each other’s shoulders, and Beng hung on to Fathers, who swam out to the horizon, unafraid that the four of us might drop out of each other’s grip into the salty waves. Father was a strong swimmer. As a boy he had jumped off the bridge into the Malacca River in weekend play, and his love of the sea blinded him to the danger he was leading us through. The water rushed like a living current over us; we were suspended above the drowning element by the power of my father’s body. (45)

In this undercurrent-filled sea, the father’s strong arms were the only guarantee of safety, steadily lifting all four children above the water. The sensation of being buoyed in the warm sea became a scene she repeatedly reenacted in the bathtub upon her arrival in the United States. In the cold and unfamiliar rented room in America, the bathtub became a miniature tropical ocean:

I ran the grainy old bathtub full of hot water and sat soaking in it, eyes closed, pretending it was grains of sand I felt running under my body and the water

barely up to my chest the vast mobile expanse of a tropical sea. (186)

This is a sensory script: using hot water, closed eyes, and tactile imagination to reinstall the sea's act of holding into her body. It is both self-soothing and a summons, allowing the sensation of being lifted to be recalled at any moment in a foreign life. The father's body was also an object of admiration for Lim at the time:

As a child I adored my father's body.....it was my father's body I reached out to touch when I roused in the night. He was warm and solid; it made me happy to touch his flesh lightly with my fingers, then drift back into sleep. So in that serpentlike familial swim, with a brother gripping me around my neck, clinging to another brother as he clung to another who clung to my father's confident body, all of us children extruded from my father like grown sperm, links in an unbreakable, undrownable chain, the meaning of my father's life made manifest to him. (46)

It is worth noting that Lim describes the children as "grown sperm" and writes that "all of us... extruded from my father," binding the siblings together with an "unbreakable, undrownable chain." This juxtaposition of reproductive imagery with the chain positions begetting and holding/containment within the same body, making the father simultaneously a point of origin and a point of support. The warm, flowing sea becomes like a womb, and the father's arms like an umbilical cord, firmly linking the four children together. One could say that a sensory and symbolic shift of origin takes place here: typically, gestation and beginnings are culturally and experientially linked to the maternal body, but in the context of the mother's prolonged absence, the father's body takes her place in Lim's sensory memory, becoming a dual bearer of life's beginnings and of safety. This "paternalized origin" suggests that gendered divisions of role can be reconfigured through the transformation of embodied memory.

Running parallel to this “safety of being held” was the father’s consistent, authoritarian corporal punishment.

My father beat me on many occasions. Every time he slapped me, raised the cane and cut me on my legs, my shoulders, my back so that the raised welts were also deeply grooved and bloodied, I hated him. My eyes would blank and hurt and in my ears I heard the chant, ‘I hate you, I hate you.’ (46)

This violence etched hatred into the painful marks on her skin. Yet hatred did not erase love; rather, it honed it to a sharper edge:

Hate does not explain love, but it sharpens love... From the moment my father beat me, I became aware of his weakness rather than of his power... His blows drove me inwards... I felt the power of my unhappiness, and therefore the power of my personhood.”(48)

In Lim’s experience, love and hate ran in parallel: the same arm that held her aloft was also the arm that struck her; safety and harm were inscribed into the memory of the same body. In this way, the violent element became, through the father’s hand, an originary imprint on the emotional circuitry of her capacity to love. As she admits, “Violence, like racism, imprinted from childhood, can never be totally eradicated.” This violent form of love resurfaced when she became a mother herself: on several occasions she lost control, lashing out at her fourteen-month-old child—only to be seized afterward by shame, resistance, and fear. It was only when she caught sight of herself through her husband’s gaze that she recognized the distortion: “finally that I was repeating those very scenes of brutality that my father had wreaked on me.”

This marks a crucial shift in perspective: Lim moves herself from the hand of the striker to the eyes of the struck, becoming aware of the stark disparity between “my adult size” and “the actual littleness of my baby,” and thus acknowledging that she

was repeating her father's actions. But acknowledgment does not automatically sever the cycle of violence. Lim says, "There were no more slaps after that morning, although I continued to struggle with... rage." In other words, what she chose was not to cut it off, but to contain it:

Once started, the cycle of family violence may never end. Only the consciousness of one's own precarious position in the cycle can contain the violence. To change the blow to a caress... the helpless choking rage to empathy, that is my struggle as a mother: to form a different love.(249)

Here, "contain" operates on the level of action—preventing the violence from spilling outward—but also on the emotional and linguistic level, by translating a "blow" into a "caress" and "rage" into "empathy." She does not deny the existence of past violence; rather, she preserves its memory while, at a deeper level, using consciousness and language to translate it into another tactile register, thereby creating space for a "different love" to take shape.

