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Hiding and Speaking in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker

Ryan Chow

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Introduction

Chang-rae Lee's debut novel, *Native Speaker*, centers on Henry Park. Henry is a multivalent figure, although his respective identities often seem to contradict. Each new face offers a different lens through which to view him. Henry is the son of a Korean immigrant, but an American citizen. He is a father whose son is dead, and a husband whose wife has left him. He is both a spy embedded in politician John Kwang's operations, and a friend and supporter of Kwang's vision. *Native Speaker* defines Henry through each of these faces and yet none of them; his quest to discover which persona defines himself provides much of the recurring tension of the novel.

Native Speaker defies easy summary. The novel flashes back and forth in time, rejecting a linear narration: it follows Henry through parts of his childhood, the departure and return of his wife Lelia, the death of his son Mitt, and his work as a spy. Published in 1995, *Native Speaker* engages with the uneasy milieu of its era—the rise of globalization that accompanied the end of the Cold War, race relations and ethnic tensions in the United States during the 1990s and, connecting the two, an increased consciousness of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. In 1992, a series of destructive riots broke out in Los Angeles as a result of the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers for the use of excessive force against Rodney King, an African American male.[1] *Native Speaker* alludes to these riots, and the shooting of Latasha Harlins, a young African American girl, by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American shopkeeper;[2]

1. Anjuli Sastry Krbechek & Karen Grigsby Bates, *When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots*, NPR (Apr. 26, 2017), https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots [perma.cc/6VLQ-GNJY].

2. Jesse Singal, *Soon Ja Du*, Post in *The L.A. Riots: 15 Years After Rodney King*, Time (Apr.

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John Kwang, the charismatic politician Henry is assigned to spy on, delivers a rousing speech attempting to reckon with fictional events that closely mirror these. Meanwhile, Kwang's eventual fall—brought about by Henry's spying—mimics the frenzy and furor of McCarthyism, recalling the anxiety accompanying the Cold War. *Native Speaker* cleverly interweaves these broader social and political issues into the novel's central concerns, ensuring they are relevant issues that the characters of the novel must consider rather than just the reader. Take, for example, Henry's job as a spy. His work for Dennis Hoagland, Henry's amoral and manipulative boss, drives much of the plot, forcing Henry into contact with John Kwang. But, it also metaphorizes the larger social ramifications of the positioning of Asian Americans in society, where we are typecast as model minorities, blending into the background and fabric of a society in which we do not belong.

Criticism about *Native Speaker* commonly focuses upon Henry's role as a spy, and the politics of ethnic visibility and racial capital[3] that accompany this creative decision. There is also a strong scholarly focus on place and cosmopolitanism, particularly with *Native Speaker*'s brief forays into globalism.[4] Finally, John Kwang is another central figure for literary scholars, particularly in conjunction with Henry's role as a spy and a mole within a Korean American politician's base.[5] I will depart from these analyses[6] in the general topics of my focus, although they will figure into my scholarship. Instead, this essay will first investigate *Native Speaker*'s heavy emphasis on language and speech—two threads that run throughout the novel and are indivisible from the central concerns *Native Speaker* addresses. Then, I will focus on how Henry's family influences his understanding of identity, often through their own unique modes of communication. In particular, I will explore family as

2007), https://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/la_riot/article/0,28804,1614117_1614084_1614514,00.html [perma.cc/GH9D-GQBF].

3. *See e.g.*, J. Paul Narkunas, *Surfing the Long Waves of Global Capital with Chang-Rae-Lee's Native Speaker: Ethnic Branding and the Humanization of Capital*, 54 Mod. Fiction Stud. 327 (2008), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287625; Jodi Kim, *From Mee-Gook to Gook: The Cold War and Racialized Undocumented Capital in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker*, 34 MELUS 117 (2009), https://www.jstor.org/stable/20485361; Tina Chen, *Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts in Native Speaker by Chang-rae Lee*, 48 Mod. Fiction Stud. 637 (2002), https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286693.

4. *See e.g.*, Rachel C. Lee, *Reading Contests and Contesting Reading: Change-Rae Lee's* Native Speaker *and Ethnic New York*, 29 MELUS 341 (2004), https://www.jstor.org/stable/4141859; *see also* Melanie U. Pooch, *Chang-Rae Lee's New York*, Native Speaker, *in* DiverCity – Global Cities as a Literary Phenomenon: Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles in a Globalizing Age 123 (2016), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt87.10.

5. *See e.g.*, Michelle Young-Mee Rhee, *"Greater Lore": Metafiction in Chang-rae Lee's* Native Speaker, 36 MELUS 157 (2011), https://www.jstor.org/stable/23035247; Christian Moraru, *Speakers and Sleepers: Chang-rae Lee's* Native Speaker, *Whitman, and the Performance of Americanness*, 36 College Literature 66 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.0.0064.

6. The list I give is by no means exhaustive. For example, speech and language is yet another popular analytical framework for scholars of *Native Speaker*, but the above list simply notes some areas about which I will not write in great detail.

a mediator of assimilation, looking at how Henry derives an understanding of his own right to belong in America through his parents, his wife Lelia, and son Mitt. I argue that *Native Speaker* contests and problematizes the racist system of white supremacy through these thematic elements, often marking moments of ideological whiteness[7] with physically white objects or descriptors. Ultimately, *Native Speaker* indicates that little is as we expect it to be regarding the way race operates in America, questioning even the foundations of social interaction such as language and the family unit.

I. Language and Speaking as Identity

In *Native Speaker*, language serves as the foundation upon which the rest of the text is built. Although the twin motifs of language and speech flit in and out of focus throughout the novel, their constant recurrence demands attention and situates them as a thematic guide. These concepts function dually as both form and content; *Native Speaker* cleverly structures moments wherein language is positioned as both simultaneously. The novel uses language and speech to fulfill multifaceted roles, like the way Henry occupies a position in society as neither fully assimilated nor fully Other. What, then, do language and speech do within *Native Speaker*? I argue that they serve as a metaphor for both national belonging and the process of assimilation, and operate as a larger commentary on Asian American voices within the public sphere and the literary marketplace. For the characters of *Native Speaker*—particularly Henry—speech is a means through which identity is asserted. But, moments of forced and voluntary silence are also a part of speaking, and *Native Speaker* makes sure to reflect on what these moments of silence mean for its characters. Over the course of the novel, *Native Speaker* articulates a central belief that language is powerful, particularly with respect to Asian American issues of placemaking and national identity formation. In centering language and speech, Lee's novel pushes for an acknowledgment of the ways in which language, speech, and communication can help or damn Asian Americans and, more generally, society at large.

