Nativisms and Mannerisms: Language and Identity in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*
and *A Gesture Life*

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and intellectual contribution to this project. His feedback, as well as his willingness to be
a sounding board, has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Elaine Roth for her
interest and input on this paper's progression. I would also like to give a special
thanks to Dr. Eileen Bender, the first to instill an interest for Chang-nan Lee. Her
insight has greatly influenced not only the development of this project, but its conception
as well.

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Although they are American-born and speak English, many American citizens are often identified by their racial backgrounds rather than their citizenship, so questions pertaining to ethnic origin, including questions such as “Where did you learn to speak English so well?” seem ordinary, or even routine for an ethnic or racial minority.

Clearly, English language fluency does not usually negate the borders created by a hyphenated identity. “These comments and questions are the result of a mixture of two distinct identities, namely cultural and linguistic,” writes psycho-linguist Li-Rong Lilly Cheng, who continues:

Broadly, hyphenated linguistic identity can be seen in the way a person delivers his or her speech, conducts conversation, talks, and writes...to speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. (218)

In conjunction with having to assume the dominant culture, often the native cultural background of one with a hyphenated identity may be confused with that of another, or be flattened enough that it becomes indistinguishable from another culture. For example, many individuals labeled “Asian American” argue that being Chinese American is significantly different from being Japanese American, yet they are frequently lumped together under the too inclusive label of “Asian American.” Like the physical function of the hyphen that conceptually marks a conditional (or somehow “less” American), and in the case of Asian American literature, “flattened” racial identity (or the borders that mark the lumping together of very distinct cultural backgrounds), experimental treatments of
identities racialized by multilingualism conceptually mark the borders of race and identity.

The sometimes problematic interpretation of a pan-Asian identity is expanded on in Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts on Asian American Cultural Politics*. She argues that the approach of the majority, perhaps, demands the marginalization of the minority through the glossing over and flattening of a culture’s individual differences and points to the treatment of ethnic and minority literature as a “minor” literature juxtaposed against canonical American literature. The treatment of Asian American literature as a supplement to canonical Anglo American literature results in “Asian American literary texts often reveal[ing] heterogeneity rather than reproducing regulating ideas of cultural identity and integration” (43). Rather than focusing on authors who reuse the stories and themes that reinforce regulating perceptions of racial identity, authors who write about the varied representations and experiences that Lowe mentions may serve to highlight a subtle recognition of the majority’s misinterpretation that a generalized and flattened Asian American identity is genuinely representative. Varied representations, coupled with either a purposefully explicit or understated concentration on language assimilation, indicates the articulation of a linguistic rebellion against, or resistance to, traditionally standardized uses of American English, along with a resistance to the expectation of complete cultural assimilation.

The positioning of Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, and Filipino American, among others, within the broad category of Asian American literature not only blurs linguistic and cultural differences but also requires an implicit
unwillingness to hear individual difference. Eric Liu, author of *The Accidental Asian*, elaborates on this as problematic when he notes:

Asian Americans belong not to a race so much as to a confederation, a big yellow-and-brown tent that covers a panoply of interests. And while those interests converge usefully on some points—antidiscrimination, open immigration—they diverge on many others. This is a ‘community’, after all, that consists of ten million people of a few dozen ethnicities, who have roots all across America and around the globe…it would take an act of selective deafness to hear, in this cacophony, a unitary voice. (74)

Calling attention to this same kind of problematic positioning of the Asian American, the fictional novels of Korean-American Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (1995) and *A Gesture Life* (1999), demonstrate different ways in which language and voice are used to shape and distinguish an identity beyond the generalization of “Asian American.” Each of the two works presents a varied representation of the “American experience” through the eyes of an Asian American (more specifically Korean American) protagonist. *Native Speaker* examines the interactions between Korean American Henry Park, a young native to the United States, and the people central to his life. Fundamental to his story is his relationship with his wife, Lelia, who is tellingly a language pathologist, as well as complications created by the demands his profession creates. As a spy for an espionage firm, he must both articulate and assume false identities in order to successfully infiltrate different organizations. Most of the novel focuses on both his assignments to penetrate given organizations and the tensions of crafting and sustaining the identities created in order to breach the security of those organizations. The assignment that comprises most
of the novel is Henry's penetration into the political party of John Kwang, a Korean American mayoral candidate, and the internal pressures created by Henry's pseudo-identity. In *A Gesture Life*, the protagonist Franklin Hata, is a Korean-born, Japanese-raised older man who is uneasily poised between his past as a Japanese World War II medical officer with his present as an enculturated U.S. immigrant. Most of Franklin's reflections are attempts to somehow downplay the opposition between the past and the present, as well as the hostility between him and his adopted daughter, Sunny. As a young lieutenant in the Japanese Imperialist Army, he was complicit in the anti-human rights brutalities that wars potentially bring. As a U.S. citizen, though, he is widely regarded in his community as friendly, helpful, and most importantly, harmless. However, his determination to be seen as an obliging, model citizen by the community as a whole strains every close, familial or intimate relationship he is part of.