Lim further elevates this translation into a feminism in practice: "The consciousness of family as love and violence all in one, and the power to stop the violence..... is, for me, a feminist consciousness." (249) For her, "love and violence all in one" is an experience embedded in the relational site and in bodily memory: accepting the coexistence of love and hate, touch and violence, while choosing to stop in self-reflection. She describes herself as "a girl-child seizing autonomy.....but damaged still," acknowledging the cost of early maturity while affirming the act of reclaiming agency. The subject does not grow naturally out of some "pure love," but, in living with the history of violence and through repeated attempts, learns to turn the "blow" into a "caress" and to convert force into support. In the details of Lim's repeated touching, embracing, wiping, and feeding of her son, bodily memory is slowly rewritten, and the cycle of family violence is broken. Lim's point of support no longer comes from the bodies of her parents but is regenerated within her own body.

### 3.3 Living and Unlearning the Female Body

This section traces how Lim lives with and resists the female body. On the one hand, her body is marked from the outside through contemptuous gazes and the slow violence of institutional exclusion. On the other hand, it becomes, from within, a tactile enclave in which she repeatedly rehearses a fragile form of self-containment. In her memoir, bodily experience and historical rupture arrive in the same instant—not as a metaphor, but as an indivisible event.

Lim grew up in a male-dominated family structure, where her female body was devalued and marginalized from the very beginning. As she writes: “My brothers’ contempt crawled on my chest each time I considered padding my body to look like a woman.” (116) Here, Lim renders “contempt” as a physical sensation—a form of pressure that crawls across the chest, visceral and embodied. Even before her body had fully developed, it was already burdened with the tension and fear brought on by gendered scrutiny. She could not even freely imagine what it might mean to “look like a woman.” This shame eventually transformed into a strategic disavowal of femininity. In another passage, she writes:

From the moment I stood outside a door and felt my sex make me unwelcome, I decided my brothers’ acceptance was preferable to my father’s favoritism. I rejected the identity of girl. Since I could not have both, I chose equality as a boy over privilege as a girl. (38)

She did not simply “wish to become a boy”; rather, through a specific moment of exclusion, she became acutely aware of how her gender functioned as a barrier to social participation. Confronted with the impossibility of occupying both the position of paternal favoritism and the equality shared among brothers, she consciously rejected the identity of “girl” and instead sought legitimacy through the imagined egalitarianism of boyhood. This choice reveals an early and incisive understanding of

gender as a structural mechanism—not a rejection of femininity per se, but a rejection of the position assigned to the feminine within that structure.

And yet, even as she attempted to reject her female body, that body continued to “speak” in a nonverbal register. As she describes one summer afternoon:

Some hot afternoons I lay on the cool wood floor of the bedroom and stroked my legs, enjoying the feel of fingers on my skin, enjoying the feel of skin on my fingers. This autoeroticism was bound up with the long boredom of being alone after my brothers had successfully shaken me off to maraud through the streets.(97)

This almost neutral account of autoeroticism does not unfold within any overt framework of gender identity; rather, it reveals a form of sensory self-awareness. The reciprocal loop of touch—skin on fingers, fingers on skin—constitutes a primordial dialogue between self and body. In this moment, the body ceases to function as a gendered signifier—“boy” or “girl”—and becomes instead a site she can access alone: to touch, to feel, to console, and to amuse herself.

The memoir contains a pivotal scene in which Lim places her first sexual experience alongside the televised expulsion of Singapore from the Malaysian federation. She recalls:

That weekend in Singapore when I was embarked on my mission to rid myself of my virginity, Uncle Charlie called me excitedly to watch Mr.Lee’s address on television.

