

Speaking and Mourning: Working Through Identity and Language in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

By Matthew L. Miller

In his five novels to this point, Chang-rae Lee suggests a penchant for trauma associated with identity, especially concerning Asian Americans and their integration in America. Paying attention to his works one can find a two-pronged trope in his fiction that notes how immigration can become a traumatic experience and how that trauma can be worked through. To better understand these themes, I explore Lee's first novel, *Native Speaker*. Through this book, Lee most completely interrogates the traumas that impact the Asian American psyche: racial melancholia, economic hardships, and language acquisition.¹ The protagonist Henry Park, someone working in these processes and maintaining his own melancholic identifications, finds himself at a crucial juncture: he appears emotionally detached and psychologically haunted at the novel's beginning. This essay focuses on the protagonist's traumas, specifically addressing his rocky past concerning assimilation and his English language acquisition. He has created an inauthentic persona through his job as an ethnic spy and a professional immigrant, I contend. The real pain of his son Mitt's sudden death, both a trauma of the heart and of the self, makes Henry lose the promise for the successful navigation of both language and identity as an Asian American. Henry looks to replace Mitt's example with John Kwang before he symbolically dies in controversy. Lee embeds the book with two characters that show Henry how to mourn loss and work through his traumas. Henry exits the novel with the promise of a healthy life and with an authentic identity.²

For Asian Americans, immigration and its often required assimilation causes a melancholic relationship to the United States, a relationship that fosters simultaneous separation from and alignment with the majority (white) norm. Anne Anlin Cheng explains, "The double malady of melancholia for the racial-ethnic subject is the condition of having to incorporate and encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self" (72; emphasis original). For many people, this ideal manifests into the "model minority," a dangerous, inaccurate myth that Asians are the perfect new Americans who quietly and politely climb the ladder of success. To acquire this ladder though often demands allegiances to stereotypes of Asian Americans, who may lose their personalities and

¹ Lorna Bradbury even opens her article with Lee's statement, "Most people don't think about race as much as I do [...] They don't have to" (qtd. in Bradbury).

² I have chosen to use the protagonist's first name throughout the essay. Most critics refer to him by his surname "Park." I find the ambiguous connotations of "Park" to be too ironic for any discussion of trauma (i.e., he is parked or stationery in his life). I want the protagonist to be more humanized by referring to him as Henry.

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cultures in the process. David Eng and Shinhee Han, a cultural/literary scholar and a practicing psychotherapist respectively, describe this process: “Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society—in order *to be* at all” (350; emphasis original). Ironically, authenticity emerges from demanded falsehood. Unless Asian Americans play out the stereotype they will not be deemed “authentic” Americans: “In this sense, the Asian American model minority *subject* endures in the United States as a melancholic national *object*—as a haunting specter to democratic ideals of inclusion that cannot quite ‘get over’ the histories of these legislated proscriptions of loss” (Eng and Han 348; emphasis original). Eng and Han’s analysis of Asian Americans, especially ones forced to hold on to and to mimic the stereotype “as haunting specter[s]” shows that individuals are stuck within the prejudices of race, psychologically internalizing those misconstrued notions of themselves. Being unable to escape these dynamics, Asian Americans can develop a melancholic identification with stereotype. Melancholia, as Freud originally outlined, finds that with loss—in this case, of whom they truly are as Asian Americans—people cannot let their losses go causing them to be absorbed and redirected back unto themselves; they lose who they are but may never have really existed outside the stereotype [i.e., “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246)]. The self of Asian Americans, authentic identity if we will, thus can become lost and irrecoverable. As Cheng notes, “[R]acial identity as a melancholic formation is to apprehend that identity’s instability and its indebtedness to the dis-identity it is also claiming” (24). In other words, they have to hold on to that stereotype no matter what because it is all that exists of whom they are. As a result, Asian Americans have a more complicated space to live in; tied to a “racialized loss or lack,” the immigrant loses “citizenship rights, legal protections, economic opportunities, and an unfettered ‘self’” (Shui 4). Along the lines of this discussion, Tim Engles in “‘Visions of me in the whitest raw light’: Assimilation and Doxic Whiteness in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*” argues that “Henry unwittingly reveals that he has tended to adopt unwittingly a middle-class white perspective on himself” (28). Because he has not tackled the damage of unconscious, melancholic (white) assimilation, Henry has not found an authentic self as an Asian American.

Through imagining his protagonist as the most deeply affected example of racial melancholia, Lee argues that immigration and its demanded assimilation is a trauma for Asian Americans and others. So detailed, the novel could stand as autoethnography, according to Jonathan Arac. All immigrants, including Henry himself (as the narrator below), share a narrative of loss:

And the more I see and remember the more their story is the same. The story is mine. How I come by plane, come by boat. Come climbing over a fence. When I get here, I work. I work for the day I will finally work for myself. I work so hard that one day I end up forgetting the person I am. I forget my wife, my son. Now, too, I have lost my old mother tongue. And I forget the ancestral graves I have left on a hillside of a faraway land, the loneliest stones that each year go unblessed. (279)

By superimposing his point of view onto the stories of other immigrants, Henry actualizes here the tremendous prices of living in America as a minority who all forget the person he/she is. Further, immigrants have to develop a work/public self at the cost of their culture and heritage. Specifically, “assimilation into the national fabric demands

a psychic splitting on the part of the Asian American" (Eng and Han 348). This splitting between origin and America, the "old mother tongue," "ancestral graves" in a "faraway land" aside from being a melancholic relationship, which is held on to but lost, oftentimes becomes a trauma that cannot easily be worked through.³ Lee explains this splitting in an interview; responding to the question, "How much of you is connected to Korea?" he says, "My daily life is the life of an American. But I've always had something Korean there—Korean core or Korean sensibility" (qtd. in Y-O. Lee 216). For ethnic peoples or "the raced subject," assimilation creates "the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception" (Cheng 17; emphasis original). Through the hegemony of the ideal "American Dream" and the allegiance to "model minority" status, Asian American immigrants consciously and unconsciously become forced and coopted to maintain their internalized oppression: "assimilation into mainstream culture for people of color still means adopting a set of dominant norms and ideals—whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class family values [. . .] The loss of these norms [. . .] establishes one melancholic framework for delineating assimilation and racialization [. . .] as a series of failed and unresolved integrations" (Eng and Han 344). These failed and unresolved integrations can become traumas that demand addressing. Most destructive, to them, they never can reach the model minority ideal nor return to life among the others. Within Asian American literature, "assimilation foregrounds itself as a repetitive trauma" (Cheng 67). Asian Americans, who get trapped between white America and their culture, "[s]huttling between 'black' and 'white' [. . .]," "occupy a truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization" (Cheng 23). Specters in the background living in a limbo of racism, Asian Americans, particularly Henry in this case, appear in—but are not present in—American life. Like the stereotyped "Hop Sing" (played by actor Victor Sen Yung) on the classic American television series *Bonanza*, Asian Americans are relegated to minor roles in our culture, despite participating in nearly every episode. In *Native Speaker*, such discussions of Asians as ghosts, or invisible characters, has not been understated by critics.⁴

Additionally, economic forces in America can create anxiety and/or trauma. American capitalism demands obedience and potential degradation for immigrant survival. For instance, "Hop Sing" has no choice but to serve the Cartwrights while living in 19th century America. To contextualize such a mentality, Min Hyoung Song who writes "A Diasporic Future?: *Native Speaker* and Historical Trauma" finds that "Chang-rae Lee's first novel is preoccupied with serial historical traumas" (81).⁵ For Song, Korean

³ Theoretically this idea aligns with Anne Anlin Cheng's concepts in *The Melancholy of Race*. She proves that American culture demands a psychological alliance to whiteness: "Dominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial" (Cheng 11). In other words, those outside the dominant culture simultaneously have to desire and reject whiteness. This delicate and unstable dance is nearly impossible to balance successfully.