Because Asian Americans are often misjudged as pan-Asian stereotypes, they may be denied the full advantages of American citizenship, or at least denied the recognition by dominant society that they *deserve* full and complete citizen rights. Each man's personal "American experience" is complicated and heavily influenced by the race that, despite his best efforts to infiltrate and please a particular organization or community, marks him as an outsider. While analyzing the wide-ranging experiences of each man, Lee pointedly concentrates on the significance of the line between, and interaction of, a speaker and listener in the use of language. Because Henry's profession requires that he verbally construct his identity for others, he generally speaks more than he listens. On the other hand, Franklin rarely interjects his own voice into a conversation, opting rather to position himself as the listener. Closely linked to both verbalization and
listening as tools in communication, the binary of language and silence, or the calculated use and the withholding of speech, serves to illuminate the duality of words as simultaneously meaningful and meaningless. Both Henry and Franklin carefully calculate the ways in which they withhold speech in order to direct and influence communication with those in their lives. Lee emphasizes the use of language as a shaping agent of a character's individual identity, requiring the reader to reexamine notions of a generalized Asian identity, an Asian American identity—even who is and who is not American—and, at the same time, to reinterpret the definitions of an authentic American identity and a legitimate American experience. Lee's Henry and Franklin strive for a feasible American identity, a struggle that is clearly registered in their language use, or their deliberate use of speech and silence.

Henry, the Korean-American protagonist and narrator of Native Speaker, is identified predominately in terms that mark him as a speaker. Significantly, the organization he works for, Glimmer & Co., is an espionage firm whose purpose is to subvert the immigrant population of New York City who may, in one way or another, threaten the financial or political interests of foreign governments or multinational companies (18). As a professional spy for the firm, Henry has successfully infiltrated organizations, and his "assignments," require him to mask his real identity by his manipulation of language. The title, Native Speaker, is thus itself a play on words, illustrating the duality of identity that structures the novel. First, it clearly characterizes Henry's ability to create convincing narratives and personas for his work, or more crucially, to play and blur with, exploit, and cross the borders that function to pinpoint an ethnicized Asian American identity. His profession, in fact, relies on the pervasive
stereotypes of a generalized Asian American identity, enabling him to use his ethnicity to bond with targets that have similar ethnic backgrounds. Secondly, the title, in describing a marker of citizenship, accentuates both who may be considered a “native” speaker of a language and a “native” of a nation, and why one who is not may be excluded. This key factor—language facility—differentiates the true or “native” individual from the “alien” outsider. It also underscores the notion that physical ethnicity determines one’s position as a “native” or “non-native,” rather than one’s legal or literal citizenship. As Lowe suggests, Lee’s Henry Park is living one of the more important stories of Asian American experiences, “[the story of] the process of critically receiving and rearticulating cultural tradition in the face of a dominant culture that eroticizes and orientalizes Asians” (65). Ironically, Henry’s need to constantly rearticulate pseudo-ethnic identities specifically intended to mask his real identity creates psychological and social tensions between false identity, disrupted identity, and non-identity.