Tearfully, pleading for calm, the distraught statesman spoke of finding a separate destiny for Singapore. The Malaysian prime minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman, perhaps acutely accepting the increasing electoral tensions between Chinese-dominant Singapore and Malay-dominant Malaya, had summarily

expelled Singapore from the union. Jostling the lines at Customs as I crossed the border at the Johore Causeway, I felt fearfully sad. The meaninglessness of my sexual encounter —the physical rupture in my body—with Rajan, the stranger I had chosen to initiate me in bed, appeared enlarged by the violent meaningfulness of the political split between Singapore, the city I was just beginning to know through my mother’s residence, and Malaysia, the country I implicitly loved.(152)

On the one hand, Lim’s body undergoes rupture—an anonymous sexual encounter that she describes as “meaningless.” On the other, the television is broadcasting the “violent political split” between Singapore and Malaysia, charged with immense national and historical significance. The intimacy of the body and the rupture of the nation do not function as metaphors for one another; instead, they become parallel fractures aligned in time, creating a moment in which one illuminates the other through simultaneity. Through this narrative of temporal and spatial overlap, Lim demonstrates how history does not merely surround the individual—it pierces through and embeds itself within the very scene of the body.

Crucially, Lim does not assign any romance or symbolism to this sexual experience: the body undergoes rupture, yet the episode is virtually meaningless to her; meanwhile, the nation’s split on television is overloaded with meaning. The two ruptures—one light and one heavy, one mute and one loud—point to an experiential logic: embodied memory often takes shape when meaning has not yet been organized. Because meaning arrives late, the body first sediments the episode as feeling rather than concept, leaving a trace that resists narration yet cannot be erased. Through the arrangement of parataxis and simultaneity, the text makes the two fissures co-present, producing a reversal of scale and a temporal non-synchrony: history is not suspended outside the self but registers on the body. The body thus becomes the bearing surface for interpersonal and geopolitical violences—not mirror images of each other, but co-present, dissonant realities.

Moreover, her affective geography is split: Singapore is the city she is only beginning to know through her mother's residence, whereas Malaysia is the country she "implicitly loved." The very notion of home—the place meant to house the body—is thus torn by both historical events and kinship configurations. Taken together, her first sexual experience is no longer merely private; it becomes a sensory node born within a historical fissure.

From the three interlinked sensory threads presented in this section, it becomes clear that Lim's body is both the site where various forms of violence occur and the locus of micro-scale acts of resistance. Subjectivity does not emerge through systematic integration into a coherent whole; rather, it is compelled into visibility through its encounters with violence.

## Chapter 4

### Moving Home

Listening, and telling my own stories, I am moving home.

— Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*

The “birthmark” of Malaysia has inscribed sensory hieroglyphs upon Lim’s body, while her parents—like ropes—tether her to the ancestral altar.<sup>6</sup> Twined together, these two forces from the past pull her in opposite directions, holding her in a prolonged state of rupture. Meanwhile, beyond the California shore, the sea swells without rest—“My life rushes me toward a shore, in full motion; only my skills keep me on my feet, not drowning” (283). This self-description sets the chapter’s point of departure: in the absence of any steady ground to lean on, how does Lim, through lived practice, cultivate the skills to keep herself upright?

These skills fall into two categories. One arises from relational practices in everyday life—women’s companionship, neighborly mutual aid, and mother–child forms of address—which situate the “I” within responsive daily relations. The other is writing. Lim has said that, for her, writing is not motivated by surface-level, metaphysical reasons; at the deepest level, writing itself is a mode of being (Zhang and Zhou 2001, 221). It externalizes the body’s sensations into audible speech, allowing memory to keep breathing within language. Lim (2007) notes that memoir “both preserves and changes memory”; at the moment she finished the memoir, she “saw and felt” a blister being pierced, and the repeatedly intrusive flashback deflated thereafter. Writing, therefore, is not a correction of the past, but a change in what can be heard and how it can be heard. It was only after completing the memoir that she could calmly acknowledge, “I am, in fact, an American.” For Lim, identity does not precede writing; she first writes out sensation, and identity finds a place to dwell in the act of

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<sup>6</sup> Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 283. This image adapts and integrates two separate passages from the original: “ropes that my mother and father...” and “birthmarks... hieroglyphs of my body’s senses,” rephrased to fit the present analysis.

writing.

