

Teaching Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*: Exploring the Limits of Race and Ethnicity

By Jaime Cleland

Chang-rae Lee has been a significant American novelist since the launch of his first book in 1995; *Native Speaker* earned awards, popular success, and critical attention, and his follow-up, *A Gesture Life* (1999), has also received quieter but steady interest. Although these two works may be the first to come to mind when thinking about Lee, I would like to suggest that his third novel, 2004's *Aloft*, deserves a place on literature syllabi. In its contemporary, multicultural, suburban setting, it portrays a world that students recognize; simultaneously, however, it can effectively challenge their assumptions about Asian American literature.

At the center of *Aloft* is the sixtyish Jerry Battle, an amateur pilot who distances himself from his problems in his private jet, high above Long Island. Indeed, he has no shortage of problems to escape from. Jerry struggles with the recent breakup of a long-term relationship; the imminent collapse of Battle Brothers, the family landscaping business now run by his son Jack; and his daughter Theresa's decision not to treat her recently-diagnosed cancer because the treatment would interfere with her pregnancy. Other unresolved traumas linger in the background, particularly the death of his first wife, who drowned in the family swimming pool when their children were young.

The novel not only portrays the Battles' troubles, but also the family's five-generation evolution from Italian immigrants named Battaglia to comfortably ensconced white suburbanites to a multi-racial blend. Jerry observes, "As a group you can't really tell what the hell we are, though more and more these days the very question is apparently dubious, if not downright crass" (69). His father Hank puts it more bluntly, demanding of him, "Jesus. How did our family get so damn Oriental?" (172). Jerry's first wife, Daisy Han, was a Korean immigrant, and his children are therefore, he says, "of mixed blood, even though I have never thought of them that way" (29). Jerry's second wife, and the children's stepmother, Rita Reyes, is Puerto Rican, further complicating the family tree.

Despite Hank's surprise at his now-multicultural family, the Battles are in fact surrounded by difference. Their Long Island includes a mix of races and cultures, from the "Hispanic men" Battle Brothers hires "literally off the street each morning in Farmingville" (24) to the young legal associates of Jerry's friend Richie Coniglio, whom he describes as "not an altogether typical crew (though probably I'm dead wrong), as the two young lawyers are minorities, black and Asian" (181). He buys his airplane from an African American man named Hal and has a good working relationship with young Miles Quintana, the "designated Spanish speaker" (34) at the travel agency where Jerry works part time. The Battles are by no means the only mixed family in

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Jerry's world; Hal, Miles, and Richie's associates are all romantically linked to white women, and Richie himself dates Rita for a time.

The broad range of characters in *Aloft*, a multigenerational mix of many races and ethnicities, speaks to the diversity of the contemporary classroom, and I have taught the novel successfully in two distinct settings: first, in Introduction to Asian American Literature at Hunter College of the City University of New York, a large, diverse urban public university, and second, in Ethnic American Literature at Gustavus Adolphus College, a small, private, Lutheran liberal arts college. At Hunter, approximately two thirds of the students in the course were Asian and Pacific Islander American, whether immigrants or second- or third- or later-generation American, from East and South and Southeast Asia; the remaining third were African American, Latino, and a mix of white ethnicities (Italian, Ukrainian, etc.). The students represented a range of ages, with many older than their early 20s. At Gustavus, the students were more traditionally college-aged and predominantly Minnesota natives; perhaps a fifth of the classroom was nonwhite. Despite the significant differences between the two student populations, and the context in which they encountered the novel, both engaged enthusiastically with *Aloft*.

***Aloft* in Context**

Perhaps surprisingly, my students at both campuses have found *Aloft* easy to relate to, even though Jerry Battle is not only older than many of their parents, but not always likeable as a protagonist and decidedly literary as a narrator, given to lengthy passages of description and introspection. It may be that the variety of characters gives everyone an entry point; the novel features four generations of the Battle family, from Jerry's father to his grandchildren, and Jerry's family, friends, and acquaintances include men and women from a full spectrum of ethnicities. If you don't identify with Jerry, perhaps you can relate to his daughter Theresa or his young coworker Miles Quintana. But even apart from personal identification with individual characters, students see the world they know reflected in *Aloft*.