Partly as a result of these tensions created by Henry’s manipulation of language, through both his voice and his deliberate silences, Henry’s wife, Lelia, leaves him out of frustration at their failure to openly communicate. The novel opens with her goodbye note that accuses him of being an “illegal alien / emotional alien / Yellow-peril: neo-American / stranger / follower / traitor / spy” (4). Another note he finds later calls him a “false speaker of language” (4). Tellingly (for he is a master of oration), Henry appreciates most the note’s “count, its clean cadence” (5) rather than its true sentiments. Certain labels that she gives him, particularly “illegal alien,” “stranger,” and “false speaker of language,” are literally untrue and contradictory because he is a legal citizen of the United States and English has been his primary vehicle of communication for his
entire life. What she is saying, then, is that he is an outsider despite his legal residency and dominant language. Further, the idea that he is both a Yellow-peril (a sinister and stereotyped threat to the American dream itself), as well as a "neo" American indicates that no matter how well he seemingly assimilates himself into a given assignment, and even the American way of life in general, he will always be a false American, and either a traitor or a spy because he appears to have mixed loyalties. Because he is "neo," or new, he is less legitimate, conventional, and traditional. His position remains outside of truly American boundaries and his experience, his life, and his identity, therefore, are less pure or legitimized, and consequently, marginalized.

As Henry's wife's note suggests, the things that he appears to be are confusing, and certain characteristics are often in direct opposition to one another. His psyche as a whole is plagued with constant tension and contradiction. Reflecting on the formation of an identity like Henry's that is confined or limited by racialized borders, Gloria Anzaldua argues that "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (100). In her collection of essays and theory, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999), she notes that the term la mestiza derives from an Aztec word meaning "torn between ways."

Similarly, as Anzaldua writes, for people like Henry, borders are constructed, unnatural separations that are:

Set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them... A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... the only 'legitimate'
inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. (25-6)

Certainly, Lee's Henry is "torn between ways" in that he is not simply an "American," but an "Asian American." The "Asian" facet of his identity points to a bordered, ethnicized identity located outside of what is considered typically or traditionally American. It seems paradoxical to be a native of a nation, yet somehow to be considered less of a citizen because of one's ethnic background. Furthermore, Henry must constantly, carefully, and tenuously straddle the vague and undetermined borderland that separates the life he lives at home (with Lelia and his son, Mitt), from the pseudo-lives he must live through his professional assignments (the adoption of false names, occupations, and backgrounds).

Such border issues and their relationship to identity become increasingly complex throughout the novel, not only marking a conceptual border, but sometimes a physical one. Lee provides examples of figurative lines dividing groups, such as the city's racial lines drawn between Korean American shopkeepers and their African American clientele, as well as the physical barricades that keep these two groups literally separated during political rallies.

The omnipresence of borders in Native Speaker is even more dramatically realized through the exchange of language. When Henry meets Lelia, he is attracted to her language. He remembers, "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 exceedingly proper, but I soon realized that she was simply executing the language. She went word by word. Every letter had a border" (10). First, the "execution" of language implies that there is a proper,
designated way that words must be used and that the mastery of this skill is a desirable trait in effective communication. The emphasis here, then, is on enunciation, diction, and speech rather than vocabulary and content. Second, Henry’s realization that “every letter has a border” and his appreciation of the ability to properly execute a language is a recognition that articulation should, more often than not, be carefully premeditated. It follows that the spontaneous use of words would represent a threat to the very structure of linguistic—and thus personal—relationships. In this view, treats to the structure of English and the relationships it fosters through communication may, as some “English Only” organizations claim, threaten unity within America.

Such precise use of language also creates interpersonal borders. For example, in Lee’s *Native Speaker*, non-native language elements are treated as pathological. At times, language indicators signaling the influence of a mother tongue other than English are viewed as “communicative disorders” that require professional diagnosis and rehabilitation. The influence of a language not based on an English dialect not only causes a phonemic separation from Standard English, but the label of “pathological” distances the non-native speaker from what is “typical” or standard.

Communication borders between people are thematically shown through non-verbal language and gestures in the novels as well. Central to the story, like Henry’s profession, is Lelia’s profession: she is a language pathologist who deals mainly with children who are English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Exploiting her precise “execution” of language, Lelia helps students “manipulate their tongues and their lips and their exhaling breath, guiding them through the difficult language” (2) or, in other words, to help them sound like native speakers of English. The children who come from homes
where a language other than English is spoken are grouped with children with pathological language disorders who come from homes where parental drug and alcohol use, physical and emotional abuse, and late cognitive development are problems (235). When ESL students are lumped together with children who may have emotional or cognitive deficiencies, the non-native speaker is marginalized as having a "disorder." Further, those non-native aspects are labeled as "dysfunctions" in a language assumed to be otherwise functional. This point of view blurs the distinction between language acquisition and speech disorders, confusing the underlying social and psychic issues in addition.