⁴ In terms of the novel, this connotation has not been lost on critics. An opposing argument to assimilation in the book can be found in Daniel Y. Kim's "Do I, Too, Sing America?: Vernacular Representations and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*." He argues, "Lee's novel [. . .] attempts to cast light on the psychic costs of the invisibility imposed on a minority community by white Americans and of the invisibility that prevents those *within* a minority community from recognizing each other" (D. Kim 232).

⁵ One such historical situation is explained by Jodi Kim who sees the novel as a metaphor for the Cold War. She argues, "Lee's narrative attends to the war as a complex problem of knowledge production[. . .] The conundrum Henry faces, in other words, is not simply the challenge of negotiating an ethnic or racialized identity. It is also a reckoning with the Cold War history through and under which he and his family are compelled to be in the US in the first place" (118).

characters in the novel are identified as diasporic figures: a group with “a culture of shared traumas” (82). All immigrants, often economic refugees from places of origin, find themselves drowning in an ocean of economic hardship in the United States. Within the novel, America becomes a purgatory where working class immigrants inhale “the steam of fumes” and “other fires.” “[A]lways loading and unloading” their “light trucks and cube vans of stapled wooden crates and burlap sacks, the bugling bags of produce,” these individuals set aside their families for their wares, chucking merchandise over their shoulders instead of their children: the “turnips or jicama” become “as heavy on their sloping shoulders as the bodies of their children still asleep at home” (82-3).⁶ Just as assimilation forces the loss of language and memories, the daily economic grind of life in America makes immigrants give away part of themselves just to survive. All immigrants have a “narrative, based on history and repeated traumas, that enables strong affective bonds, often melancholic or haunted in mood, between fellow [immigrants] and a country faraway and inaccessible” (Song 85).⁷ Working from this framework, Henry, masked in stereotype, knows that being a corporate (ethnic) spy creates leverage with the American market. His only recognition in contemporary America is to be the stereotype whites wish from him. No matter his psychological damage, he must perform for the white world.

As the novel’s title alludes to, becoming a (new) “native” speaker of English can be another trauma. As Eng and Han explain, “This estrangement from language, native and foreign, is a double loss. While acquiring a new language (English) should be perceived as a positive cognitive development, what is not often acknowledged or emphasized enough is the concomitant psychic trauma triggered by the loss of what had once been safe, nurturing, and familiar” (the native language) (357). Lee fictionalizes the struggles of language acquisition and fluency. Immigrants, especially Henry, have not overcome the pain of these experiences, melancholically internalizing it as a trauma. Returning to aforementioned imagery, immigrants are “ghostly forms,” people who struggle “to shift themselves forward,” as they work their menial jobs (82). Economic necessity elbows aside family and culture, especially language. Henry, like the workers on the street, has been forced to “forget” his Korean roots and language, erasing any cultural connections and remarking, “I never fathomed the need of the culture even for the smallest acts” (271). Or as Henry’s father shrewdly observes, it is “hard to stay Korean” in America (51).⁸ To put it another way, “One becomes a good American precisely by refusing to be any type of Korean at all, whether good, bad, or in between” (Kim 117). Original languages, the most intimate cultural links, transform into profound losses of culture. Lee provides one powerful example, as Henry notices near a market: “One of the fathers will stall in broken English while the others hastily pack the merchandise into the van. *No trouble, no trouble*, he’ll say, shouting it, bowing, shaking his hands, seeming to beg” (238). This exchange between a street hawker and a police officer becomes the “necessary song” of the immigrant, an anthem of emasculation. Moreover, the vendors’ sons know the chorus of this degrading lyric, for “[t]he boys know it, too, they’ve learned it well.” “They will share” with their parents this “last language” of submission and fear (238). These kids will lose their original languages, the

⁶ Christa Baiada offers a reading of this passage that compares it to Fitzgerald’s valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*: “Lee obliges Henry to see clearly: the struggle of exploited human life—the labor that threatens to devour the masses in its gaping jaws; bodies dissolving into specters, engulfed in noxious air” (66).

⁷ Perhaps this is why Lee notices that immigrants eat “alone” at a Korean noodle shop (315).

⁸ Lee provides an extended outline for immigrant success on page 47.

language of their parents, cultures, and souls. After all, “language is the privileged vehicle by which standards of successful assimilation and failed imitation are measured” (Eng and Han 357). English thus becomes a rung on the ladder of American success. These kids, like Henry, may find themselves one day unable to recall their original tongues.⁹

Before moving forward to Henry, it is important to understand another traumatized immigrant character. As a micro example, the character Ahjuhma illustrates these struggles to assimilate and survive in America. A “total alien,” Ahjuhma appears to Henry as “some kind of zombie”; she does not whistle, hum, exercise, listen to music, read, or watch TV (78, 65). “[S]he was barely present,” Henry feels, “when she wasn’t cleaning or cooking or folding clothes” (65)—the Cartwrights probably felt the same way with “Hop Sing.” Again, she is an immigrant trapped in an economy that devalues her as worthless. Notably she has been brought over by Henry’s father, who seemingly buys into the American Dream. Yung-Hsing Wu explains, “Ahjuhma confirms the Parks’ accomplishment of the American dream (their domesticity is sustained by the labor of an other) even as she embodies Korean authenticity (in cuisine, for instance)” (1470). Henry’s father’s success condones his “purchase” of this (O)ther immigrant, and America lauds him for it. Because she is not allowed to develop agency, Ahjuhma seems curiously immature to Henry who spies on her: “She went into Rocky’s Corner newsstand and bought a glossy teen magazine and a red Popsicle. She flipped through the pages, obviously looking only at the pictures. She ate the Popsicle like it was a hot dog in three large bites” (78). Symptomatic of her social, cultural, and linguistic alterity, Ahjuhma’s adolescent behavior above makes Lelia, Henry’s wife, see her as an “abandoned girl [. . .] all grown up” (73). Indeed, Lelia suspects that she is no stranger to suffering. Henry notices that “she only partly possessed her own body, and preferred it that way” (65) and imagines that “something deeply horrible had happened to her when she was young, some nameless pain, something brutal” (66). Indeed, the “deep pockmarks stippling her high, fleshy cheeks, like the scarring from a mistreated bout of chickenpox or smallpox” seem the very inscription of trauma (62). Isolated and lost, Ahjuhma “never called her family in Korea, and they never called her” (66). She thus has no language nor voice to explain her problems; she has no economic power to escape her circumstance. Enduring past sufferings silently and present humiliations quietly, she even neglects to tell Henry’s father that she is sick with pneumonia (80). She dies shortly thereafter. Ahjuhma is a subaltern figure, an encapsulation of the traumas I have outlined thus far.