Though published four years before the 2008 presidential election, *Aloft* could be described as a quintessentially Obama-era novel in its portrayal of the current landscape of race and ethnicity in America. As the first African American president, Obama has been described repeatedly in the media as a harbinger of a "post-racial" society in which race is a nonissue and voters are colorblind in their selection of candidates (a proposition whose accuracy and desirability remain open to debate). Simultaneously, Obama complicates earlier black and white notions of race, with one white parent from Kansas and one Black parent from Kenya (not to mention a childhood spent in Hawaii and Indonesia). In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 52% of survey respondents said that they think of Obama not as Black, but as mixed race; in the same poll, 16% of respondents identified themselves as mixed race. Researchers suggest that these findings "demonstrate that, at the very least, the old categories are hard-pressed to describe America's new demographic realities" (5).

Aloft, with its portrayal of a mixed race family located in a diverse world, does capture some of that reality, as well as the popular attitude toward these new demographics. Jerry Battle describes Maya, the receptionist at Battle Brothers, as "a hot little multicultural number (like a young Rita but with some West Indian or Thai mixed in)" (135), the word "hot" suggesting not only sexiness but trendiness. Throughout the

2000s, politicians, actors, athletes, models, and musicians have made mixed race identities visible and fashionable. In addition to Obama, there have been Salma Hayek, Jessica Alba, Derek Jeter, Tiger Woods, Kimora Lee Simmons, Tyson Beckford, Mariah Carey, and Shakira, just to name a few. It's a far cry from the United States in which interracial marriage was not only stigmatized but outlawed, with the last anti-miscegenation laws struck down as recently as 1967 with the Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*.

Lee's novel can provide an opportunity to discuss the changing perception of race in the United States, which is a reality not only for celebrities but also for average Americans. The new millennium heralded an evolution in racial thinking with the 2000 census, the first in which respondents could select more than one race when describing themselves. Not simply a neutral reflection of preexisting reality but also a tool that shapes perceptions of reality, the census provides one way with which to discuss American ideas about race. "Even a brief survey of U.S. census schedules, past and present, raises questions that require answers," notes Melissa Nobles in her book *Shades of Citizenship*: "What do the terms *octoroon* and *quadroon* mean, and what were they doing in the 1890 census? How does one explain the seeming explosion of racial categories since 1970? More basically, why does race even appear in the census, and why have the categories changed from nearly one census to the next?" (x). Examining historical census forms can be a helpful classroom activity for thinking about the changing parameters of race.¹ I have asked students, in groups, to compare and contrast forms from 1790, 1880, 1950, 1970, and 2000, noting what has changed, what has stayed the same, and what the classifications might reflect about the current events and beliefs of the time period. We also discuss the difference between selecting one's own racial/ethnic categories and having them selected by a census taker and speculate about what future census forms might look like. Students seem interested in this way of labeling identity, perhaps because personal data is so frequently solicited of them in applications for college and graduate school admission, financial aid, fellowships, internships, and post-graduation employment. This immediate personal interest can lead to exploration of current attitudes toward race and ethnicity, and how they fit in to a historical picture.

***Aloft* and Ethnicity**

As a contemporary novel, *Aloft* fits naturally at the end of a course that proceeds chronologically; furthermore, the novel works well at the end of a class in ethnic American literature or Asian American literature as a way to help students clarify their understanding and question their assumptions about the literature they have been reading. The narrator, Jerry, is a starting place for thinking and re-thinking about the way *Aloft* challenges readers' expectations, and discussion might begin with their understanding of his ethnicity, which is not specified until the second chapter (although the first does provide a few subtle hints). In fact, Jerry is Italian American, which surprises students who tend to expect the narrator and author of an ethnic American text to be of the same background. Discussion about when and why it became apparent

I would like to thank the Ohio University English faculty for their feedback on a draft of this essay at a department colloquium.

¹ Forms may be downloaded from www.census.gov/multimedia/www/photos/census_history/historical_forms.php.

that Jerry was not Korean American, like the author, can then lead to an exploration of the significance of this unexpected and delayed identification.

Questions of when, how, and why the novel labels its characters may be examined through the scene in the first chapter in which Jerry, in flashback, recalls how he purchased his airplane from its previous owner, Hal. He describes Hal's suburban home, his charming wife, his age and medical condition and previous employment, then adds, "And I should probably not so parenthetically mention right now that Hal was black" (11). Jerry's not-so-parenthetical description tends to interest students, and seems to reflect a common dilemma in their daily lives – when is it relevant, polite, and/or necessary to identify racial difference? Classes tend to be divided about whether Jerry should have noted Hal's race right away (perhaps in fairness to him, as race and racism have been significant aspects of Hal's life), or whether it was wrong of him to mention it at all (because it has no bearing on whether or not Jerry will buy his airplane). Thinking about Jerry's description of Hal from the perspective of personal experience helps the class to think about Lee's presentation of Jerry and about their own expectations of the novel. Did they assume that Hal was white until informed otherwise, since whiteness is typically unlabeled? And did they assume that the similarly unlabeled Jerry was likewise white? Or that he must be Asian American, because Lee is?