Significantly, Henry has had traumatic childhood experiences in which his own non-Standard English was treated as a language pathology. Like Gloria Anzaldua, who, as a child, was forced to take speech classes in order to get rid of her Spanish inflection, Henry's speech classes served to minimize the long-term impact (or "damage") his immigrant parents may have had on his acquisition of English and its American accent or inflection. Paradoxically, Lelia is aware of his ambivalent feelings as the result of his history with speech therapists--the speech therapists who were looked to as experts by parents feeling the pressure to linguistically assimilate: "She knows how I was raised by language experts, saved from the wild," he says, and recalls his first days away from

[T]he private realm of our house and tongue. I thought English would be simply a version of our Korean. Like another coat you could wear. I didn't know what a difference in language meant then. Or how my tongue would tie in the initial attempts, stiffen so, struggle like an animal booby-
trapped and dying inside my head. Native speakers may not fully know this, but English is a scabrous mouthful. (232-3)

At this point, the protagonist begins to vocally describe the mastery of English itself as an unnatural kind of border skirmish, questioning the idea that English is completely logical and always functional and that only non-native elements create problems. Acquiring a new language is incredibly difficult to begin with, presumably for both a non-native speaker and a native child learning the language, but the impression that Henry leaves the reader with is far more extreme: English is unusually complex, and even painful, to learn and speak.

In fact, the line drawn between the two languages, Korean and American, often results in a kind of friction. Henry admits “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. Friction, affliction” (234). Conflating the languages is symptomatic of the uneasiness caused by the distinct border between Korean and English as far as code-switching (as they are more different than similar), so at times, the only option for Henry is to blend the two into a whole, apparently crossing and challenging the border between the tongues. Alternatively, neither code-switching nor conflation of the languages are permanent ways to manage hyphenated identity issues, and consequently conflagration is a third option: the friction and the conflict between English and Korean threaten to cause the tongues to burst figuratively into, or be consumed by, fire. Finally, the affliction Henry feels is, returning to his complaint that “English is a scabrous mouthful,” possibly partially physically
painful, but certainly mostly mental, much like Anzaldua’s mental and emotional states of perplexity that result in the spirit’s psychic restlessness.

Given these struggles with speech, Henry’s psychic restlessness, or the restlessness of his identity, centers heavily on his manipulation of silence, and not just words. It is key that he recognizes fully that deliberate non-verbal communication and gestures, or a refusal to use language conventionally and in the most straightforward way possible, creates a border between people and prevents open communication. When Lelia calls Henry an “emotional alien” in her note, the term highlights the frequency with which Henry leaves things unsaid in order to draw attention to and highlight a particular issue. Through Henry’s use of this tactic, Lee allows his protagonist to underscore the complexity of silence as a strategy. Lelia’s principal complaint about him, and ultimately one of the reasons she leaves him, is his verbally receding during intense discussions or arguments, or his refusal to vocalize and work through issues in order to maintain a level of power over her. Henry admits: “We perhaps depend too often on the faulty honor of silence, use it too liberally and for gaining advantage. I showed Lelia how this was done, sometimes brutally, my face a peerless mask, the bluntest instrument” (96). He is (possibly over-) generalizing himself and other Koreans as using silence as power in communication too often because he sees this as a characteristic that is all too frequently associated with stereotypes of Asians. This passage suggests he is being deliberately ironic in his admission in which he classifies himself in a stereotyped Pan-Asian way. Certainly, it is worth mentioning here that Chang-rae Lee is allowing Henry to play with a stereotype of Asian-Americans because the racialized notion that Asian cultures are mysteriously masked by “otherness” and silence is so prevalent. These stereotypes are
being subtly manipulated in order to enable Lee and his protagonist to “bear [his] own simulations and revisions to contend with...the ‘authentic’ summaries of ethnology, and the curse of racialism and modernism in the ruins of representation” (Vizenor, 1982). Because silence, mystery, exoticism, and otherness are common characteristics associated with Asians, assumed and maintained by dominant non-Asian culture, Lee is revising the stereotype while removing the mystery and framing silence as a legitimate form of communication, albeit non-verbal.