While Ahjuhma is Lee’s understated example around the traumas in the novel, Henry is his chief case study. Like other immigrant characters, Henry suffers from the tug between cultural and linguistic forces at home and in public, between being Korean and American. Henry traditionally can be labeled a second-generation immigrant, the son of Korean-born grocer. He knows the American drive to succeed economically. Furthermore, Henry has been groomed to accept his struggles quietly and dutifully. Raised in a house where “suffering is the noblest art,” and where one learns the Korean proverb, “[o]ver the mountains there are mountains” (333), Henry is alienated emotionally and psychologically from others and himself, making him a perfect spy but also a wounded child all grown up. Lelia observes that, like his mother’s, Henry’s face

⁹ Henry wants to talk to a Korean merchantwoman but has lost his native language confessing: “If I had the sentences, the right words” and “If I were able with my speech” (316).

says, “You won’t get to me. Don’t try. I’m immune” (220). However, as a child, he yearns to belong:

[F]or a long time in my boyhood I would often awake before dawn and step outside on the front porch. It was always perfectly quiet and dark, as if the land were completely unpeopled save for me. No Korean father or mother, no taunting boys or girls, no teachers showing me how to say my American name. I’d then run back inside and look in the mirror, desperately hoping in that solitary moment to catch a glimpse of who I truly was; but looking back at me was just the same boy again, no clearer than before, unshakably lodged in that difficult face. (323)

Imagining a land without Americans and Koreans to torment him, a young Henry cannot move beyond his “difficult face” as a mark of Otherness, a gaze that coldly reflects his psychic and cultural liminality (which is “no clearer than before”). Henry desperately wants and needs his own mirror to confirm his identity.¹⁰ This schism between appearance and psyche makes Henry unsure of himself. He realizes—at least retrospectively—that he despises his skin when he sees the newly born Mitt, who “looked so fully Korean then.” When Lelia says as much out loud, Henry thinks about his internalized prejudice:

Though I kept quiet, I was deeply hurting inside, angry with the idea that she wished he was more white. The truth of my feeling, exposed and ugly to me now, is that I was the one who was hoping whiteness for Mitt, being fearful of what I might have bestowed on him: all that too-ready devotion and honoring, and the chilly pitch of my blood, and then all that burning language I once presumed useless, never uttered and never lived. (285)

Beyond Henry’s racial self-loathing is a deep-rooted negativity surrounding his cultural and linguistic heritage (i.e., the “devotion and honoring,” the “chilly pitch,” and most significantly “that burning language”). He does not want Mitt to inherit the struggles of living with having not-quite Korean, not-quite American customs, demeanors, and speech. He also does not want Mitt to be “deeply hurt inside” as Henry feels he is not quite (right)/white.

Part of Henry’s apprehension stems from his language learning in American schools. A troubled passage into English spurns Henry’s pain with language acquisition, eventually traumatizing him. Taught by the “ancient chalk-white woman” Mrs. Albrecht, Henry often was beaten with a ruler to learn the “sublime meter” of a Percy Shelley poem. Traumatized by this education, as Rachel Lee notes, he recalls how he would “choke” and “stumble inside [him]self” (233) when asked to speak.¹¹ Finding

¹⁰ Perhaps Lee plays homage to the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston’s famous *The Woman Warrior* who forces a silent school girl to speak in front of a mirror to affirm the protagonist’s own identity and linguistic superiority (175-82).

¹¹ Rachel Lee in “Reading Contests and Contesting Reading: Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Ethnic New York” finds that his experience in Mrs. Albrecht’s class may be even more traumatic. She says, “*Native Speaker* presents to its readers a Korean American male protagonist, Henry Park, who is undone by the English language, who compares his own induction into alien, that is, English literary classics [. . .] as a domestication, if not emasculation” (343). Rachel Lee’s exegesis of Park’s memory of the classroom returns as a “trauma”:

English not to be “another kind of coat you could wear,” Henry discovers the inadequacy of his speech: “[M]y tongue would tie in the initial attempts, stiffen so, struggle like an animal booby-trapped and dying inside my head” (233).¹² Anxiety-filled, Henry finds himself a victim of language, suffering like “a trapped animal.” For Henry, his language acquisition also involved a level of social ostracism. Sent away to speech class, a place for children from “difficult backgrounds” where kids were considered “dumb as the dead” (235), Henry experiences a kind of physical exile within his psychological one.¹³ When he was not in speech class, Henry was laughed at and called “Marble Mouth” for his “garbled voice” (234). Even years later, these experiences shape his belief that “English is a scabrous mouthful” (233) (i.e., *scabrous* evoking a cicatrix or scales of wounds, past trauma that has healed over but still exists).¹⁴ Likewise, he fears his struggles are contagious, thinking that he might “handicap” Mitt, or “stunt the speech blooming in his brain” if he read aloud to his son (239). Henry’s language fears correlate to the larger problem of racial melancholia discussed earlier. In other words, his racial and linguistic imperfections signify (to him) an unsuccessful assimilation and an incomplete identity.

Henry’s wounds from learning English still impact his life in the novel’s present. Indeed, Lee has described Henry as “someone who’s trying to figure out his language” (qtd. in Quan,). Despite his American upbringing, Henry still agonizes over a future where “[he] will always make bad errors of speech” (234). As a trained speech pathologist, Lelia notices when she first meets him that he “look[s] like someone listening to himself” (12).¹⁵ Trapped behind this inner gaze and anxiety, Henry cannot seem to express himself openly in Korean or English: “I always hear myself displacing the two languages, conflating them—maybe conflagrating them—for there’s so much rubbing and friction, a fire always threatens to blow up between the tongues” (234). He finds the “friction,” this generated “heat” between his two languages, to hinder and “afflict” his expression. In Korean, “[e]ven the most minor speech seemed trying” around his father, he explains. To counterbalance this inability Henry communicates with his father

The recollected reading lesson symbolizes cultural and linguistic assimilation as an ocean voyage: an image of transatlantic and transpacific crossing that will be several times repeated in the book, reminding the audience of the immigrant flows so crucial to New York’s and America’s history and culture. Though the verses themselves depict that crossing as a gentle drift into the sea, the recitation of this image is portrayed as a trauma, one of multiple bodily terrors: fecal contamination [. . .] and physical battery [. . .]. (344)

¹² David Cowart interprets Henry as the embodiment of “a paradox of double consciousness, his Korean self a kind of ethnic pentimento beneath the American” (108).

¹³ Kingston recalls a similar self-believed stupidity: “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two [. . .] I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length” (165).

¹⁴ The tangle, terrible struggle of expression through English deeply complicates and often can nullify assimilation. In a personal observation, Lee noticed this dilemma in his Korean mother’s language: for her, “the English language was not very funny. It usually meant trouble and a good dose of shame, and sometimes real hurt” (“Mute” 105).