If students are surprised that Lee's protagonist is so distinct from himself, that expectation may arise naturally from patterns observed in their other course readings. Many of the texts commonly taught in ethnic American literature classes are autobiographical, or if fictional, closely based on the author's life; such texts rely on factuality and personal identity to combat racism, educate outsiders, articulate the challenges of belonging to a minority group in the United States, and express pride in personal heritage and community. *Aloft*, however, plays by other rules. Lee does seem to have a surrogate in Paul Pyun, Theresa's fiancé and an author who "writes about The Problem with Being Sort of Himself – namely, the terribly conflicted and complicated state of being Asian and American and thoughtful and male, which would be just dandy in a slightly different culture or society but in this one isn't the hottest ticket" (74).² But Paul is a comparatively minor character, and the center of the novel is occupied by a figure different in many ways from the author. Although classics such as *The Woman Warrior* (1976) continue to be taught as "contemporary" literature, the contrast between Lee's work and the '70s-era surge of ethnic writing shows that ethnic American literature continues to evolve and may be more challenging to define than students expect.

As a concluding writing assignment in my Ethnic American Literature course, I asked students to argue for or against *Aloft* as "ethnic American literature," explaining their criteria for making that judgment and giving examples that show how the novel does or does not fit into patterns established by the other course readings. Although students were able to draw many distinctions, some interesting similarities also emerged; for example, in a class where we read *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Lee's novel resonated with Richard Rodriguez's skepticism about whether his book should be shelved "alongside specimens of that exotic new genre, 'ethnic literature,'" as he intends to write not "the typical Hispanic-American life," but "the life of a middle-class

² Indeed, Lee has commented that Paul is "someone I wrote to make fun of myself and to make fun of the image of the 'Asian American writer' working out his anxieties" ("Flying").

man" (7). Like Rodriguez, Lee here foregrounds class and tries to break out of strictures others place on "ethnic" writing. Since we began the semester by discussing the class's initial expectations of what makes texts "ethnic," what makes them "American," and what makes them "literature," this assignment offers a way for students to reevaluate their preliminary answers to those questions and to assess the way their thinking has deepened as a result of their reading.

Similar questions also frame the Introduction to Asian American Literature course. Scholars continue to interrogate the parameters of Asian American literature and identity,³ and these concerns are no less relevant to undergraduates beginning their studies in the field. Although *Aloft's* defiance of expectations seems highly contemporary, in fact, the novel resonates closely with earlier texts. Our first readings in this class included works by the early 20th century writers Edith and Winnifred Eaton, sisters of Chinese and British ancestry who crafted distinct authorial personae; Edith adopted the Chinese pen name Sui Sin Far and wrote stories and reportage in defense of Chinese immigrants, while Winnifred invented a "Japanese" alter ego (Onoto Watanna) in order to write novels appealing to the popular taste for Japonisme. Often claimed as the first Asian American fiction writers, their complex identities pose a challenge to the definition of that field. Wei Ming Dariotis suggests that the example of Edith Eaton "can create a space in which to critique and problematize accepted racial categories [and] help us explode the idea that there ever was an original authentic Asian American or Chinese American identity" (75-76). In this context, Lee's novel seems like a return to the earliest days of Asian American literature, in which literary identities were complex and malleable. If writers like the Eatons are taken as foundational, then *Aloft* may be less a unique challenge to expectations than a continuing reminder of the instability of the designation of "Asian American literature."

***Aloft* and Whiteness**

The novel's racial boundary-crossing provides an opportunity to think not only about the parameters of Asian American literature specifically and ethnic literature more broadly, but also about issues of whiteness. Although students are often unaccustomed to discussing this topic, *Aloft* helps them to do so by creating a context in which whiteness is brought to the foreground rather than tacitly treated as the norm. Ruth Frankenberg explains that "[t]o speak of whiteness is ... to assign *everyone* a place in the relations of racism. It is to emphasize that dealing with racism is not merely an option for white people – that, rather, racism shapes white people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life" (6). *Aloft*, too, highlights the role of race generally and whiteness particularly in the everyday lives of white individuals, a concept so important to Lee that he made two central characters, Theresa and her fiancé Paul, scholars able to discuss the roles of colonialism and Orientalism in their family's lives, explicitly and in academic terms. Jerry is forced both negatively, by his daughter's labeling of his own "rapacious hegemonic colonialis[m]" (28), and

³ Mark C. Jerng outlines the debate in his treatment of *Aloft*: "Should [the object of study for Asian American literary critics] be defined minimally in terms of the author's ancestry ...? Should it be defined as a genre whose content treats Asian American subjects irrespective of the author? Or should it be defined irrespective of content or authorial identity and more in terms of a shared aesthetic or formal concern ...?" (184).

positively, by his close relationships to people of other backgrounds, to see race as a force in his life.