7. Whiteness, which I reference throughout this paper, is a term entrenched in our society. It is casually used as a label for huge swaths of people, actions, food, places, and even speaking practices, often with little consideration as to the idiosyncrasies of the individual subjects or what exactly about these things are white. Part of the struggle in addressing the systemic issues whiteness creates is that nailing down a definition of exactly who or what is white is incredibly difficult. Beyond that, what white refers to has constantly changed throughout history, as scholar Nell Irvin Painter traces in her book *The History of White People*. *See generally* Nell Irvin Painter, The History of White People (2010). For the purposes of this article/paper, and borrowing a definition used by other scholars, I understand critical studies of whiteness to be attempts to reckon with the ways in which "identities, ideologies, and norms that are not always understood or even explicitly realized by those who benefit from them … can mystify, legitimate, and ultimately perpetuate systems of racial inequality." Douglas Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis & Paul R. Croll, *An Empirical Assessment of Whiteness Theory: Hidden from How Many?*, 56 Soc. Probs., 403, 404 (2009). Intertwined with this is the idea of white supremacy, which I see as the idea that whiteness is the default. It justifies whiteness as existentially right, as moral, as natural.

I argue that *Native Speaker* explores the idea of language as an objective concept—a frame of reference wherein there is a right and a wrong. Henry opens the novel describing Lelia's departure; she leaves him with a "list of who [he] was."[8] This list is the first indication of the kinds of ways in which language can be used and commandeered, twisted into meanings that are laced with permanence. The list is filled with a series of phrases, all of which hint at various ideas the book wishes to explore. Among other descriptions of Henry, Lelia includes, "illegal alien . . . Yellow peril: neo-American . . . poppa's boy . . . stranger."[9] Despite the generally shocking or possibly offensive contents of the list for the reader, Henry finds himself able to justify each of these terms, until he finds a scrap of paper clearly intended for the list that simply states, "False speaker of language."[10] Although *Native Speaker* is a novel about many things—being a Korean American writer in America, the perils of the globalized economy that causes people's ethnicities to become commodities, and the emotional distance between many Asian immigrants and their children—it is, first and foremost, a self-conscious novel about language, mediated by language. The novel differentiates importantly, however, between language and the speaking of it. Henry is not a speaker of a false language, but a false speaker of language.

As a result, I argue that language becomes positioned as a neutral truth—a truth that can be manipulated into something that is warped and corrupted as a result of its speaker, who assumes responsibility for the manner in which language is produced. *Native Speaker* alludes to this, as Lelia decries "Henryspeak,"[11] the way in which he twists language to evade discussing his work. In fact, this moment provides just one example of the manner in which language undergirds the concerns of the rest of the novel, as Henry's inability to discuss his work with his wife replicates a societal expectation of Asian Americans as a silent, model minority. But, over the course of *Native Speaker*, this idea of language as a static construct that is acted and enacted upon evolves and changes until language itself finally becomes a speaker.

The novel, and the characters within, associate language and speech with identity. Henry describes the moment he first met Lelia, stating:

> I was immediately drawn to her . . . But even before I took measure of her face and her manner . . . I noticed how closely I was listening to her. What I found was this: that she could really speak. At first I took her as being exceedingly proper, but I soon realized that she was simply executing the language. She went word by word. Every letter had a border. I watched her wide full mouth sweep through her sentences like a figure touring a dark house, flipping on spots and banks of perfectly drawn light.[12]

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8. Chang-Rae Lee, Native Speaker 1 (Riverhead Books 1996).
9. *Id*. at 5.
10. *Id*. at 6.
11. *Id.*
12. *Id*. at 10–11.

Henry identifies and discovers Lelia through her language, which illuminates her both physically and intellectually. He focuses upon her precision—the ease with which she speaks, and her natural execution of language. Speech, then, provides the initial basis of Henry's connection to Lelia. Language serves to do more than just reveal a personal identity. It also depicts a broader cultural identity. After the death of Henry's mother, he is raised by a Korean woman he knows only as Ahjuhma, which is a Korean form of address. He reveals to Lelia that he does not know her name, having only called her by her title for his entire life. Lelia is shocked, to which Henry reflects, "Americans live on a first-name basis. She didn't understand that there weren't moments in our language—the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants—when the woman's name could have naturally come out. Or why it wasn't important."[13] The Korean that Henry speaks differs drastically from Lelia's English. What is perfectly natural in one is incomprehensible in the other. Both languages provide insights into what each respective culture values and prioritizes.

If language broadly serves as a mode of revealing identity, the novel positions English as a mode of asserting one's Americanness. Lelia, who is a speech therapist and educator, tells Henry when they first meet, "I work for a relief agency . . . Many of the people there are illegals, Mexicans and Asians . . . They just want to talk. They know me as the English lady . . . Everybody in this town wants to learn English."[14] The people who Lelia teaches are explicitly marked by their foreignness: they are illegals, Mexicans and Asians, stripped of even the hybridity of Mexican-American or Asian-American. In contrast, Lelia is "the English lady,"[15] possessor, guardian, and distributor of the language by which American culture is created, spread, and understood. J. Paul Narkunas writes, "Lelia, as a speech pathologist, performs ironically the function of transcendental gatekeeper/judge of the linguistic and national community."[16] Although culture is inextricably tied into language, the people Lelia describe desire English because of the access language grants to life and its necessities, rather than culture. Lelia recounts the questions they want to learn: "*How much is this air conditioner? Does this bus go to Sunland Park Racetrack? Yes, I cook and clean and I can sew.*"[17] Each question concerns matters of life and employment—of survival. They are not matters of entertainment, or the phrases of a tourist interested in the brief novelties. English, then, becomes a metaphor for both American-ness and survival, a sense of belonging both physical and mental. Returning to Lelia and Henry's first meeting, her speech is not elaborate or complex, but is instead "simply execut[ed]."[18] By extension, American-ness becomes something that is incredibly accessible to some yet nigh-impossible to attain for others.

13. *Id*. at 69.
14. *Id*. at 11.
15. *Id*.
16. Narkunas, *supra* 3, at 332.
17. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 11.
18. *Id*. at 10.

Henry's own history with the English language reveals the difficulties of an outsider's attempt at both mental and physical belonging. Amanda Page argues, "[Henry's] unstable sense of self is best illustrated through his complicated relationship with language."[19] Henry thinks back to his childhood, when he was learning English, reflecting, "I thought English would be simply a version of our Korean. Like another kind of coat you could wear. I didn't know what a difference in language meant then."[20] As a marker of national identity, language is intrinsically part of one's assimilation. Here, Henry argues that the broader experience of assimilation, as evidenced by language, is not composed of just external processes. Instead, this experience involves an ontological shift that extends beyond the physical transition from country to country. As Lelia tells Henry, "there are certain mental pathways of speaking that can never be unlearned."[21] Similarly, the novel makes the argument that an American consciousness is not freely available to all. Henry knows that certain speech patterns can never be retrained, suggesting that his acute awareness of his alien existence can never be unlearned, despite his best efforts to assimilate.