¹⁵ Consequently, one of the Henry’s attractions to John Kwang stems from the latter’s confidence and precision with English. In a strange reversal, Henry catches himself listening to Kwang: “For despite how well he spoke, I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race.” Not finding a “mysterious dubbing going on,” Henry returns to his own insecurities knowing that strangers wait his “real speech” (i.e., Korean) (179). For another discussion of this character, see Daniel Y. Kim.

through gestures (e.g., putting flowers on his mother's grave and driving used cars [128]). In English, he cannot translate the scars from his past into a discernable language that assuages or even manages his psychological pains. Like our "Hop Sing" example, he decides to play parts that look authentic but are not real. Having "been raised to speak quietly and little" (for Lee seems to be evoking the same language here as used for Ahjuhma), Henry lacks the confidence to communicate (182). For example, he was "envious" of neighborhood friends who could "speak so confidently, so jubilantly" (182). Subsequently, he thinks that he may have never learned to speak for/about himself (288). This diffidence creates his distrust of emotional expressions, especially with the phrase, "I love you": "I never felt comfortable with the phrase, had a deep trouble with it, all the ways it was said. [. . .] You said it when you meant it and sometimes when you didn't. You somehow always said it when you had to" (112-13). Without an unconditional acceptance of this phrase and the American cultural parlance needed to contextualize it, Henry refuses to receive or share love with/from his wife and son. If he cannot freely love them, he may find it impossible to love himself.

Trapped behind this language barrier, Henry sees his job as an ethnic spy as an escape, an occupation of make believe where he can exploit his struggles to thrive economically. Using racial, cultural, and linguistic prejudices to his advantage, Henry identifies as a *professional* immigrant. His spy career, which as Christina Cheveresan explains, is "his double appurtenance (exploiting his Asian origins to the benefit of his American persona)" (120). As a professional immigrant, he endures the traumas of assimilation and language acquisition constantly to remain the perpetual, green-to-America stereotype. As a spy, he acts a part to succeed for the assignment. This plot has received a lot of critical attention, but for this reading, I think it is important to remember that his job is essentially just that: Henry as spy is literally and figuratively a "cover" for his (in)authentic self, which has been traumatized from the language-learning experience and racial melancholia.¹⁶ If anything, his job as spy is a byproduct of an internalized need

¹⁶ Critically, *Native Speaker* has generated a lot of discussion on Henry's job as an ethnic spy. Crystal Parikh, in her article "Ethnic America Undercover: The Intellectual and Minority Discourse," explains that the ethnic spy "challenges conventional models of knowledge-power relationships" (251). Moreover, James Kyung-Jin Lee summarizes Park's power: "As an Asian American, model minority, and spy—together in one person—Henry is Ariel with a paycheck, and these three identities reinforce one another because they all serve their respective Prosperos to defeat Caliban" (247). Joonok Huh in "'Strangest Chorale': New York City in *East Goes West* and *Native Speaker*" similarly sees Henry holding a privileged status. Huh even suggests that Henry has already arrived to his American dream. Christian Moraru also explains the best spy tactics in "Speakers and Sleepers: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, Whitman, and the Performance of Americanness": a secret agent has "the capacity to operate in more than one world and go back and forth between [the worlds of the spy and subject], screen people and lives perceptively, sift through their often culturally unfathomable texts, sort out the relevant and the trivial, and then write it all out by translating and formatting it into a 'story' the firm can in turn read and sell (68-9). These arguments overlook that Henry's being a spy does not automatically anoint him as a member of the (white) elite; he is not trickster in the Ariel sense. On the other hand, Henry's affinity other immigrants, and his awareness as an Other, make him a citizen on Caliban's island. Elaborating this position, Tina Chen analyzes the novel's spy plot through, "the paradoxical truth" which simultaneously "prevent[s] him from speaking" his mind yet "enable[s] him to articulate a semblance of self" (640). The dichotomy Chen sees allows Lee's novel to "operate behind the mask of the spy story in order to expose the formal limitations of narration [and . . .] to acknowledge the important role conventions play in dictating the stories by which we know ourselves and others" (640). Chen's points are salient. The novel is about this "articulation" she describes. Another reading boils the spy plot to Henry's unhealthy assimilation: "In my view, Henry blames not Korean culture but the searing effects of assimilation imperative for making him a self-alienated spy" (Rody 80). However, by largely focusing on the spy subplot, these critics misplace the novel's emphasis.

to find some type of “American” belonging or identity. He thus feels his “truest place in the culture” is in his job, where he “could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once” (127). Playing a “series of men,” Henry enjoys the comfort of “serial identity” (33)—a form of impersonation found in espionage: “Call me what you will. An assimiliist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. I have already been whatever you can say or imagine, every version of the newcomer who is always fearing and bitter and sad” (160).¹⁷ Henry believes that he as a spy can become whatever the audience expects, and he understands rather keenly this ability to bring out and imitate artificial personalities, the essence of a “model minority”:

I am an amiable man. I can be most personable, if not charming, and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me. In this sense I am not a seducer. I am hardly seen. I won’t speak untruths to you, I won’t pass easy compliments or odious offerings of flattery. I make do with on-hand materials, what I can chip out of you, your natural ore. Then I fuel the fire of your most secret vanity. (7)

This elaborate performance, or mimicry, reassures Henry’s audience, allowing him to subvert (or undermine) these people with kindness.¹⁸ That is, he believes he echoes subversively. Michelle Young-Mee Rhee labels this strategy through other means: “Asian Americans become model citizens in precisely the same way that model citizenship can be dismantled: through betrayal” (163). Another critic sees Henry’s performance this way: “Having been sentenced to a problematic subjectivity, a life of invisibility, an existence as ethnic other, Park makes his living in domestic espionage. His job, in fact, becomes the novel’s basic metaphor for life as a hyphenated American. He is a good spy precisely because he seems in his own eyes not to be assimilated” (Coward 110). Unlike the models of his father or John Kwang (at least publicly), Henry does not possess a “personal lore,” a metanarrative that defines his identity. His father had tried to be a protector and provider, believing in the “old-fashioned idea of nation as personal test—and by extension, a test of family—and not only because he was an immigrant” (136). Kwang has, as it were, a “greater lore,” according to the narrator, based on his journey to America and his burgeoning sense that “America [is] a part of him” (211).¹⁹ Henry, instead, tries to enact his own narratives of self-invention through his job. Not taking a “crucial leap” like Kwang (211) or adhering like his father to a “small man’s folly of sometimes seeing himself in terms historical,” he uses his job to “mine” objects he

¹⁷ This theory comes from Henry’s observation that Jack (his friend and coworker) functions as a “series of men,”—a killer, a lover, a husband, etc. (33).

¹⁸ Indeed, Henry is the immigrant version of Homi Bhabha’s “sly” civilian working to undermine the people in power through a “mimicry” of identity, a game of control that is “almost the same but not quite,” “[a]lmost the same but not white” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 89). In turn, this new language renders “the insignia of authority,” signs of power and (colonial) authority, “a mask, a mockery” (“Signs Taken for Wonders” 120). Crystal Parikh offers a similar postcolonial reading of the spy motif in Lee’s novel. She sees “[t]he figure of the ethnic spy, like the minority intellectual,” as challengers to “conventional models of knowledge-power relationships by calling into question the extent to which the material processes of race mediate the class and professional affiliations of intellectual and institutional power” (251).

¹⁹ For the entire passage that narrates the arrival and the birth of an American ego for John Kwang, see pages 210–211.

never had the confidence to earn: the Other's respect, money, and soul. Henry ironically is a confidence man.