Toward the beginning of the novel, Jerry's daughter Theresa characterizes him as "the last living white man" (28), an assertion that raised interesting debates when students were asked to agree or disagree with the description. Jerry's complicated relationships with ethnic others are one entry point into this discussion. He seems drawn toward difference: his first wife, and Theresa's and Jack's mother, was a Korean woman named Daisy Han, and after Daisy's death, Jerry entered a long-term relationship with Puerto Rican Rita Reyes. Yet Jerry's interest in these women is debatable; when, for example, he describes how he would "cup [Rita's] silky butterscotch breast through the opening of her robe" (5), is he celebrating their difference? Exoticizing her? Congratulating himself for being "colorblind" enough to romance a woman his friends would expect to be the maid? His relationship with Daisy may also be questioned. Analyzing his attraction to her mother, Theresa suggests that he is "your basic sorry white dude afflicted with ... 'Saigon syndrome' (*Me so horny, G.I. Joe!*)," and Jerry admits that "I found [Daisy] desirable precisely because she was put together differently from what I was used to" (107-08). His attraction to difference is not only romantic; musing about his friendship with Theresa's fiancé Paul, he speculates that its success may result from the fact that they

have neither the subtle pressure nor the dulling effect of instant concord, an ease and comfort I've enjoyed all my life but find increasingly wanting now. Maybe I'm a racist (or racist?) and simply like the fact that he's different, that he's short and yellow and brainy (his words, originally), and that he makes *me* somehow different, whether I really wish to be or not. (93)

Characteristically, Jerry refuses to commit himself to an interpretation here. He is only "maybe" a racist or racist, and his tone might convey sincere self-examination, irony, or defiance.

Yet while it would be hard to argue for Jerry as a perfect role model for white anti-racism, his experiences with Daisy, Rita, his children, and others also help him to develop a more nuanced understanding of his own position. He recognizes, for example that platitudes like "We're all individuals" or "We're all the same" are "smarmy" (235) and tries to refrain from taking whiteness as an unmarked norm (sensing a blister developing after a tennis game, Jerry observes that his skin has "gone the color of watermelon, just that shade (white) skin turns just before the blisters puff out" [188]). More deeply, Jerry's own self image seems to change. In his book *White*, Richard Dyer explains that the seeming invisibility of whiteness "is part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content ... white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's" (9). Jerry's appreciation of the way that Paul makes him "somehow different" seems to indicate a desire to have an identity with content rather than an unquestioned sense of white normality.

Another component of the question of Jerry's whiteness is his Italian American identity. As he recounts the family's history, he emphasizes their immigrant, ethnic beginnings, including the change of the family name, which had been Battaglia, and his father's and uncles' hardscrabble youth in Harlem, where they lived and fought among Irish, Jewish, and African Americans. The story of the Battle family is one of assimilation and upward mobility, culminating in a comfortable suburban life – a

mobility bound up in the eventual acceptance of Italians as white rather than racially “other.” Reading *Aloft* in the context of Asian American literature puts another spin on the idea of a transition into whiteness, since “the economic and educational success that Asian Americans have enjoyed in the United States” (Warren and Twine 213) has led many commentators to propose that Asian Americans are the next group likely to be accepted as “white.”⁴ But this transition does not only represent a success story. Although whiteness seems to be an expandable category, scholars have argued, it is consistently defined against Blackness, to the detriment of African Americans. Susan Koshy emphasizes “that such pressures to affiliate upward and disaffiliate downward were generated within a social structure in which the increased mobility of one racial group came at the expense of another: in James Baldwin’s succinct formulation, ‘the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro’” (156). Perhaps the Battle family provides a template for Asian American assimilation; perhaps it shows instead a historically situated transition that cannot, or should not, be repeated today.