Henry recalls his own painstaking attempts to learn the English language, recounting, "In kindergarten, kids would call me 'Marble Mouth' because I spoke in a garbled voice, my bound tongue wrenching itself to move in the right ways. 'Yo, China boy,' the older black kids would yell at me across the blacktop, 'what you doin' there, practicin'?'"[22] Even as a child, Henry has internalized English as a means of expressing one's assimilation and, by extension, American identity. Henry is not the only one who has noted the explicit links between a command of language and an assertion of an American identity. Black people, another historically marginalized group, racialize Henry in relation to his poor speech, calling him "China boy"[23] while mocking his attempts to learn English. *Native Speaker* imitates the ways in which minority groups have historically been pitted against each other, trodding upon one another in an attempt to stand one rung higher on the societal ladder. The older Black kids who mock Henry also do not execute language perfectly, eliding the g's from their present participles and dropping the linking verb from their sentence. African Americans, *Native Speaker* notes, have their own histories of exclusion and oppression that they are responding to. They too are marked as foreign by their language. Moreover, whiteness provides a troubling undercurrent in this scene. Henry states:

> I would rewhisper all the words and sounds I had messed up earlier that morning, trying to invoke how the one girl who always wore a baby-blue cardigan would speak . . . Alice Eckles. I adored and despised her height and beauty and the oniony sheen of her skin. I knew she looked just

19. Amanda M. Page, Understanding Chang-rae Lee 14 (University of South Carolina Press 2017).

20. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 233.

21. *Id*. at 234.

22. *Id*.

23. *Id*.

> like her parents—lanky, washed-out, lipless—and that when she spoke to them they answered her in the same even, lowing rhythm of ennui and supremacy she lorded over us.[24]

Alice, the girl Henry simultaneously envies and detests, possesses the elusive command of language both the older Black kids and Henry lack. Henry suggests this possession is closely linked to her whiteness, emphasizing "the oniony sheen of her skin."[25] Noticeably, he finds himself torn in his attempts to identify Alice. He alternately describes her as beautiful and "lanky, washed-out, lipless,"[26] and desperately desires her command of the language even as he seems to abhor the rhythms and patterns of her speech. In a similar vein, some segments of the Asian American population have historically flirted with whiteness as a model minority, as our proximity relative to other minorities has, on occasion, benefited us. For all his practicing and longing, Henry ultimately declares, "I will always make bad errors of speech."[27] As much as Henry might desire Alice Eckles' oniony skin tone and sense of supremacy, he will never be able to obtain these attributes.

In fact, *Native Speaker* uses this analogy, wherein language—specifically English—serves as a metaphor for belonging, to critique society's uneven bent towards whiteness. Before he dies, Henry's son Mitt struggles with bullying. Henry remembers:

> But the other kids would have more ammo against Mitt, they were all just Westchester white boys . . . Maybe Mitt could say 'kike' . . . or else pretty much nothing, maybe something lame like 'paleface' or 'ghost,' unless the kid had big ears or was plainly slow. Because there isn't anything good to say to an average white boy to make him feel small. The talk somehow works in their favor, there's a shield in the language, there's no fair way for us to fight.[28]

Henry notes the disparity in the way language can be weaponized against minorities versus whites; Mitt cannot deploy English offensively. Meanwhile, the existence of a multitude of racial slurs offers Mitt's counterparts a wealth of material. Henry argues that English is built to support and empower whites at the expense of others, as the structural logics of the language prevent the coalescence of other kinds of positive, foreign identities. Instead, these implicitly foreign identities become defined by the differences that English reveals between them and the normative population. Henry also experiences the disparities of language. He states:

> I saw that if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me. I wasn't there. They didn't look at me. I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them. I could even catch a rich old woman . . . whispering to her friend right behind me, "Oriental Jews."[29]

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24. *Id*.
25. *Id.*
26. *Id.*
27. *Id.*
28. *Id*. at 243.
29. *Id*. at 53.

Language does more than just alienate identities; it also dissipates them. Henry's decision to speak only Korean renders him an invisible presence. But, Henry is still present as an idea—represented through language—as seen through the rich old woman's derogatory reference to the "Oriental Jews"[30] surrounding her. This idea, however, becomes defined by the internal reality of the old woman's racist modes of thinking, which in turn influences the external reality of what she sees before her.

Henry's active decision to speak Korean rather than speak up in the face of the rich old woman displays another mode of speaking: silence. This silence can be either metaphorical or literal, but it serves as a means by which identity is both relinquished and claimed. After initially disapproving of Henry, his father-in-law, Stew, tells him, "[Lelia] needs someone like you. You're ambitious and serious. You think before you speak. I can see that now. There's so much that's admirable in the Oriental culture and mind. You've been raised to be circumspect and careful."[31] Stew suggests that Henry holds value because he knows where his place lies within the political ecosystem—Henry will be careful with both words and actions. Although Stew praises what he would term as the Oriental mode of existence, in connoting a certain kind of silence with the "Oriental culture,"[32] he suggests that Henry's mode of existence, especially as revealed through the manner in which he speaks, is foreign. Jodi Kim argues that Stew's interaction with Henry displays "the odd yet enduring temporality of Cold War racial grammars,"[33] which cement America as the hero who saves other nations in the face of foreign threats. Furthermore, Stew reveals that Henry first had to earn the right to be seen. He tells Henry, "I didn't know you then . . . I can see you now, and that makes all the difference. Before that you were just a bad idea."[34] By virtue of the above characteristics he ascribes to Henry, Stew has deemed Henry a person he can see. As with the rich old woman, visibility is political. Stew asserts confidently that he does indeed now know Henry (who claims the opposite); he thus equates this invented identity of Henry with the actual Henry Park. Whereas Henry was previously invisible, Stew implicitly claims a kind of responsibility for illuminating him through his vision. However, Stew's vision is based on the image that he wants to see, rather than on Henry. Henry's active decision to remain silent and think before he speaks allows for Stew to be centered as the speaker.

At other moments, Henry's silence appears to be something that is forced upon him. He states, "When real trouble hits, I lock up . . . I can't speak."[35] Silence functions as a place of familiarity for Henry. He defaults

30. *Id.*
31. *Id.* at 121.
32. *Id.*
33. Kim, *supra* note 3, at 121.
34. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 121.
35. *Id.* at 158.

into nonverbal communication, a trait he credits his father with passing down to him. Henry states:

> To tell [my father] I loved him, I studied far into the night. I read my entire children's encyclopedia, drilling from aardvark to zymurgy. I never made an error at shortstop . . . Later, to tell him something else, I'd place a larger bouquet than his on my mother's grave. I drove only used, beat-up cars. I never asked him for his money. I spoke volumes to him this way, speak to him still, those same volumes he spoke with me.[36]

Silence becomes generational and familial; Henry follows his father's example. However, this silence, wherein they speak without speaking, leads to confusion, disconnection, and irreparable damage that Henry attempts to exorcise on his father's deathbed. Moreover, when Henry's son dies, he desperately desires to escape his silence and be heard. Henry builds a memorial to Mitt after his death. He tells the reader, "I stand up and shout out his name. I shout it again, as loud as my meager voice can. Then I fling it all in the woods, dismantled piece by piece. I turn back, ready for [Lelia], but even with all my hope she still isn't there."[37] At his moment of greatest vulnerability, Henry finds himself trapped by a silence that is not of his own choosing. Even as he shouts and screams, no one is present to hear him. Lelia, whom he hopes is watching him, is nowhere to be found. When Henry tells her later that he was hurting after Mitt's death, she responds, "You did a great job hiding it."[38] Henry's individuality and personality are obscured by a silence not always of his own choosing.