Through his covert actions, Henry constructs a false narrative of self, a fiction which he masters and memorizes to quell his own insecurities. This (mis)identity created for his job cannot allow for an authentic self. Except when following John Kwang and Emile Luzan (for whom he mostly plays a version of himself), Henry maintains a "legend" for each assignment: "an extraordinarily extensive 'story' of who [he is], an autobiography as such, often evolving to develop even the minutiae of life experience, countless facts and figures, though it also required a truthful ontological bearing, a certain presence of character" (22).²⁰ Following this fictional script, Henry becomes a great actor, a simulacrum of his imagination. He also produces and directs this drama—playing such roles as the "obedient soft-spoken son," the "good volunteer, the invisible underling" (202). Henry even explains that he feels "indebted" to Dennis Hoagland, his boss, "for life"—"Dennis Hoagland and his private firm had conveniently appeared at the right time, offering the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in his one place and take half-steps out whenever he wished" (127). By creating faux-agency, Henry believe he reinvents himself one little step at a time. Henry also thinks he garners power in his job, "Though I often stumble, I can be a most careful speaker when I wish. [. . .] My sentences will dwindle, darn, steadily unravel themselves. Up and collapse. But all the while the ready manner of my face and hands and body will say, 'Yes, I am here, enjoying your company, so let us go on, please'" (200). As Lee alludes to, Henry is a master knitter, a quilter of expectations and obedience, despite not being the weaver of his psyche. Elda E. Tsou also notices this ability: "[T]he narrator is nothing more than a product of textile tropes" (582). However, his job does not help Henry find an authentic self or his voice to work through traumas.

Reopening the traumas of racial melancholia and learning English, Mitt's death creates a tangible crisis for Henry. It remains an open, undressed wound in the novel's present time. This event causes Henry to lose a healthy version of assimilation and a successful learning of English. Indeed, Mitt "was a perfection," according to Henry's friend Jack, because he seemed comfortable within his skin, his soul, and his language (165). Physically as well, Mitt brings together the two racial and genetic characteristics of his Asian and American grandparents: "In profile, you saw the same blunt line descend the back of their necks [i.e., Henry's father's and Mitt's], those high, flat ears, but then little else because Lelia—or maybe her father—had endowed Mitt with that other, potent sprawl of limbs, those round, vigilant eyes, the upturned ancestral nose" (103). Moreover, Mitt is the most complete, unique specimen, says the narrator: "No one [. . .] had ever looked like that" (103). Beyond his "beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic" body (103), Mitt seems effortlessly to synthesize language, easily bridging the cultural and linguistic gaps between his grandfather—"their communication was somehow wholly untroubled, perfect in its way" (239)—and his parents: "He could mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean" (240). Unlike the performances in Henry's job, Mitt's mimicry involves no dishonesty; he simply wants to learn and interact with the world and people around him. But Henry, ever insecure, "feared [Mitt's] perceptiveness, what he might have seen of me, or even possibly thought in his young mind" (107). Mitt, the model for authenticity, symbolizes Henry's potential future, his complete and healthy identity, a real person who is wholly (both) Korean (and)

²⁰ Christian Moraru provides an interesting discussion of the various "legends" within the novel (67-8).

American. Henry's investment in his son as personal model, however, does not end with his sudden passing. Henry melancholically holds on to Mitt beyond death, refusing to work through that loss. Psychoanalytically,

In identifying with the lost object, the melancholic [i.e., Henry] is able to preserve it [i.e., Mitt] but only as a type of haunted, ghostly identification. That is, the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object or ideal, identifies with this emptiness, and thus participates in his or her own self-denigration and ruination of self-esteem. (Eng and Han 346)

Henry loses whatever remains of his self when Mitt dies. Mitt's death obliterates any chance for healthy authenticity unless Henry finds a way to mourn for his losses.

Because of his melancholic hold on Mitt, Henry seeks a replacement for him after his death in John Kwang, the mature example of a Korean-American synthesis, a kind of grown up Mitt (in Henry's eye). Seemingly a multicultural exemplar, Kwang appears to speak for inclusion and authenticity: "he embodies the national romance of transcending old ties and forging new identities" (Chang 110). Due in part to his charisma and his seemingly perfect example of assimilation, Kwang nearly becomes an obsession for Henry. Indeed, Juliana Chang finds that "John Kwang is the novel's premier object of romance, generating intense love and longing" (111). However, the public's love for him becomes the reason he needs to be surveilled, as Jodi Kim reminds us, "John Kwang becomes a yellow peril in the novel precisely because he refuses to be sutured into [. . .] pubs, laundromats, and falafel carts" (127).²¹ For instance, he has the gift of making others "feel as though he [is] bequeathing a significant part of himself" (138). Henry even imagines himself functioning as "a memory" of Kwang's past (134). Indeed, he sees their relationship as "a kind of romance," where "one [person] was an outlying version of the other" (138-139). As Henry's "necessary invention," Kwang represents the narrator's "hope" for a fully integrated identity, a star within the racial play of Asians in America (140). After all, Kwang appears so "effortlessly Korean, effortlessly American" (328): "John Kwang was Korean, slightly younger than my father would have been, though he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English. He had a JD-MBA from Fordham. He was a self-made millionaire. [. . .] He looked impressive on television. Handsome, irreproachable" (23). Henry sees in Kwang everything he "imagined a Korean would be, at least one living in any renown": "He would stride the daises and the stages with his voice strong and clear, unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between" (304). Kwang here is the most natural and comfortable American, one who can talk with or without an accent with pride in the fore or backgrounds and one who can speak for all immigrants. Indeed, this "most moving and beautiful" quality of Kwang allows Henry to experience "the ancient untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope" (304). Henry idolizes Kwang so much that he thinks Kwang even transcends immigration. He thinks Kwang has mastered, just as Mitt would have, American assimilation and language.

Lee pulls back the veil, however, to show Kwang's flaws. Attempting to report on Kwang, Henry realizes that he cannot describe him through normal means: "I couldn't write the usual about him, at least in that automatic, half-conscious way. I had trouble

²¹ For an extended discussion of Kwang's political potential and pitfalls as an ethnic politician, see Betsy Huang's "Citizen Kwang: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and the Politics of Consent."

again. I could not picture him. It seemed I had no profile from which to work” (204). Kwang, who defines himself the way the public views him, does not have an identifiable core; he has created a “serial identity.” As a politician, Kwang plays to what others want him to be: “‘When others construct and model you favorably,’ he admits, ‘it’s easy to let them keep at it, even if they start going off in ways that aren’t immediately comfortable or right’” (193). Considering this problem endemic to Asian Americans who buy into the model minority myth, Kwang nonetheless enjoys being “many people all at once”—“father,” “dictator,” “servant,” “actor,” and “the favorite chaste love of the people” (293). As Henry begins to search “out the raw spots in [Kwang], the places where he appears open, where the wounds are still fresh” in hopes of finding a nod to his deeper, authentic self and an opening for his job (299), he discovers that Kwang’s personality is a façade, a rhetorical/political device to garner votes: “He didn’t want them to vote for him solely because he was colored or Asian. He knew he’d never win anything that way” (326). Or as Kwang says, “So you make them into a part of you. You remember every one of their names. You are the model by which they will work and live. You are their hope” (326). Kwang, therefore, is a political con man. Presently “part of the vernacular” (139) and “the living voice of the city” (304), Kwang strives to become the universal signifier for immigrant success and identity.²²