Furthermore, even “white” groups may remain marked, as my Asian American Literature class at Hunter College demonstrated. When several students suggested that the proof of Jerry’s whiteness was the absence of current stereotypes and discrimination against Italian Americans, their Italian American classmates were quick to argue otherwise. Indeed, *Aloft* was published, and we were reading it, during the run of the HBO series *The Sopranos*, a show whose popularity suggested that the public is still eager to consume portrayals of Italian American Mafiosi. (Even after *The Sopranos’* run concluded in 2007, the appetite for stereotype continues – witness the popularity of MTV’s reality series *Jersey Shore* and its self-described “Guidos” and “Guidettes.”) Although there are few strong markers of Jerry’s heritage, this very absence may cause readers to rethink their expectations of Italian American life; indeed, *Aloft* often seems to work consciously against those expectations. While the Battle family landscaping business is blue-collar work, Jerry narrates in long, thoughtful, “lofty” sentences that belie stereotypes.

***Aloft* and Social Class**

In *Aloft*, as in life, issues of race and ethnicity are closely linked to class; the Battle family’s admission into whiteness is not only a cultural statement but an economic one. And like whiteness, class is an issue that students may not be accustomed to engaging with, one that the novel provides an opportunity to explore. When a character named “Richie” challenges Jerry to a match on his private tennis court, with Jerry’s airplane or Richie’s Ferrari at stake, it seems a clear signal that class plays an important role in the novel.

One way to begin a discussion of class in *Aloft* is through Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Because students are often unused to discussing class (sometimes based on a sense that the United States provides equality for all and thus lacks any stratified class system), or see it in a

⁴ In 1990, Richard D. Alba suggested that “[s]ome non-white and Hispanic groups may be beginning to undergo processes similar to those that have undercut ethnic differences among European whites – one thinks in this connection of Cubans, most Asian American groups, and the many Americans of American Indian ancestry who are integrated in the white population” (9, emphasis added). Less than a decade later, Eugene Volokh argued in the *L.A. Times* that, for better or for worse, the shift had occurred and that “Asians are now white” (B9).

simplified structure of rich, middle class, and poor, Bourdieu's theory provides both a specific language of class and a useful complication of students' preexisting ideas, which tend to focus only on economic forms of capital. Having talked through the three forms of capital, I have asked students, in groups, to locate the novel's characters in a hierarchy based on class. Some characters seem relatively easy to place, like Richie, with his luxurious lifestyle, based on his senior partnership at a law firm. Other characters present more difficulty and therefore give rise to interesting conversation. Theresa, a college professor, and Paul, a novelist, are educated people rich in cultural capital but lacking in economic capital. Jerry has an airplane, but does that mean he's wealthy? Battle Brothers is a landscaping business, so are the Battles blue collar? Does Jack's "McMansion" qualify as an actual mansion?

The groups often have trouble filling in the other end of the spectrum, characters lacking capital. In fact, however, the novel does offer glimpses of such characters: Jack's "nanny/cook/housekeeper" Rosario (66), as well as the Latino laborers employed by Battle Brothers. The seeming invisibility of these people in the novel mirrors their invisibility in real life, even as they support the "McMansion" lifestyles of others. Once attention is brought to these characters, it is easy to see their relevance to contemporary America, particularly in light of the 2000s-era debates about undocumented workers doing "jobs Americans won't do." As students flesh out the full picture of capital in *Aloft*, they also observe the way race and class are linked – trending white at the top of the heap, and nonwhite on the bottom.

The most familiar class-related discourse in the United States is that of upward mobility, and *Aloft* presents a version of that story in the history of the Battaglia family and the development of Battle Brothers. Although the novel presents this familiar rags-to-riches journey, it also invites us to ask whether such success is sustainable. Pondering his family's history, Jerry muses, "I of course recognize that one's character should rightly derive from privation, crucibles, pains in the ass, and so I guess my only semi-rhetorical question is from what else does it come, if there's always been a steady wind at your back, a full buffet as your table, and the always cosseted parachuted airbagged feeling of your bubbleness, which can never brook a real fear?" (290). Having begun with riches, the younger Battles may in fact be returning to rags; the current fortunes of Battle Brothers raise the specter of failure. Jerry's father, Hank, was really the last family member to develop the business; Jerry simply maintained it and Jack, in his attempts to expand from landscaping into remodeling, overreaches and ultimately causes Battle Brothers to collapse. Given the stagnation and arguable downward mobility of the family business, the novel may be suggesting that the American Dream has reached a point where it has become unrealistic – if in fact it ever was.