Silence is not solely limited to Henry or his family, instead taking on broader cultural undertones throughout Henry's reflections. Henry relates how silence seems to be replicated by other Koreans when Janice, a white assistant of John Kwang's, talks about one of her former lovers, John Kim, who never answered her in their final argument or spoke to her again. Henry thinks to himself:

> I knew I could have tried to comfort [Janice], perhaps telling her how John Kim was probably just as hurt as she was and that his silence was more complicated than she presently understood. That perhaps the ways of his mother and his father had occupied whole regions of his heart. I know this. We perhaps depend too often on the faulty honor of silence, use it too liberally and for gaining advantage . . . And Janice's John Kim, exquisitely silent, was like some fault-ridden patch of ground that shakes and threatens violence but then just falls in upon itself, cascading softly and evenly down its own private fissure until tightly filled up again.[39]

Henry, who mentally categorizes John Kim as a metaphor for an average Korean American everyman,[40] links silence to a Korean immigrant identity in the way that speaking the English language becomes tied to a normative white

36. *Id*. at 128.
37. *Id*. at 249.
38. *Id.* at 117.
39. *Id.* at 96.
40. *See id.* at 96.

identity. Silence functions as a mode of defense, "threat[ening] violence"[41] and appearing when "real trouble hits."[42] But, Henry notes that this defense mechanism is deeply flawed, describing silence as a "faulty honor"[43] and akin to a "fault-ridden patch of ground."[44]

Moreover, Janice repurposes John Kim's silence, using it as a weapon by which to attack him. She states:

> I never understood how he could just drop me like that. Is it a Korean thing? I mean what kind of person does that . . . Except for the very end, everything was great between us . . . But now I have to think none of it was very good. It was like he'd done his time with me, with a white girl, and then it was over . . . Asshole.[45]

Janice racializes John Kim's silence in a dehumanizing manner. By both questioning what kind of "person"[46] would do such a thing and suggesting that it might be a Korean trait, she links the two: Korean thus becomes oppositional to personhood. Moreover, Janice centers herself and her whiteness, speaking for John Kim, who becomes pushed to the periphery. She assumes his motivation is simply a race-based sexual fetish—an ironic reversal of the hypersexualization of Asian women—and definitively declares him an "asshole"[47] because she can no longer look back fondly on memories, preemptively dismissing John Kim's right to defend himself through speech. Janice's self-centeredness mimics Henry's theory of the Korean American's experience with the racial slur "gook."[48] He postulates that American soldiers bastardized the Korean word for America, which phonetically is "mee-gook"[49] into said slur—a repositioning of the American soldier, the agent of American imperialism, into the foreigner who is a "false speaker of language."[50] Kim writes of this moment, "This grammatical objectification registers a kind of ontological objectification of Koreans by the American soldiers . . . it is precisely because racialized subjects historically have been denied individual identities, subjectivity, and interiority that the American soldiers make such an assumption."[51] Janice and the American soldiers both imagine Korean to be descriptive of a persona rather than an ethnicity, allowing them to paint John Kim and the villagers, respectively, into their own simplified narratives.

In what is perhaps the most popular critical focus of the novel, Henry's role as a spy—a role in which silence is a necessity—is directly linked to his

41. *Id.*
42. *Id.* at 158.
43. *Id.* at 96.
44. *Id.* at 96.
45. *Id.* at 95.
46. *Id.*
47. *Id.*
48. *Id.* at 242.
49. *Id.*
50. *Id.* at 6.
51. Kim, *supra* note 3, at 121.

Korean American identity. Henry describes how spies in his line of work create legends, which are "extraordinarily extensive 'stor[ies]' of who we were, 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 ontological bearing, a certain presence of character."[52] Henry's fictional identity changes in response to what is required of him, blending into his reality until he struggles to distinguish between what is true and what is false. The spy thus imitates the roles into which immigrants are often placed, whether that be the foreign peril, the dutiful worker, or any of a number of other stereotypes. In turn, this role gradually becomes deterministic, as society first reacts and responds to this expected identity, which as a result then becomes actualized. Reflecting on his own life, Henry describes this process. He states:

> It's the prerogative of moles, after all, which only certain American lifetimes can teach. I am the obedient, soft-spoken son. What other talent can Hoagland so prize? I will duly retreat to the position of the good volunteer, the invisible underling. I have always known that moment of disappearance, and the even uglier truth is that I have long treasured it. That always honorable-seeming absence. It appears I can go anywhere I wish. Is this my assimilation, so many years in the making? Is this the long-sought sweetness?[53]

Henry acknowledges that his ethnic identity is inextricable from the position he fills in the global marketplace as a dealer of information on people. This concern, he suggests, is explicitly American, to be learned by an "American lifetime."[54] Henry alludes to his own position as a model minority, noting that Hoagland, representative of the nexus of power and information in this market wherein people are capital, values his silence and obedience. The politics of visibility once again reappear, as Henry is invisible. At moments, he even treasures this invisibility. But, Henry ultimately questions the value of this assimilation. His reflections call to mind the Asian American struggle to overcome monolithic depictions in popular media; rhetoric around Asian Americans as the model minority erases the experiences of those who do not fit neatly into the expectations surrounding this trope. And, the prominence of the model minority as a popular concept leads to an invisibility similar to the kind that Henry experiences as a spy, where competing or contradictory viewpoints are silenced.

John Kwang appears to be one Korean American who has mastered the use of language and thus achieved belonging, overcoming both the dangerous minefields of silence and speech that Asian Americans must navigate. Henry describes Kwang's enunciation as "melodic"[55] and notes "he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English."[56] Henry idolizes Kwang, seeing in him

52. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 22.
53. *Id.* at 202.
54. *Id.*
55. *Id.* at150.
56. *Id.* at 23.

an example of what a Korean American who refused to be defined by his identity would be like. After Kwang's career burns down, Henry reflects wistfully back upon their relationship. He thinks:

> He [Kwang] was how I 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. I found him most moving and beautiful in those moments.[57]

Henry most appreciates Kwang not when his language is at its cleanest, but when Kwang is confidently expressing a raw, unfiltered identity. In referencing the Puritans, Chinamen, and every boat person in between, Henry suggests that Kwang's speech at its purest captures a multicultural identity. Kwang's presence metaphorically promises the arrival of a post-racial society wherein all of the above identities are welcomed. In keeping with this vision of multiculturalism, Henry tells the reader that Kwang "never sought to be an ethnic politician."[58] In contrast to Henry's first encounter with Lelia, he finds Kwang's language to be beautiful not because of its precision or adherence to a standard, but because of the latent potential present in Kwang's appropriation of language.