The tragic downfall of this mayor-to-be becomes an abject lesson to Henry, who begins to see the man’s corruption and unlikable nature, thus losing another model for his identity. Kwang’s plummet becomes a symbolic death to accompany Mitt’s real one. For example, Kwang’s home does not replicate his public persona. According to Henry, “[t]he place feels borrowed to me, un-lived in. There are no strange smells, no lingering aroma of cooking oils” (302). With its superfluous “ornate woodwork” that has “precious layerings of molding and mullion and balustrade and apse,” the house is superficially impressive, artificial, like its owner, who segregates his Koreanness to the basement (302). “Ill lighted like any memory,” the basement contains “the Korean foodstuffs [. . .] the earthenware jars of pickled vegetables and meats, the fermented seasoning pastes and sauces, strips of dried seafood” (302). Representing an emblem of dysfunctional assimilation, the house symbolizes Kwang’s inner divide between America and Korea, public and private. Other walls are removed when Kwang yells at his wife (145) and has an affair with his campaign manager, Sherrie Chin-Watt, who he slaps in a sordid scene at a Korean “stand bar,” a place of dubious male entertainment, devoted to ameliorating “the lonely feeling of [. . .] men for a woman and a homeland” (305). Kwang also takes Henry along and, in a strange moment, narrates Henry’s interactions with an under-aged girl: “He tells of me, the girl. My stiffness” (308). Kwang becomes a momentary interpreter of the self here to pass his foibles to another generation. Henry, Kwang declares, “reminds me of another Asian figure in city politics we used to know and love. [. . .] How I wish I could recall his name. But see here, how it begins” (308). Revealing his ignoble beginnings and a possible intent to groom Henry, Kwang slips into debauchery. He accidentally kills the waitress he hired for Henry after driving drunk. Kwang’s story ends with his regression to an ordinary, liminal immigrant—another zombie lost in America (like Ahjuhma). In front of a crowd gathered at his home, Henry watches Kwang, suddenly emptied of his false agency:

²² Jack notices that John Kwang “‘is in the language now’” and that “‘[t]he buildings and streets there are written with him’” (169).

He is moving too slowly. He seems to tempt the mass. The men walking him try to speed him up, but he stays his pace. He shrugs them off. Now, he even stops. The people are screaming. An arm's length away from him they shout with everything they have. But nothing registers in his face. It is as if he is deaf. He seems to look only at a window of his house, but I look up and no one is there.

He is already in another world. (342)

As the walking dead, Kwang and the psychological destruction described here illustrates the damage of "serial identity," particularly when it masquerades as the authentic self. His fleeting glance at his home is a last attempt to maintain his façade, pride in defeat. Henry realizes here though that Kwang's public and private personas never coalesced, forcing him to seek authenticity through other means.

Finding Kwang not to be the model for Asian American authenticity and losing in Mitt, the perfect offspring of these sensibilities, Henry begins the arduous work of finding himself, sans "serial identity." Fittingly, Kwang is his last assignment, his final job. Henry quietly bows out of the spy game and will join his estranged wife. The novel's first sentence actually begins the process of reconciliation between them, and it starts Henry's psychic recuperation: "The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was" (1). Admitting this loss signifies the first step toward Henry's eventual change. Through the list she makes, Lelia charges and labels what she has gathered thus far about Henry's emotional and psychological distance: he is an "emotional alien / genre bug / Yellow peril: neo-American" and a "stranger / follower / traitor / spy" (5). Sāmi Ludwig explains, "Lelia gives Henry stereotypical clichés about his identity. [. . .] Hence the point is not that his wife is imposing these stereotypes on him but that this is a false identity that he has assumed for himself; she has taken the initiative to provoke him by showing him this mirror of himself" (224). Furthermore, Lelia perhaps accidentally forgets to include the most hurtful epithet, which Henry finds under their bed, "False speaker of language" (6). Lelia's poem comes after Mitt's death, which becomes the last blow on their marital house of cards. Indeed, their marriage, especially after that loss, became increasingly unworkable, what Chang calls "a domestic rupture" (107), which the poem verifies. Having "too many gaps" (125), the relationship was mirrored in the "dysfunctional space" (24) of their apartment: "It was one of those lofts you see in movies and at parties, the one cavernous nearly-empty room of windows and hardwood flooring, some exposed brick, steam pipes. [. . .] It was much too big. You felt you were living in the wrong scale" (23-4). Henry thus realizes that "the expanse and room were easy excuses for not seeing one another" (24). This apartment becomes the site for Henry's role-playing in the marriage as an "impeccable mate": "For ten years she hadn't realized the breadth of what I had accomplished with my exacting competence, the daily *work* I did, which unto itself became an unassailable body of cover" (161). Maintaining the character of "husband," Henry indicates that their relationship followed gestures, habits that all were just "enough" (161). They even "talked plenty," according to him—"talked her work, and other things, talked friends, did our talk of family, the talk of how much we missed each other, even the queer ironical talk of when I was coming back home" from an assignment (33). Lee's repetition here suggests the couple's conscious avoidance to discuss their failing marriage and Mitt's death. He is playing a part, the attentive husband who knows when to listen and when to speak, despite not knowing what words he should say.

As another strange manifestation of their avoidance, sex functions as a means to suppress their shared loss. It was not always so, as Henry reminisces: "When [Mitt] was an infant we waited until he was asleep and then delicately placed him atop our two pillows, which we arranged on the floor next to the bed. We lay still a few minutes until we could hear his breathing deepen and become rhythmic. That's when we made love." Using Mitt as monitor, Lelia and Henry follow the rhythm of his breathing: "We moved as mutely and as deftly as we could bear, muffling ourselves in one another's hair and neck so as not to wake him, but then, too, of course, so we could hear the sound of his sleeping, his breathing, ours, that strange conspiring" (67). This connection between sexual pleasure and Mitt's respiration symbolizes the most complete union and complement in their marriage. Later, sex functions as a melancholic reenactment of the deadly "dog pile" that kills their son:

During certain nights, I pulled a half-sleeping Lelia back onto my body, right onto my chest, and breathed as barely as I could without falling faint. [. . .] She let herself balance on me until she was no longer touching the bed. She knew what to do, what to do to me, that I was Mitt, that then she was Mitt, our pile of two as heavy as the balance of all those boys who had now grown up. We nearly pressed each other to death, our swollen lips and eyes, wishing upon ourselves the fall of tears, that great free anger, that great obese heft of melancholy, enough of it piling on at once so that sometimes whether we wanted to or not we made love so hard and gritty we had to say fuck to be telling the very first part of the truth. (106)

The calculus of weight, balance, plus pain equals an intercourse without love. By reenacting his death and hoping that "fucking" will replace or release the "crushing" pain of loss, Henry wants to mourn and work through loss without words. Instead, he and Lelia only find an absence of love, grief, and expression: "In the bed, in the space between us, it was about the sad way of all flesh, alive or dead or caught in between, it was about what must happen between people who lose forever the truest moment of their union. Flesh, the pressure, the rhymes of gasps. This was all we could find in each other, this the novel language of our life" (106). Full, meaningful love making is gone between them here. Indeed, Sāmi Ludwig calls this interaction an "act of imitation" (238), mimicking the emptiness of their changed marital interactions. Mitt's death first changes, then ends the pleasure in their marriage and in their lives, however temporarily.