Therefore, this chapter focuses on how writing operates in concert with the body and with relationships. The first section will closely examine the “trigger–delay–naming” mechanism of recall, analyzing how writing, following this rhythm, brings embodied traces such as hunger, tactile absence, and pain from the body’s circuitry into language. Through juxtaposition rather than integration, it allows different sensations to share the same space. The second section turns to the subject’s displacement. In the memoir’s composition, Lim is no longer merely “a stranger in America under observation,” but develops, through writing and relational practice, an ability to move. Overall, as Lim hones the skill of “keeping her footing” amid the surging waves, writing becomes both her breath and the way she maintains balance at the crest.

#### **4.1 Writing as a Mechanism of Recall**

In her reflections on her own memoir, Lim writes:

like canning, the process of preservation materially changes the original. The analogy lies not simply in the difference between fresh and canned fruit but between fruit borne fresh and green on a living tree—the tree of an individual consciousness—and the fruit plucked, preserved, and sold on the shelves of mega-bookstores.....But language, the word, is breath, not death. If memory speaks in the memoir, then memory lives outside of the individual skull case, and it lives in language. (Lim, 2007, p. 33)

She does not sweeten the bitterness of her childhood for the sake of “palatability,” yet she acknowledges that once it enters language, memory acquires another mode of life. Writing, therefore, is not a neutral container like a canning jar, but a form of re-mediation: it transfers sensations lodged in the body’s circuits into language,

allowing them to move beyond the individual limits “inside the skull” while still retaining vitality. Drawing on Jan Assmann’s distinction (via Levy & Sznajder), communicative memory refers to memory that lives in concrete human beings—embodied, orally transmitted, dependent on eyewitnesses and small communities, and thus perishable. Cultural memory, by contrast, relies on institutions and media (writing, archives, classrooms, rituals) for stable transmission, enabling it to persist beyond individual lives.

Then, Lim’s memoir stands at the threshold between the two: she externalizes “pre-linguistic sensation” into the memoir form, where it is read in classrooms and repeatedly cited by readers, thereby turning individual neural reflexes into publicly audible experience. Crucially, however, she does not flatten differences in the process; rather, she inscribes the text with embodied traces—unique as a birthmark. Thus, “writing changes memory” does not move toward universalization or flattening, but turns sensation into a form that can be heard and discussed, while preserving its corporeality and resisting premature abstraction. In other words, Lim relocates “what belongs to the body” into “what belongs to the cultural archive,” but she does so not through sugared embellishment or theoretical over-articulation, but through “breath.” In this way, memory takes language as its vehicle and lives on in the echoes between readers and the social field.

In Lim’s text, this re-mediation unfolds with a discernible rhythm, a practice pattern that can be distilled from her memoir. The first step is trigger—sensation arrives first, meaning follows. In the memoir, Lim frames the trigger as the “switch” of the body being turned on, rather than as a movement from an abstract concept. Upon first arriving in the United States, hunger and panic pull her back into the sensory circuits of childhood; in the mirror, she “recognizes” her mother’s face (“my mother’s face... out of the mirror,” 1996, 186): vision and the hollow of the stomach are short-circuited together, and the mother–daughter relationship is not “recalled” but

summoned by the body. Similarly, the hot water of the bathtub re-enacts the sense of safety carried by the buoyancy of the sea (“we were suspended... by the power of my father’s body,” 1996, 45). Here, what truly operates is the subtle perception bound up with the body.

The second step is lag—allowing what is “not yet in meaning” to linger, letting time remain in juxtaposition. In other words, the past does not simply “pass”; it returns, embodied, into the present. Glenberg conceives of embodied memory as a cognitive structure emerging from body–world interaction, producing “embodied representations” that can be reactivated within a context. In this sense, Lim likewise asserts that “the past is seldom gone,” a restatement of Faulkner’s remark: “the past is never past.” These pasts return in the form of individual psychic experience—trauma, flashback, guilt, pleasure, association, recognition, dream, and nightmare—while also sedimenting in the social archive and the familial body (birth and death records, photographs and letters, wills, hereditary illnesses, etc.). Thus, in AWMFs, the “present” itself becomes a polyphonic site saturated by return: sensation arrives first, meaning follows. The text preserves this uneven temporal gap through juxtaposition and simultaneity, rather than prematurely smoothing it into a single causality or allegory (Lim 2007; Lim 1996, 29, 152).