Although Kwang appears to be poised and confident, Henry senses that this assured exterior is simply an identity for public display that is under continual curation. Henry, at dinner with Kwang, states:

> For despite how well [Kwang] spoke, how perfectly he moved through the sounds of his words, I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race. Although I had seen hours of him on videotape, there was something that I still couldn't abide in his speech.[59]

Kwang, unlike Henry, is not betrayed by his language. Instead, although he is audibly perfect, his Korean ethnicity renders his American speech unfamiliar and foreign. Henry thus evinces a belief that the speaker matters more than the language itself—this belief is what he has learned from his experiences with Alice and in grade school. For all the hard work that Henry and other minorities like him put into language in an attempt to assimilate, the belonging that accompanies a native speaker of English is fundamentally unattainable. The inability to accept Kwang as a native speaker in turn spreads to his speech. As events begin to collapse around Kwang, Henry comments, "Perhaps for the first time in his public life he mumbles, his voice cracks, and even an accent sneaks through."[60] Kwang's explicit othering by the media and Mayor de Roos leads to his breakdown in speech. These bastions of American society—the media and the government—capitalize on Henry's forced betrayal to Hoagland of Kwang's underground *ggeh* to paint Kwang as

57. *Id.* at 304.
58. *Id.* at 326.
59. *Id.* at 179.
60. *Id.* at 293.

representative of a foreign invasion, disrupting Kwang's picturesque exterior and capping the heights to which he can rise. Kim states of Kwang's *ggeh*, "John's *ggeh* is surveilled and criminalized as racialized undocumented capital precisely because it attempts a racialized redistribution of economic and *political* capital and power."[61] For minorities in *Native Speaker*, then, fluency in speech does not override one's identity. Rather, one's identity—fixed primarily in cultural and ethnic concerns—influences and shapes speech and perceptions of speech. Thus, *Native Speaker* locates these minorities in an impossible situation. They either speak poorly and are deemed foreign, or are deemed foreign and assumed to speak poorly. Either way, the picture Lee's novel seems paints is a grim one for its inhabitants, doomed to always exist on the outskirts of American society.

While John Kwang's career collapses, the hope of a multicultural, welcoming society he embodies does not. The vision of the novel holds that Henry, too, ultimately is not a static character. At the conclusion of *Native Speaker*, he thinks:

> And whenever I hear the strains of a different English, I will still shatter a little inside. Within every echo from a city storefront or window, I can hear the old laments of my mother and my father, and mine as a confused schoolboy, and then even the fitful mumblings of our Ahjuhma, the instant American inventions of her tongue. They speak to me, as John Kwang could always, not simply in new accents or notes but in the ancient untold music of a newcomer's heart, sonorous with longing and hope.[62]

Henry transitions from a relationship with Lelia that he initially grounds in a voyeuristic appreciation for her precision of language and perfect execution of English to a mindset that appreciates the vocal cracks and shifts of his parents, of himself, and even of Ahjuhma, the maid who he previously struggles to see as a person. Henry's repositioning to appreciate "the strains of a different English"[63] signals his mental decentering of an Americentric worldview wherein whiteness is both normative and venerated. Over the course of *Native Speaker*, he comes to value the people who stand behind these novel and supposedly imprecise ways of speaking. Kwang thus provides the impetus for Henry to envision a future wherein the "newcomer's heart"[64] is valued and uplifted, where their dreams "sonorous with longing and hope"[65] are recognized and achievable—a contrast with the broken dreams of Henry's father, and the all-consuming capitalist doctrines that Mr. Park begins to pursue and which ultimately drain the life out of him.

By the end of the novel, Henry's relationship with Lelia has also come to reflect this paradigm shift. Henry has quit his job, moving past his positioning as "the good volunteer, the invisible underling,"[66] and begun to help

61. Kim, *supra* note 3, at 128.
62. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 304.
63. *Id.*
64. *Id.*
65. *Id.*
66. *Id.* at 202.

Lelia with her work as a speech therapist. Henry does suggest that he will never find a true place in American society, telling the reader, "We [Lelia and Henry] play this game in which I am her long-term guest. Permanently visiting. That she likes me okay and bears my presence, but who can know for how long?"[67] Even in his most private relationships, Henry plays the perpetual visitor and the eternal foreigner. In this game, he experiences the constant fear that he will be expelled—that his presence will be rejected, as his position in relation to Lelia is forever in doubt. Henry expresses the constant dilemma immigrants face, particularly with recent rhetoric by former President Trump about deportation[68] and the wave of nativist sentiment as perpetuated by hate groups at events like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.[69] But, Henry's actions offer future generations promise. During Lelia's speech therapy sessions for young children, he plays "the Speech Monster . . . gobbl[ing] up kids but . . . cower[ing] when anyone repeats the day's secret phrase, which Lelia has them practice earlier."[70] These kids are "mostly just foreign language speakers,"[71] and Henry, as the Speech Monster, symbolizes the kind of struggles he himself faced in learning the language. In contrast to Henry and Kwang, who struggled to learn and suffered because of their foreignness, these children visibly watch as Henry, a member of the older generation and in some ways representative of the obstacles their parents have undergone, cowers at their use of language, giving these children a vision of the power they have access to.

Lelia's actual instruction aims to facilitate the inclusion of these children rather than force upon them a standard of achievement by which their assimilation is judged. Henry recounts:

> [Lelia] thinks it's better with their high number and kind to give them some laughs and then read a tall tale in her gentlest, queerest voice. It doesn't matter what they understand. She wants them to know that there is nothing to fear, she wants to offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show them it's fine to mess it all up.[72]

Lelia repositions English from a weapon used to inform minorities of their alienness into a means of gentle laughter. Moreover, her instruction aims to divorce the close connection between whiteness and "proper"[73] English, as she deems it important that these young, immigrant children witness a

67. *Id.* at 347.

68. Ted Hesson & Quint Forgey, *Trump Promises Mass Deportations of 'Millions of Illegal Aliens' Next Week*, Politico: Immigration (June 18, 2019, 12:59 PM), https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/18/trump-deportation-illegal-aliens-1367012 [perma.cc/K23S-V5EX].

69. Debbie Elliot, *The Charlottesville Rally 5 Years Later: 'It's What You're Still Trying to Forget,'* NPR (Aug. 12, 2022, 5:00 AM), https://www.npr.org/2022/08/12/1116942725/the-charlottesville-rally-5-years-later-its-what-youre-still-trying-to-forget [perma.cc/FM6M-D6X9].

70. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 348.

71. *Id.* at 349.

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.* at 10.

"pale white woman"[74] messing up and improperly executing language—a clear departure from Henry's first encounter with her, where she speaks perfectly. In the last lines of *Native Speaker*, Henry describes how Lelia ends her speech therapy sessions, stating, "Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen . . . Now, she 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."[75] Lelia explicitly names these children as citizens, signaling that they belong and are valued contributors to the nation. Again, this is a clear departure from Henry's time in school learning English, where he and his fellow classmates in Remedial Speech "were misfits . . . the school retards, the mentals, the losers who stuttered or could explode in rage or wet their pants or who just couldn't say the words."[76] Whereas the characters of *Native Speaker* previously center English, Lelia presumably defaults to the enunciation of the children's native languages, expanding what is seen as valuable and beautiful. Although Henry remains an outsider, *Native Speaker* positions language as a means for future generations like these young children to showcase the breadth of experience present in American society and assert their right to be heard.