I hope I have explained how Henry shows his need to find a way to move beyond Mitt's death. Through the added losses of Mitt and Kwang as potential role models of Asian American identity, Henry must find his authentic agency that comes to terms with the traumas of his life. Consequently, Lee creates two characters that provide Henry the opportunity to work through or mourn Mitt, language acquisition, and racial melancholia, his most latent trauma. Before he reunites with Lelia, and ultimately finds himself, Henry encounters Dr. Emile Luzan, the Filipino psychiatrist Henry surveils by becoming a patient. Like he does with John Kwang, Henry finds that he cannot separate himself from his made-up "legend": "[I]nexplicably I began stringing the legend back upon myself. I was no longer extrapolating; I was looping it through the core, freely talking about my life, suddenly breaching the confidences of my father and my mother and my wife. I even spoke to him about my dead son" (22). Tsou shrewdly notices here that "the narrator function and the alibi switch places" (581). For Tsou, this switch

signifies how the novel “contests the notion that its characters are subjects acting or telling under their own power” (581). However, this slip in persona represents Henry’s desperation to tell his story. Luzan provides a safe-zone, making Henry feel at times that Luzan “was the only one in the world who might comfort” him (22). Putting it another way, “Henry’s desire to hear his own story [. . .] is given an outlet in Luzan’s chosen method of therapy” (Kessel 204), (i.e., *talk therapy*). Most profoundly, Luzan assuages Henry’s wounds by encouraging him to discuss his “[p]arentage” and his anxieties about “intimacy” and “trust.” He also asks, “Who, my young friend, have you been all your life?” (205). Luzan thus helps the protagonist accept Asian American identity, stating: “We have our multiple roles like everyone else. Now throw in an additional dimension. A cultural one. Cast it all, if you will, in a broad yellow light. Let us see where this leads you and me” (133). Luzan’s advice privileges Asian American culture and removes shame. The uninhibited relationship between patient and analyst gives Henry the reassurance to speak about his past. He tells Luzan about his “invisible brother with no name,” who was perfect at school, at martial arts, and in social settings. This imaginary ego also “spoke a singing beautiful English” and “made speeches” (205). He also explains the fear that his “brother” “would perish in some accident wherever he was (when he didn’t need to be with me)” and “that he was going to die tragically, drown in a lake or slip and fall off a cliff” (206). Whether a memory of his childhood fantasy or an oblique story about Mitt, this admission reveals the all-too-quiet psychological struggles Henry has been living with. Through this narration with Dr. Luzan, this “articulation” in theorist Dominick LaCapra’s word (or literally an *enunciation*, one may say), Henry speaks about racial melancholia and Mitt’s death. Although Luzan’s response is not given in the novel, the narrator feels better from this therapy, a catharsis of sorts: “I wanted to tell him [. . .] that he had saved my life in ways he never imagined, or ever could” (207). Luzan provides Henry an opportunity to express himself and work through trauma.

While Dr. Luzan initiates his mourning, Henry returns to Lelia to complete this process. Her aforementioned poetic list begins the journey to understand his identity and address his trauma. Lelia, who shares his loss, models grieving, offering Henry an alternative way to cope with the trauma of Mitt’s death. Always active, Lelia “liked to climb trees, could still ramble up the bark of one with complete ease and confidence, though she had a deep, running scar on her lower back from falling through the branches of an oak tree when she was nine” (216). Despite previous injury, Lelia’s resiliency speaks to her power to overcome and move on from painful memories. Even after a car accident, while Henry remains “too dazed to do much except sit on the side of the road with Mitt,” Lelia seems “fine” and does “all the right things” such as “setting up a flare, rerouting traffic, [and] getting names and addresses of drivers and witnesses” (126). Only her vomiting after leaving the scene belies her poise. More important for Henry is Lelia’s command of English, which he notices first about her (i.e., according to him, “she could really speak” [10]). Indeed, her mastery confounds and attracts Henry who realizes that “she was simply executing the language [. . .] word by word [. . .] like a figure touring a dark house, flipping on spots and banks of perfectly drawn light” (10-1). In their relationship, Lelia’s authority with language directs Henry’s actions and speech: “I could hear the driving tone to her voice. She was always surging ahead of where we were, never staying with one notion for too long, and I willingly followed her wherever she needed to go, off the real subject, maybe pushing her there myself” (34). Lelia’s linguistic locomotion helps Henry see beyond his own insecurities about language and expression: “Thank God, for her sake. She deserved whatever was available, to keep us moving, to

speak in counterpoint to the deadening strings of my pyrrhic feet" (200). By using "pyrrhic feet," Lee indicates Henry's limited elocution for which Lelia can improve. This metaphor suggests that she has the ability to restore him back to life through speech.

Before enacting this change, however, Lelia's own precision and control of language breaks down after Mitt's death. "She was wailing nothing I could understand or remember now," Henry observes, "and she sounded like someone else, an anybody on the street" (105). Lelia also becomes a stranger to herself. At times, as she tells Henry, "I'd just stop moving for a few days" (116). Feeling and looking a "little suicidal" while listening to Mitt's voice over a tape recorder, Lelia seems to have changed permanently, which is reflected in her voice that has become "clipped, almost dead" (116, 115). Still, she gives herself a period of grieving and comes to mourn and accept Mitt's death. With that, her command of English returns; Henry notices her newly found language during a conversation she has: "[W]hen your baby dies it's never an accident [. . .] that's a word you and I have no business using" (129). Understanding language's subtle powers to express emotions, Lelia corrects Henry and proffers him the chance to see that a new normalcy can emerge. At the end of her mourning, Lelia eventually gravitates to her "other children" through her teaching (124).

On the opposite side, Henry neither mourns Mitt's death nor moves on. Indeed, he cannot get over this loss, and he reconstructs the accident nightly for a while, a melancholic exercise: "[F]or a long time the little arms and legs and voices were part of my nightly ritual before sleep. Like a cinematic mantra, a mystical trailer of memory, I replayed the scene of all those boys standing in the grass about the spontaneous crèche of his death" (104).²³ In time, Henry admits to erasing those boys from his memory, noting that he "forgot everything about them" (104), leaving him to fixate on his son's demise. Most damagingly, Mitt's death gives Henry an excuse for more denials of other painful experiences. Lelia notes that Henry remained "solemn and dignified" and played "[t]he bowing, the white-gloved bit" publicly for "about a year" (117). He concurs and even admits, "When real trouble hits, I lock up. I can't work the trusty calculus. I can't speak" (158). Admitting this last failure also reaffirms Henry's inadequate feelings around English. Instead of allowing himself to grieve, Henry participates in his "father's act," to deny and shut off (one may say quieten up) others from his psychological pains. Henry remembers how his father, after getting attacked at his store, "came home with deep bruises about his face, his nose and mouth bloody, his rough workshirt torn at the shoulder. He smelled rancid as usual from working with vegetables, but more so that night, as if he'd fallen into the compost heap. He came in and went straight to the bedroom and shut and locked the door" (56). His father, saying nothing to a young Henry, confesses only to his wife that he was robbed, bound, and beaten (56-7). Lelia sees this "silent suffering" in her husband, especially after Mitt's passing. For instance, upon returning from an emotional break in Europe, Lelia speaks of his continuing denial: "You haven't said his name more than four or five times since it happened. You haven't said his name tonight" (129). Henry's emotional alienation inevitably takes its toll on their marriage. Taking stock, Henry finally comes to realize that he is something of the

²³ Interestingly, the passage continues and describes Lelia's role as a healer for the protagonist: "Lelia knew I did this with the night. She would grasp my hand until she couldn't wait any longer for me to say something, and finally she would fall asleep" (104).

zombie Lelia describes: “I think you’re not even here, with the rest of us, you know, engaged, present” (126). Like the immigrants he has observed at the market, Henry exhibits a traumatized demeanor, victim less to economic forces but nonetheless victim of traumas that have damaged him.