The third step is naming—carefully assigning words and referents. Only after repeated triggering and lag does Lim begin to name with deliberation. She resists offering a sweeping, reductive conclusion, instead employing her own strategies. One such strategy is poetic naming, using imagery to compress complex sensations into words that can be summoned again. The title *Among the White Moon Faces* itself originates from one of Lim’s early poems:

Years later, I lie awake  
In the deep enclosing heart of a household.

Years later than in a crib  
Floating among the white moon faces that beam and  
grasp.

Years later, flecking the eyes, Faces like spheres wheeling, savoring myself.

Years later, I awake to see Dust falling in the dark, in the house. (1996, p.19)

The “white moon faces” that an infant sees when looking up from the cradle form a relational field composed of faces. This image preserves the tactile sensation of being “surrounded by faces,” while also conveying the concepts of crowd, community, and society. Thus, for Lim, naming is not the abstraction of experience into a conclusion, but the establishment of a poetic point of origin.

#### **4.2 Moving as Ability**

Lim points out that her memoir threads together “at least two subjectivities”—that of a Malaysian Chinese and that of an Asian American (Lim, 2007, p. 44). In an interview, she remarked: “For many years (fifteen or twenty, perhaps) I had thought of myself as a foreigner and did not examine the fact that I was an American immigrant until I completed this memoir. Because I was compelled to finish the second part of the memoir, I began to think: well, I am indeed an American” (2001, p. 223). In other words, writing renders speakable a self-relation that had long existed but remained inarticulate: it translates the embodied perceptions described in the previous chapter—hunger, the absence of touch, pain—into a shared language and a public context, shifting the position of the first person—from “the other, observed by America” to “the I who can speak within America.”

This shift culminates in a redefinition of “home.” When asked in an interview whether the home at the end of her memoir was an abstract concept, Lim replied: “It is no longer concrete, because it is not fixed in the same place,” yet it is not abstract either; rather, it is “a kind of confidence in one’s ability to make a home” (2001, p. 229). For Lim, home here is an ability that can be continually practiced: “How does one make oneself at home?” (1996, p. 30). This resonates with the notion of relational subjectivity discussed in Chapter One: home is constructed through ongoing connections—with people, with institutions, and with language—so that the “I” can

be heard and placed within these relationships.

Lim(2007) sees the condition of the immigrant as carrying an important metaphorical resonance with Edward Said's binary classification. Diaspora signifies a state in which one has been severed from a homeland defined by blood ties; what diasporic subjects can claim instead is a home that is deliberately chosen and socially constituted. Such a home is actively and intentionally built outside the framework of kinship, and this process should not be understood merely as imitation or assimilation. As an immigrant in the United States, Lim constructed her own community in precisely this way, thereby gaining the "home" she articulates. This is why she can say, "Even though I seem to have been moving all the time, I have still been very conscientious about keeping up my ties with my friends and with the groups I belong to" (2001, p. 232). More concretely, Lim's "moving as ability"—that is, her capacity to practice home—has been forged through at least three relational circuits: first, women's communities; second, neighborhood relationships; and third, the kinship bond between mother and son.

Lim's first community was a women's community, whose strength continually supported her in various ways. At the opening of her memoir, Lim states plainly that her "second life" could move forward largely because of the sustained support of the women around her:

In my second life as an immigrant Asian American, I find that Western women have also helped me plot my life, as I write forward: women of all colors—workers, neighbors, colleagues, mentors, and sisters. This book is for all these women in my life. (p. 16)

The first to reach out to her was her therapist, Helda, whose maternal presence allowed her to temporarily step out of the pain of her early days in the United States: "I measured the world differently. I wanted to see it through eyes other than my

suffering ones.” (p. 205) After moving into a dormitory, she found herself, for the first time, fully immersed in a small group of women. The daily intimacy of her roommates made the feeling of being supported tangible: “I felt how sweet it was to be in a community of women, where one’s laughter was laughter and not flirtation, where someone combed your hair to adorn you, not to penetrate, where a palpable affection in the moment, requiring no commitment, possession, or competition, was good enough for the moment.” (p. 204) Here, laughter was just laughter; combing one’s hair was for beauty, not possession; the affection of the moment required no proof or exchange. Tension eased, and friendship took root in small gestures.