II. Familial Relations as Forms of Cultural Expression

Henry spends much of *Native Speaker* relating stories about his family to the reader. He recalls memories of his parents from his childhood, the development of his relationship with his wife, Lelia, and his son Mitt's effervescence and joy for life. As Henry alludes to, family provides an "ordering"[77] principle—a principle that appears objective and unchanging, a "familial precision, where the relation abides no argument, no questions or quarrels."[78] After all, familial titles such as father presuppose the fulfillment of a certain set of conditions. Furthermore, a father is always a father, even after death. In contrast, a social label such as friend occupies a more nuanced role in our lexicon. We generally view social labels as temporary, and we often see the need to modify labels such as friends with adjectives like as close or life-long, while family simply remains family. However, as *Native Speaker* suggests, familial relations are seldom quite as simple as one expects in childhood; indeed, expectations often complicate matters. Having experienced these expectations firsthand, Henry notes their limitations and rigidity, "how it [family] variously casts you as the golden child, the slave-son or daughter, the venerable father, the long-dead god."[79] Similarly to *No-No Boy*, *Native Speaker* positions Henry's family as a stage where national identity is performed and developed. Henry's parents, his wife Lelia, and his son Mitt all

74. *Id.* at 349.
75. *Id.*
76. *Id.* at 235.
77. *Id.* at 6.
78. *Id.* at 7.
79. *Id.* at 6–7.

initially fit neatly as metaphors for certain racialized identities, but, as Henry notes, the truth of these identities depends on who the speaker is.[80] By the end of the novel, the neat categorizations and metaphors give way to a richer—if messier—sense of the value of one's individual personhood.

Henry's parents appear to be the quintessential immigrants. Mr. and Mrs. Park moved from Korea after Henry was born. Henry remembers how Mr. Park worked his way up to run a series of grocery stores before his death, while Mrs. Park stayed at home. Henry's mother died early, from cancer, placing Mr. Park in a role of standard-bearer for Korean culture—a clear contrast from many other Asian American texts: *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*'s "Wisdom of the New" situates the mother as the figure responsible for maintaining the family's native cultural tradition, Ichiro's mother in *No-No Boy* is clearly associated with Japan, and in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* the mother relays stories of Chinese culture, among others. Henry views his father with a certain disgust and disapproval often reserved for these maternal figures. As one example, his relationship with his father mirrors Ichiro's relationship with his mother. Henry recounts, "The second stroke, just a week before the last one, took away his ability to move or speak. He sat up in bed with those worn black eyes and had to listen to me talk . . . I spoke at him, this propped-up father figure, half intending an emotional torture."[81] Henry feels a deep-seated sense of anger at his parents, speaking to a systemic problem that extends beyond any individual parent-child relationship. However, his anger damages more than just the enemy he has created in his father. He thinks:

> I thought [my father] would be an easy mark, being stiff, paralyzed, but of course the agony was mine. He was unmovable. I thought, too, that he was mocking me with his mouth, which lay slack, agape. Nothing I said seemed to penetrate him. But then what was my speech?[82]

Henry's agony stems from his inability to engage in discourse with his father, but his remark about speech suggests a frustration with more than just his father's physical inability to comprehend brought about by the stroke. Rather, there is—or at least Henry perceives there to be—a fundamental difference in their modes of communication and speech, with "language becom[ing] [Henry and his father's] primary battleground."[83]

Meanwhile, Mrs. Park's death signals a rending of Korean culture, particularly as it is passed down to Henry. "[Henry's parents] said [Mrs. Park's] constant weariness and tears were from her concern over my [Henry] mediocre studies . . . They finally said, with hard pride, that she was afflicted with a 'Korean fever' that no doctor in America was able to cure."[84] Although her cancer is not literally a Korean fever, Henry's parents, in equating their

80. *See id.* at 7.
81. *Id.* at 48–49.
82. *Id.* at 49.
83. Page, *supra* note 19, at 16.
84. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 77.

Korean identity as the cause of her death, reinforce the lines separating Henry's Korean and American identities, perhaps because of oppression they themselves experienced. Furthermore, in foisting the blame for Mrs. Park's health upon Henry, his parents suggest that Henry's failures as a child affect their ability to assimilate and even survive. After her death, his mother's role in the house is filled by Ahjuhma, whom Henry's father pays to take care of the house and Henry. However, Henry intentionally chooses to remain distant from Ahjuhma, never even learning her name.[85]

Native Speaker suggests that generational differences and Henry's contrasting sense of Korean and white family structures and roles contribute to the disconnect he experiences with his family. Henry understands his parents only through their relation to him. He says of his father, "For him, all life was a rigid matter of family,"[86] and, in a moment of direct reflection, "Your family was your life."[87] Meanwhile, Henry says of Mrs. Park, "My mother was the worst. She was an impossible woman. Of course she was a good mother. I think now she treated it like a job. She wasn't what you'd call friendly. Never warm."[88] Henry thus confines Mr. and Mrs. Park within the "fine and terrible ordering"[89] he describes at the beginning of the novel, treating his parents as known quantities and reducing them down to essentialized constructs. Moreover, Henry finds Mr. and Mrs. Park wanting in their duties as parents. Although Henry describes Mrs. Park as a "good mother,"[90] he situates it next to a scathing critique of her womanhood and persona, creating a logically inconsistent argument. Henry appears to argue that Mrs. Park is an "impossible woman"[91] and "the worst"[92] because she treats her status as a mother as a job, which indicates that her method of mothering reflects poorly on her character. He implies the existence of certain prerequisites parents must meet to be successful; one of these prerequisites is a certain emotional expressiveness that Asian parents are often perceived to be lacking in. In fact, Henry draws a clear distinction between the manner in which his own family functioned and the manner in which white families function. He tells Lelia:

> When I was a teenager . . . I so wanted to be familiar and friendly with my parents like my white friends were with theirs . . . I wanted just once for my mother and father to relax a little bit with me. Not treat me so much like a *son*, like a figure in a long line of figures.[93]

Henry's time in America has conditioned him to believe that to be a son, particularly within an immigrant family, is to fit within a certain bounded role—one marked by duty and composure.

85. *See id.* at 68.
86. *Id.* at 6.
87. *Id.* at 47.
88. *Id.* at 221.
89. *Id.* at 6.
90. *Id.* at 221.
91. *Id.*
92. *Id.*
93. *Id.*

By contrast, Henry sees white families as an idealized blend of emotional intimacy and more formal provision. Although Lelia disputes this notion, telling Henry, "It's not so goddamn wonderful, you know,"[94] this vision holds power for Henry as a standard against which he constantly measures his own family. Thus, for Henry, part of the failings of his parents lies in their essence rather than just their actions. His parents are inextricably tied to their immigrant, Korean identity, which limits Henry's ability to attain a normalized identity. By virtue of this connection, he can never claim to have experienced or lived certain common white experiences. He says of his father, "For him, the world—and by that I must mean this very land, his chosen nation—operated on a determined set of procedures, certain rules of engagement. These were the inalienable rights of the immigrant."[95] Henry has his own rules of engagement; he exists within a separate ecosystem that seldom overlaps with the world his parents lived in. In fact, defining his parents within the immigrant trope displays one of his rules of engagement. Henry, like his father, operates within a set of fixed assumptions about the world.