Henry needs to regain his life from his traumatic experiences; he has to *work through* Mitt’s death, his language issues, and his racial melancholia. Trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra describes this process well: “Working through is an articulatory practice: [. . .] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one [. . .] back then while realizing that one is living here and now with *openings to the future*” (22; emphasis added). As LaCapra posits, language and expression are crucial devices to allow working through. As a narrator, Henry has a unique opportunity “to articulate” his past and redefine his present. He can provide “witness” to the immigrant experience, “to undo the cipherlike faces scrawled with hard work, and no work, and all trouble. The faces of [his] father and his workers, and Ahjuhma, and the ever-dimming one of [his] mother” (170-1). He wants, like his friend Jack, to let go of his loss—Jack lost his wife Sophie and considers her part of his past whereas Henry sees her rather melancholically frozen in the present: “She’s still a blessing,” says Henry; Jack replies, “No no. She is gone” (165). Jack accepts her passing, but Henry cannot. Overall, Henry wants to tell his story, to remaster the traumatic events and associations plaguing his existence, and to erect hope for a viable future and a healthy authenticity.

Henry’s recovery begins when he renews a relationship with Lelia, who slowly reciprocates his continued (but unexpressed) love. Their reinvented relationship is most explicitly seen through their sex life, which Henry discloses, “There is a sense of our stalking each other through the day and the night, each of us waiting for the other to fall asleep, to step out of the shower, hold a hot pan at the range, not expecting a touch. It’s the first second of contact that sets her off, that almost criminal moment. For me, it’s the idea that she’s been considering us through her day” (281). On her part, Lelia seems to create “a little story complete in her head,” according to the protagonist (281). The “idea” and “story” of sexual pleasure makes their reunion thrive. Moreover, they make love for their desires and do not use the time to dwell on Mitt’s life or death, as they did earlier. In one moment, Lelia functions as a healer, returning “the hurt” Henry felt when he met her (10): “When we got upstairs Lelia stripped me of my clothes and then she stripped herself. [. . .] I felt a melancholy before her nakedness. She gripped at my breast and collarbone and tore me down to the carpet” (229). Henry’s “melancholy” in her stripped presence comes from the awareness of his losses (i.e., his child, his spouse); oddly he is exposed through her vulnerability. As he claims that he has even “forgotten how to make love” (229), Henry (re)discovers a great hunger: “We were always oral. We were forever biting, we bit hard, we spit and shined each other, we licked each other, we slobbered, we gorged, we made elaborate meals of ourselves [. . .] the cold strange meal of tongue, of ankle, of toe, we made a mess” (229). Indeed, their “gluttony” is a kind of *self*-consumption: “She was tasting herself on my fingers and wet nose and my chin. [. . .] She kept eating. I kept eating, too, wanting every last fold of her, the taste brand new to me, or, at least, a refection of what I knew” (230). Joan Huang notices in this scene that the protagonist operates “without restrictions when he uses his mouth to pleasure Lelia”: “He can explore and experiment in ways that he doesn’t allow himself to when he is talking” (85). But the language of the passage suggests more. Almost regressing to infancy’s oral pleasure, Lelia and Henry return to the most basic form of *jouissance*, a way

to complement and complete each (O)ther's inner desire. The scene seems to recast the sexual encounters after Mitt's death:

She wanted me to push down on her harder. I couldn't, so then she turned us around and pushed down on me, the slightest grimace stealing across her face. Her body yawed above me, buoyed and restless. I held on by her flat hips, angling her and helping her to let me in. Mixed-up memory, hunger. It was like lonesome old dogs, all wags and tongues and worn eyes. This was the woman I promised to love. This is my wife. (230).

It is Lelia here who wants to be crushed, who needs to feel the shortness of breath. However, the lovers seek and find a new rhythm not keyed, as in the earlier scenes, on Mitt's breathing or his suffocation. Their love has returned from "mixed-up memory" and "hunger," like old, familiar (pet) companions rejuvenated by frisky sex. Most important, Henry again sees Lelia as his wife, which is indicated, as Liam Corley notes, through his switch to present tense (64-5). The rejuvenation of life, love, and marriage even allows Henry to consider the possibility for future children (284-85).

Lelia and Henry use the speech pupils (or their current, surrogate children) as an immediate way to finalize change and create hope. "A beautiful imperfect resolution" (Rody 86), Henry's attendance in the classroom raises the possibility "to retreat into new imaginings, new inhabitations in a life, and newer dreams" (Rhee 170). No longer an ethnic spy, Henry works as Lelia's assistant, playing ironically "the Speech Monster" who makes language learning a fun game. By choosing to take a less lucrative job, Henry is deciding for himself to step onto another type of ladder for success, one built with personal happiness and health instead of financial rewards. Through this change, Lee reifies Henry's progress. Despite one critic's claim that "there is no 'solution' to the dilemma of his identity" (Chen 660), Henry comes to embrace the "yellow light" that Luzan mentions. For example, he yearns to hear his father's imperfect yet real pidgin speech again—"But now, I think I would give most anything to hear my father's talk again, the crash and bang and stop of his language, always hurtling by" (337). The novel concludes with promises for embracing authenticity in both language and identity. Henry is comfortable with himself and accepts who he is. He relishes his past, reflected in the students, and appreciates his role as the speech assistant. Lelia, who takes her role as (speech) *therapist* seriously, uses her classes "to give [her students] some laughs and then read a tall tale in her gentlest, queerest voice." Unlike Mrs. Albrecht and her method, Lelia and her lessons foster confidence in the children and express respect for their cultural backgrounds: "She wants to offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show them it's fine to mess it all up" (349). Henry too tries to make these children comfortable with their speech and their identities, for he embraces each child "one by one" (349). With each hug, he assures them and himself that they do not have to experience racial melancholia.

Chang-rae Lee has said in interviews that he wants to "bring home for the reader not just an act, historical or not, but the aftereffects, what happens in the act's wake" (qtd. in Hogan). Through Henry's journey, Lee certainly shows the aftermath of racial melancholia, economic pressures, and language learning, each a traumatic struggle to belong and survive in America. Lee also believes that humanity can be affirmative, offering not necessarily "hope, so much," as a "greater consciousness" (qtd. in Y-O Lee 226). To reify this idea, Lee ends the novel with another embrace: the inclusion of multiculturalism by Lelia, Henry, and the other speech students. To borrow LaCapra,

“openings to the future” are being established. In the end, we hear the different home languages and the original names of each child. Spared the imposition or supposition of new American, English names (often a demand of assimilation), the children encompass a new generation, a new consciousness for immigrants in America. Facilitating this change, Lelia “calls out each [name] as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who *we* are” (349; emphasis added). Because he counts himself alongside these children every morning at roll call, Henry perhaps finds a promise and strength to accept a burgeoning authentic identity and a refreshed relationship to America. By speaking his name every morning, Henry will become a member of a new class of immigrants. He stands as an example for others to show that racial melancholia and other traumas can be worked through.

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