Grounded in such intimate, close-to-the-body experiences, Lim reclaims the term “sisterhood”:

Although some feminist theorists have bracketed the concept of ‘sisterhood’ as an anachronistic embarrassment, it is the only term I can find to suggest not only the necessity for coalition and the work of solidarity but also the sensibility of support that grows when social gender is recognized as a shared experience. (p. 132)

For her, “sisterhood” names an environment that can be felt and that holds people up—one that combines the organizational force of alliance and solidarity with the sensibility of presence and mutual care. In such a space, the subject is propped up and seen through relationships, finding voice in the mutual act of support.

The significance of women’s communities for Lim was not confined to emotional support; it also directly shaped her positioning within the academy and her writing. She was acutely aware of the structural biases of the academic system: “What can one say in the face of all the evidence that U.S. academics then gave preferential treatment to white males who looked and talked just like themselves?” (p.140). From the early dismissal of her poetry to repeated obstacles in promotion, Lim was propelled toward

a clear objective: to seek “another, more welcoming America in which poetry, Asia, and woman could be accepted in the same body” (p.295). To this end, she built the “women’s community” as an external scaffold: “To grow as an Asian-American scholar, I needed more than books and a room of my own. I needed a society of scholars, an abundance of talk, an antagonism of ideas, bracing hostile seriousness, and above all a community of women.” (p.185). After joining a feminist seminar, this network quickly transformed into concrete practices: collectively hunting down sources, introducing one another to contacts, planning topics, and pursuing publication. As she writes, they were “spending our stipends lavishly in mounds of small change fed into the Barnard library’s wheezing copy machine” (p.185).

Lim’s effort to build a women’s scholarly community was not only aimed at creating space for difference, but also at learning from the lived experiences of other Asian American women scholars—experiences that enabled her to position Malaysia alongside the United States, becoming an Asian American not by birth but by formation. It was precisely through the reminders and support of her sisters that “feminist women reminded me that I also had rights to a separate life, even within a traditional family” (p.181). Stepping out from the comfort and quiet of family life, she pursued academic research. In Lim’s life, her connection to women’s communities kept her on the right course—one that was distinctly her own.

The second relational circuit arose from neighborhood connections. After starting a family, Lim moved into a row house, where daily life alongside multiethnic tenants brought recurring frictions—such as noise—with relatively weak formal channels for communication or mediation. A turning point came when a neighbor-initiated association was formed. The association organized block parties and charity sales; gradually, children began to play together, and adults started exchanging recipes and plants. Encounters moved from simply seeing each other to engaging in discussions. Lim recorded this experience as a peculiarly Western social phenomenon:

It was a peculiarly Western social phenomenon: people with nothing in common beyond property interests drawn together to secure these interests. Knowing nothing of each other, with no sense of common background or cultural concerns, our first meeting was itself the first move to the formation of a community. (p.148)

The procedures offered by the neighborhood association translated private troubles (such as noise) into public issues (shared living rules), gathering scattered residents into a “negotiable we.” In this process, language shifted from complaint to agenda; terms of reference changed from “they” to “we”; and identity moved from being “the foreigner under observation” to becoming “a neighbor/citizen capable of responding and taking initiative.” Home was gradually built through everyday acts of greeting, lending, entrusting, and negotiating. This experience made Lim aware of the necessity of political action in the United States—its capacity to create a community where none previously existed, thereby continually reconstructing civic identity. Although such collective action initially arose from shared property interests, over time it became a tool for strengthening intra-community connections and fostering a shared sense of identity.

As Lim’s community practices in the United States found their grounding, her understanding of home gradually shifted from a fixed location to the capacity for sustaining relationships. The birth of her child marked a pivotal turning point in her relationship with the United States. The child’s existence was not merely a new stage of life, but also an extension of her own immigrant identity within America. Through her child, Lim experienced a more immediate sense of belonging—one that far exceeded any previous legal or social bonds. This direct connection through kinship added a new layer of complexity to the emotional dimensions with which she navigated her own identity. This is vividly illustrated in the poem “The Power of Names”:

Everyone has names for those who are not them.

You know, the others that are not people. Not human.

Not us. Kwai: dogs and ghosts, we Chinese call non-people.

Some of these Americans in turn like to say Chinese are non-white. Like non-being, non-life.