But, Henry's assumptions often contradict, leading to an internal sense of confusion about his family. Although Henry often fits his parents into neat tropes like that of the immigrant foreigner, he also acknowledges certain ways in which they do not fit the preset stereotypes he places them in. These differences suggest that Henry's parents have more depth to their character than the family-oriented mindset he assigns them, and extend their concerns beyond attempts to fit into society. Henry describes the *ggeh*, or Korean money club, his father participated in, stating:

> At the meetings the men would be smoking, talking loudly, almost shouting their opinions. There were arguments but only a few, mostly it was just all the hope and excitement. I remember my father as the funny one, he'd make them all laugh with an old Korean joke or his impressions of Americans who came into his store, doing their stiff nasal tone, their petty annoyances and complaints.[96]

Henry here paints a picture different from the one he described earlier. His father's small world, centered on the family, expands into a more detailed setting—the *ggeh* is a completely different ecosystem. In the context of the *ggeh*, Mr. Park has an entirely different personality, replete with characteristics that struggle to come through within the familial context during Henry's childhood. Noticeably, this different personality draws strength from its contrast with an American persona. Henry remembers his father's humor as culturally Korean and full of satirizations of American customers. As Henry's father assimilates more into the American ethos, if not the culture, he begins to lose this hope and joy. Henry states:

> I wonder if my father, if given the chance, would have wished to go back to the time before he made all that money . . . He worked hard and had

94. *Id.*
95. *Id.* at 47.
96. *Id.* at 50.

> worries but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in.[97]

The novel suggests that the quintessential American Dream, wherein economic success grants—or reflects—a social acceptance, gradually strips Mr. Park of his support network and leads to a flattened experience devoid of joy.

Henry also recognizes the possibility of a different childhood, one wherein his cultural identity does not war with his sense of belonging. He reflects on one of his friends from college, Albert, who is also Korean American. Over one of their school breaks, Henry visits Albert's house. He describes his visit, stating, "the sweet scents of beef short ribs and spicy codfish soup and sesame-fried zucchini made me think of my own house before my mother died,"[98] and "the inflection of the words [of Albert's mother] was just that of my mother's, so much so that I nearly dropped my duffel and went to the strange-faced woman."[99] Henry connects to the environment of Albert's house because of moments that are explicitly Korean, as the sight and scent of the cultural food and the accented English remind Henry of his own childhood. But, Albert's house differs noticeably from Henry's in one key aspect. He states:

> while sitting at dinner listening to [Albert's mother] and Albert's father asking their son questions about school, his health, worrying as they were in the very words, in the very tone and gesture of my own growing up, a familiarity arose that should have been impossible but wasn't and made me feel a little sick inside. It wasn't that Albert and I were similar; we weren't, our parents weren't. It was something else. That night, lying in the short bunk bed above snoring Albert, I wondered if anything would have turned out differently had a careless nurse switched the two of us in a hospital nursery, whether his family would be significantly changed, whether mine would have been, whether any of us Koreans, raised as we were, would sense the barest tinge of a loss or estrangement.[100]

Henry associates Korean immigrant culture with a certain set of expectations that revolve around emotional distance and family as duty. Because Henry's communication with his own family is lacking, he extends this fractured relationship to all Korean American families. However, Albert's family disrupts the universality of Henry's assumptions and reflects the dangers of viewing any demographic as monolithic. Henry categorizes emotional vulnerability and healthy communication as white-specific traits because he cannot imagine his own family operating with these qualities. Albert serves as a counterexample, indicating that the structure that leads to the fractured family that Henry experiences is not inevitable. Henry struggles with this concept, wondering whether anyone would notice if he and Albert were swapped at birth. As a result, Henry's belief in Asian Americans as devoid of individuality becomes apparent. He cannot reconcile a world where a Korean American family has

97. *Id.* at 51–52.
98. *Id.* at 96.
99. *Id.*
100. *Id.* at 96–97.

attained what he had assumed were white-exclusive attributes with his own expectations.

While Henry's family is distinctly Korean American, the novel emphasizes Lelia's whiteness. At their first meeting, Henry notices that Lelia "was very white, the skin of her shoulder almost blue, opalescent, unbelievably pale considering where she lived."[101] Henry describes her as his "American wife."[102] Lelia's whiteness is not presented as a neutral trait, though. Henry tells the reader, "I knew [my father] liked the fact that Lelia was white."[103] Henry theorizes that "perhaps [his father] thought he saw through [his] intentions, the assumption being that Lelia and her family would help [Henry] make [his] way in the land."[104] This euphemistic idea of making a way in the land thinly couches Mr. Park's view of Lelia as a means by which Henry can alleviate his otherness. Lelia, to Mr. Park, is valuable because of the diffusive effect her whiteness has on Henry's yellowness. Henry implicitly affirms his father's presumption, telling the reader about Lelia and her father, "I knew that I was afraid of [Stew], too. And what it was about Lelia that I desired and feared came partly through his bloodline running through her, the openness and exuberance and all that hard focus she could sometimes call up."[105] In evoking Lelia's bloodline, Henry links the traits about Lelia that he views as desirable with her genetics. Henry describes these genetics simply, stating of Lelia's father Stew, "[He is a]ll balls and liver. His kind predated the notion of alcoholism. Groton, Princeton, Harvard Business School."[106] Later, speaking in reference to his ethnicity, Henry tells Lelia, "it's being with old guys like Stew that diminishes you."[107] Henry views Stew as native; by extension, Lelia is also a native. Page argues that for Henry, "Winning Lelia works to stake a claim to that identity [whiteness] and that privilege."[108] The genetics that Henry references—openness, exuberance, hard focus—all suggest an ease of belonging that Henry sees as unattainable. Lelia's inheritance of Stew's sense of belonging combined with her proficiency in language implies that Henry's marriage to her represents his proactive attempt to associate with whiteness as a way to assimilate.

Mitt, the child of Henry's union with Lelia, symbolizes Henry's hope for a future wherein his line will no longer be identified by their alienness. Mitt occupies a position as a kind of bridge between cultures by virtue of his hybridity. Henry discusses his son's relationship with Mr. Park, stating, "When Mitt played with my father their communication was somehow wholly untroubled, perfect in its way . . . [Mitt] could mimic the finest gradations in our English and Korean, those notes of who we were, and perhaps he could

101. *Id.* at 9.
102. *Id.* at 8.
103. *Id.* at 58.
104. *Id.*
105. *Id.* at 119.
106. *Id.*
107. *Id.* at 242.
108. Page, *supra* note 19, at 15.

imagine, if ever briefly, that this was our truest world, rich with disparate melodies."[109] Mitt, as a mixed-race child, appears to be ontologically attuned to both aspects of his ethnic identity. Henry notes how "Mitt always spoke [English] beautifully,"[110] and his son also can understand and communicate in the pidgin English Mr. Park speaks in. Henry views Mitt's intonations and pronunciations as emblematic of Lelia's and his identities. In capturing the notes of who they are, Mitt's language offers a means by which Henry can translate his identity into society.

However, Henry still feels distant from his son, in part because of what he sees as his own deficiencies. He states, "I didn't want to fumble or clutter any words for the boy just as he was coming to the language. I feared I might handicap him, stunt the speech blooming in his brain, and that Lelia would provide the best example of how to speak."[111] Although Mitt is the biological product of both Lelia and Henry, Henry actively attempts to minimize the influence he has over his son in order to facilitate Mitt's ability to belong and flourish within a white-passing identity. He states to the reader, "my hope was that [Mitt] would grow up with a singular sense of his world, a life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not."[112] Henry sees Mitt's ethnic hybridity as occupying a liminal space similar to his own position as an immigrant. He suggests that these liminal identities face systemic challenges; the lack of authority or confidence comes not only from internal forces but also external ones. In referencing a life univocal, Henry once more gestures to the impact of language upon the way a person is viewed within society. For a time, at least, Henry acknowledges that he believed in absorption of ethnic identities within a larger, "singular sense"[113] of society—a sense that is explicitly white.