***Aloft* as Text**

Last, but not least, students seem to enjoy engaging with *Aloft* on a more strictly textual level, and the book rewards close reading. Many discussions arise in the areas of plot and character. Students seem to be especially interested in Theresa, and why such an otherwise-progressive woman would choose to risk her own life for a pregnancy rather than terminating it and proceeding with treatments for her non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Theresa's relationships with the other characters are also worthy of examination. For example, she and her brother Jack seem to have had very different

responses to the childhood they had in common, both in their approaches to developing a mixed race identity and in their reactions to their mother's death. Likewise, other questions might include what they seem to have inherited from their parents and whether Jerry was a good father to them ("You're always just there, taking it in," Theresa tells him, describing his role in her childhood. "Like tofu in soup" [243]).

Discussions also proceed from issues of theme and symbol. Students might consider the effect of the book's opening scene, which positions Jerry in the air above Long Island, flying alone in his private airplane. The airborne perspective gives a broad view of the setting, contemporary suburbia (Jerry looks down on a mix of old and new, all seemingly more magnificent from the air than from land) and hints strongly at Jerry's personality, in the way that he distances himself from his problems, and in the fact that he has marked the roof of his own home with "slightly darker-shaded shingles in the form of a wide, squat X" visible only from the air (21). Notions of flight are interlaced with disaster beginning in the first chapter, where we learn that Hal first bought his airplane as a kind of tribute to his son Donnie (killed by a drunk driver just before enrolling in medical school) and is now selling it because he suffered a stroke in the air and can no longer fly. Hal implies that potential buyers have been put off by his race, but his wife says that "it's because they come and see him like he is, and they think the plane has bad luck" (18). Although she says the idea of bad karma is "poppycock," it nonetheless presents a foreboding image.

In the conclusion, the novel is bookended with an inverse scene in which Jerry looks up at the sky from a hole in the earth (soon to become a new backyard swimming pool replacing the one where Daisy died).

Unlined as yet with concrete and tiles, it's a huge dark shoebox, the earth cool and still moist in the corners and along the deep end. And as scary and unnervingly quiet as it is to be even this far below ground, I do like the smell, which is loamy and fat and sweetly vernal, not at all of extinction, and I breathe in as deeply as I can bear. I've found myself coming down here at least once or twice a day, standing and sitting and then leaning back against the steeply ramped dirt, gazing up at a perfect frame of firmament for flights endless, unseen.

Now where's Jerry? somebody says, the barely audible sound traveling just above and far enough away from me that I don't immediately answer. It's okay. No problem. They'll start without me, you'll see. (342-43)

Students tend to have a variety of responses to the end of the novel; some see it as comforting, and an improvement over the distanced, airborne Jerry of the novel's introduction, while others observe that Jerry seems to be lying somewhere very much like a grave. They are also able to debate whether, and to what extent, Jerry has changed over the course of the book, noting that he has finally been "grounded," but that he is still distanced from his family.

Although they may seem removed from questions of race, ethnicity, and class, such textual issues are, ultimately, also related to Lee's ethnic border-crossing. As a first-person book about an Italian American character by an Asian American writer, *Aloft* performs a kind of cultural appropriation – though the nature and significance of that appropriation are open to discussion. Gayatri Spivak has argued that the right to comment on a culture may be earned by thorough, respectful study (12), and to Lee, close reading reveals the appropriateness of border crossing, whether in Arthur

Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, or his own *Aloft*. "When evaluating a book by an author who crosses racial lines," he argues, "you have to start with what you would normally look at in any book: the characters, the language, what happens to the characters. If something doesn't quite fit, if something seems out of place, then maybe you could say that the writer didn't understand a character, didn't understand the culture, etc." ("Flying"). Lee argues, in other words, that the text itself demonstrates the amount of "homework" a writer has done toward earning the right, and building the ability, to cross cultures.

While cultural appropriation is an issue of power, as theorists such as Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao observe, *Aloft* is an unusual case, not really "a taking from a subordinate into a dominant culture" yet not quite its "complementary opposite: cultural assimilation" (5). *Aloft* instead claims the power to challenge preexisting frameworks. Mark C. Jerng argues that in the novel, "Lee disrupts conventional assignments of where and when race signifies. *Aloft* thus poses the problem of reading race when it cannot be located within modes of perception built around the literary formation of ethnic literature and ethnic author" (186). In the classroom, therefore, *Aloft* provides an opportunity for professors and students to challenge their preconceived notions about identity in individual texts and authors, in literary canon(s), and in the world around us.

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