I do not call myself some names: wife, beauty, saint, poet, and hate the life in naming: Chink, Prof, Hey you, Not I!

“Read me, read me,” I want to cry.

But my son wraps me in his arms and says, “I love you, Mom.” (p. 2)

At the moment when her son wraps her in his arms and calls her “Mom,” touch and address converge, rewriting naming from an externally imposed label into an ongoing, relational call-and-response. Belonging therefore first appears as a perceptible emplacement rather than an abstract identity; “who calls me, and how I am called” shifts from the cold lexicon of classification to the concrete practice of relation—from address to response. In the memoir, this “being called—being placed” position is continually reinforced through everyday affiliative practices: from school events and neighborhood exchanges to participation in parent communities. She also notes that the arrival of her child prompted her to make a decision regarding citizenship: she wanted her child, from an early age, to have the rights and resources to connect with the place of residence (while fully aware that this does not automatically dissolve prejudice). Rather than a decision dictated by “blood ties,” it was the relationship of care that stitched her into the institutions and language of American society—“Mom,” as a form of address, transforms the audible self from “a named Other” into one who responds within a relationship.

Lim distills her early “literary influences” into a stubborn act of self-imagining: though living in the United States, she persistently regarded herself as “a Malaysian writer.” She cites her own line—“We are born with a migrant squint”—to describe

this structural asymmetry: a gaze in which one eye is always angled toward elsewhere, as if never able to come fully to rest, driven by a restless urge to grow (2001, p. 232). For her, “American” is thus not a nailed-down identity but a position from which one can answer back. Within the arc of this chapter, that position is sustained by two interlacing crafts: the craft of writing and the craft of relation. Taken together, they shape what I call moving as ability—not the question of “where to move,” but of “how to hold one’s ground in the very act of moving.”

## Conclusion

On the morning of her fiftieth birthday, the waves of the Pacific were rolling shoreward along the California coast in long swells. A storm in Alaska had pushed the waters into long, tubular breakers, and surfers raced through their hollow cores. <sup>7</sup>At that moment, Lim writes: “My life rushes me toward a shore, in full motion; only my skills keep me on my feet, not drowning” (p. 283). At the same time, another scene comes into view: “the ropes that my mother and father have cunningly woven, invisible like spirits and ghosts,” (p. 283)—ropes that tie her to the ancestral altar table that presides in every Confucian home. The two images are set in juxtaposition: on one side the tug of ancestral ties, on the other the force of the sea; on one side binding, on the other surge, together forming the point of departure for her recent self-writing. The “rope” here can be read alongside Robin Cohen’s notion of the “diasporic rope<sup>8</sup>”. Lim does not attempt to sever the rope that tethers her to the homeland; rather, through narration she reworks its braiding: “We tell stories to bind us to a spot, and often the stories that make us cry knot the thickest ropes” (p. 283). She twists together a history of tethering and a present in motion, re-braiding the rope through writing into a fulcrum on which to stand.

From here, the question that guides this essay comes into focus: amid these countervailing forces, how do writing and relation provide the skills for footing, enabling the diasporic subject to “stand” in an addressable position?

This essay’s answer is as follows: the formation of diasporic subjectivity is first and foremost experienced at the level of the body. Embodied memory, as the sensory

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Lim’s description of the Pacific swell: “A northern storm in Alaska has pushed the waters... into long slow motion... surfers race... within cells of crashing water” (Lim, 1996, p. 283).

<sup>8</sup> Following Robin Cohen, diasporas are best conceptualized not through essential definitions but as a “diasporic rope” woven from nine strands—dispersion from an origin; homeland orientation; boundary maintenance; collective memory; a return movement; ethnic group consciousness; institutionalization; transnationalism; and hybrid identity (Cohen, 2022).

interface of violence, returns in forms not yet conceptually articulated. In this process, writing changes what can be heard and how it can be heard. It translates individual sensory traces into a shared language, allowing memory to keep breathing within texts and networks of relation, thereby shifting the position of the first person.