Despite Henry's fascination with whiteness, both *Native Speaker* and Henry himself acknowledge that the singular pursuit of assimilation leads only to disaster. Shortly after describing the "univocal"[114] life he wanted for Mitt, Henry states, "Of course, this is assimilist sentiment, part of my own ugly and half-blind romance with the land."[115] More dramatically, Mitt, the vessel of Henry's hopes and the apple of the Park's eyes—Henry, Lelia, and Mr. Park—dies accidentally, suffocated under a dogpile of white, suburban children before the events of the novel even occur. Henry, in thinking about Mitt, always looks backwards into time, coloring his reflections with hints of hindsight and nostalgia. His acknowledgement of his own "ugly and half-blind romance"[116] is one example of the wisdom Henry has gained; he sees the destruction his own attempts at hiding have wrought—whether it be from

109. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 239–40.
110. *Id.* at 239.
111. *Id.*
112. *Id.* at 267.
113. *Id.*
114. *Id.* at 267.
115. *Id.*
116. *Id.*

his familial trauma, his identity as an Asian American, or in the course of his work as a spy. Michelle Rhee argues that *Native Speaker* "appears to link assimilation with death and downfall."[117] In one moment of vivid reflection, Henry imagines his son's death, stating:

> You pale little boys are crushing him, your adoring mob of hands and feet, your necks and heads, your nostrils and knees . . . Too thick anyway, to breathe. How pale his face, his chest. Blanket his eyes. Listen now. You can hear the attempt of his breath, that unlost voice, calling us from the bottom of the world.[118]

As Amanda Page argues, Henry emphasizes the paleness of both Mitt and the children who suffocate him, implicating their whiteness in the events that lead to Mitt's death.[119] Notably, Henry does not seem to blame the children who killed Mitt, describing them as an "adoring mob"[120] and "little boys."[121] Instead, Henry positions Mitt's death as an inevitability. As the explicitly mixed-race bridge between worlds, Mitt was never going to be allowed to survive by the ecosystem of whiteness.

As the novel progresses towards its conclusion, *Native Speaker* depicts a crucial transformation of the racial dynamic between Lelia and Henry. Lelia and Henry are struggling to reignite their relationship following Lelia's return. In a moment rich with symbolism, they agree to clean out Mr. Park's home—which is also the place of Mitt's death—as they have never properly dealt with the remnants of the past following the death of Henry's father. This crucial chapter serves as the fulcrum of the whole novel. Henry finally opens up about his occupation, telling Lelia about his work as a spy and confessing, "I'm sinking a little, Lee."[122] Lelia, on finding out that Henry's work involves another Korean American, "[tries] her very best to stay quiet, to think around the notion for a moment instead of steaming right through it."[123] Whereas Lelia previously processes events and racial experiences through her own whitened frame of reference—assigning her own conclusions to the scenario she finds herself in—she now attempts to wait and listen, allowing Henry to speak about his own experiences and desires. "In a voice [Henry] hardly recognize[s],"[124] Lelia tells Henry, "You just say what you want. Please say what you want."[125] In this moment, Lelia's character fundamentally changes, as reflected by her change in voice.

If Lelia's moment of enlightenment serves as a psychological shift in Henry and Lelia's relationship, then the rest of the chapter functions as the physical representation and consummation of this change. After Lelia's

117. Rhee, *supra* note 5, at 164.
118. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 107.
119. *See* Page, *supra* note 19, at 19.
120. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 107.
121. *Id.*
122. Lee, *supra* note 8, at 225.
123. *Id.* at 227.
124. *Id.*
125. *Id.*

words, *Native Speaker* inserts a section break. Henry lies alone in Mitt's old bed, within the house he describes as "this place of our ghosts."[126] Joined by Lelia, they begin to make love. Henry describes the scene in vivid detail, and, as with Mitt's death, he fixates upon the whiteness of the scene. He notes Lelia's "white skin . . . Bone white, purple white,"[127] and as they become more and more passionate, Henry tells the reader, "I started to take her with my head up against the angled ceiling painted dead flat white by my father in a long fit of mourning and she said, *No, sweetie, not here*."[128] Lelia leads him out through the rain to the house's garage apartment. They strip, and Henry watches "the straightness of her as she move[s], her long belly, the dark collapse below that."[129] For the first time, Henry sees past Lelia's metaphorical whiteness; "the dark collapse"[130] is one of the first moments Henry describes Lelia without using terms synonymous with white. But, Lelia drives this moment, choosing to leave behind the ghosts of their past and the lifelessness of whiteness—the dead flat white painted by Henry's father in the suburban house Mr. Park never really wanted—and instead breathes life and agency back into their relationship. Lelia, as the agent of whiteness in this relationship, must drive the change past the trappings of whiteness to a new equilibrium. Henry emphasizes the orality of their sex, telling the reader, "I kept eating, too, wanting every last fold of her, the taste brand new to me, or, at least, a reconfection of what I knew."[131] Lelia's shift has changed her very core into something unfamiliar to Henry, reconstructing her character to better facilitate and understand who Henry is. In reconfiguring the mouth as an instrument of intimate consumption rather than speech, Henry radically alters the understood conditions of his existence. At the conclusion of the chapter, Henry states, "This is my wife,"[132] asserting a continued relationship with Lelia, but also further marking this moment as a crucial shift in the novel by virtue of the change in tenses. Prior to this moment, Henry speaks primarily in past tense; following this moment, Henry switches primarily to present tense, indicating his full participation and presence in the world he finds himself in.

Conclusion

Chang rae-Lee's novel *Native Speaker* wades into a host of issues, touching upon race relations between minorities, the politics of ethnic categorizations, the allure of whiteness, and the social dynamics of language in our society. Through *Native Speaker*'s interrogation of speech, the novel questions popular understandings of the foundations upon which American

126. *Id.*
127. *Id.* at 228.
128. *Id.*
129. *Id.* at 229.
130. *Id.*
131. *Id.* at 230.
132. *Id.*

society has been built. Henry's experiences position speech, a fundamental part of the fabric of our national life, as a double-edged sword, alternately able to empower and disenfranchise depending upon how it is used. *Native Speaker* also initially places Henry and his family within several classic ethnic tropes, from the hard-working immigrant parents to the suppressed and marginalized child of immigrants. Over the course of the novel, these tropes are upended, highlighting the inadequacy of the sweeping generalizations that arise from treating ethnic groups of people as monolithic. This subversive approach is a common trend throughout *Native Speaker*, which advocates for a more complex understanding of society beyond simple narratives. Finally, *Native Speaker* protests the idea that one can read an Asian American text and subsequently understand all that is encapsulated by that label. I believe *Native Speaker* forces a close inspection of the ways our society values and devalues people and relationships according to racial and social factors outside of our control. Nevertheless, *Native Speaker*'s emphasis on speech and the power of language must be accompanied by action, lest its vision for future generations fail to come to fruition.