Building on this claim, the essay develops four interlocking conclusions. First, a review of diaspora studies suggests that to understand how diasporic subjectivity takes shape, we must begin from the body as an experiential anchor. Existing scholarship often centers on identity and macro-structures, which risks ossifying “diaspora” into a measurable object and obscuring how the sensory register is lived and recorded. The body, by contrast, is the primary site where memory, violence, and relation leave perceptual marks; on this basis, the diasporic subject takes form between fractured habitus through ongoing linkages with others, institutions, and language. This shift does not deny the importance of structures or identity categories; rather, it offers an operational close-reading entry point alongside them, to remedy the omission of the sensory dimension. For Lim, the body as the conduit to imagination names the generative premise of her writing: the externalization of embodied memory into language is precisely the process by which the subject comes into view, as the “I” is continually positioned and repositioned in the act of writing.

Second, by beginning from Lim’s transnational ethno-racial background and her cross-genre, cross-cultural practice, this layer establishes the memoir’s value as a lived site of diasporic experience. Tracing her transnational formation and her trajectory across poetry, prose, and criticism, Chapter 2 treats the memoir’s openness as a methodological resource: it allows the private sensorium to stand alongside national history, bringing embodied traces—hunger, pain, the absence of touch—into the narrative as scenically grounded detail rather than flattening them into grand allegory. The book’s two parts—“Malaysian Chinese” and “Asian American”—are not two linear autobiographies but two sensory maps that face one another within a single text, showing that the position of the “I” is written by returning to the body and

responding to recurrent sensations. This outside-to-inside compositional logic sets the path for the close readings that follow: it treats the memoir as a vessel linking private memory and public history, the individual and others, and relocates Lim's "I" from a preset identity to a perceptual position generated in the act of writing.

Building on the methodological frame and textual positioning established in the first two layers, the third and fourth move the analysis into concrete close readings and trace the emergence of the first-person position. Lim's memoir does not reconstruct a panoramic "scene of events"; rather, embodied traces enter the text as fragments, even spectrally, bringing the private/public and the intimate/violent into co-presence. These experiences are triggered at the level of skin and nerves, constituting a formative violence that becomes the conduit to imagination. Writing thus becomes a strategy—and even a mode of being. Against this background, in which an originary meaning of "home" is no longer available, the work articulates a new paradigm of home as a practicable capacity. Through forging and entering different relations, the subject acquires an addressable position. At this point, writing becomes breath, relation a fulcrum; moving no longer signifies loss, but names the craft of sustaining connection and balance within the fissures.

In this process, the article's chief contribution is to establish an entry point for diaspora studies that takes embodied memory as its analytic point of departure. Rather than treating "diaspora" as a measurable social object or romanticizing it into an abstract sign of flux, this perspective begins with the trigger-lag-naming of sensory traces, locating the emergence of diasporic subjectivity at the interface of body and relation. In Lim's memoir, details such as hunger, pain, and the absence of tactile contact function as the generative conditions of subject formation. Through writing, these traces are re-mediated into shared language, enabling the first-person position to move continually between address and response. In this sense, "home" is no longer a coordinate but a capacity to sustain connection and balance within relations. This shift also furnishes an operational pathway for diaspora as method—a mid-range

theoretical orientation calibrated back and forth between case and concept: it neither ossifies the roots–identity–belonging triad nor effaces institutional and material conditions, but builds a testable bridge between the sensory register and structural constraints.

However, this thick-descriptive approach also entails limits. Centering on a single case—Lim’s memoir—helps to reveal the mechanisms by which embodied traces and subject positions are formed, but it cannot encompass differences across ethnicities, generations, and institutional contexts. The media dimension likewise remains underexplored: re-mediation through image, sound, and oral history may produce sensory rhythms and narrative strategies that differ from those of written text. In addition, although this paper emphasizes the formative force of the sensory–relational chain in the making of subjectivity, the strength of its coupling with legal status, economic capital, and institutional exclusion still lacks cross-archival and cross-method corroboration.

Finally, a pathway that takes the body as the primary site of experience naturally foregrounds the singularity of individual experience. At the same time, the body is a relational entry point shared by all. On this basis, future inquiry can focus more closely on how, under the premise that difference is irreducible, difference can persist within relations rather than be smoothed out in the name of integration. Community, then, need not be built on sameness, but practiced through negotiation across difference—within a sustained tension of being heard and being able to respond to one another. This trajectory extends the theoretical potential of the body as an experiential anchor and offers diaspora studies an ethics oriented toward relation.

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