Emphasizing the point that silence is a one-sided (or one-way) form of non-verbal communication that, while people can often read one another's silence, shuts down open communication, Lelia frequently refers to his reoccurring refusal to vocally communicate as “Henryspeak.” Henryspeak is also used to describe his hyper-calculation when vocalizing his concerns. At points, Henry appears to be listening to his own words so cautiously that the care he uses in choosing his words, tone, and emphasis stops being part of a real dialogue. Henry unintentionally passes on this over-vigilant care with speech on to his son, who admires how his father uses a small voice-recorder for work-related notes and he begins using one too. Mitt observes that the tape recorder can “hear you even when you whispered, so that you had to be extra careful of what you said,” and Henry realizes, “he got the notion of being careful of what you said mostly from being with us, his father and his mother, how we were beginning to speak to one another during the course of a day with more waiting and quiet than any real noise or talk” (107). This passage suggests not only that Henry begins to see his and his wife’s influence on his son’s use of speech but also that calculation and deliberation do not always foster an open dialogue, and that “real” noise and talk are often a necessity in natural communication.
His influence, however, stands in stark contrast to the lessons he tries to teach Mitt. When Mitt innocently repeats “chink,” “jap,” and “gook,” after a few of the neighborhood children had called him those things, Henry tells him “they’re just words...firmly, confidently—in a way a father believes he should” (103). Though what he says is superficially a typical parental assurance, this lesson—that words are meaningless—seems to greatly contradict nearly every other issue examined thus far. How can language be an identity shaping agent for characters like Henry Park when words are simultaneously without meaning and unimportant? However, one must remember that language is not confined only to words. Words, at this point, are being contrasted with meaning and action. Henry insists that this incident with Mitt and the response he gives is a moment when he simply does not know what else to say, or in other words, that he is unable to give a meaningful response to words that unarguably lack logic; they are hateful and bigoted and Henry is trying to protect Mitt and minimize the damage these words cause. Significantly, the only point in the novel when Henry is involuntarily at a loss for words coincides with the racialization and generalization of his son’s identity (Mitt is half Caucasian, half Korean, and obviously U.S. born). His response is not simply fatherly concern, but is also frustration that, though Mitt is half Caucasian and a native U.S. citizen, his (arguably unexperienced) Korean ancestry negates his recognition as an American. The racial slurs also reinforce the tendency to generalize a pan-Asian identity; “chink,” “jap,” and “gook” generally refer to very distinct and different cultures, none of which is Korean. The statement that “they’re just words” then, however literal, is intended to be unconvincing, and instead emphasizes to
the reader the racism inherent in Pan-Asian stereotypes and the varying weight carried by "just words," as well as the meanings behind them and why and when they are used.

Further, this occasion is meant to emphatically mark the exclusivity of common slang in English. It subjugates the marginalized and assists in maintaining the power of the traditionally educated Anglo American. Surely, this exists elsewhere and among other dialects, but, at least as a global language, Standard English is particularly valued. Henry notes, "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" (243-4). The idea that a language has shields constructed to protect those in power inevitably results in the marginalization of those not in power by that same language. Unfortunately, this is a lesson almost too complex for Henry, as a father, to relay to his young son.

The influence that Henry’s immigrant father has had on Henry is more ambiguous. Eric Liu writes that:

In our archetype of the immigrant experience, it is the first generation that remains wedded to the ways of the Old Country and the second generation that forsakes them...There is, I’ll admit, a certain dramatic appeal to this account. There is also, unfortunately, a good deal of contrivance. In search of narrative tension, we let ourselves forget that the father, too, is transformed. (14)

Echoing Liu’s argument, though we do see Henry’s father wedded to the old ways in some respects, we also see instances where his father desires Henry’s full assimilation, while Henry is more resistant to this idea, at least during his young adulthood. Compared
to many "typical" stories of generational conflict, this represents an ironic generational role-reversal. When Henry worked in his father's market as a young man, his father requested that he make it a practice to "casually" recite Shakespeare for customers. Rejecting the notion that it would impress customers, Henry thinks, "I, his princely Hal. Instead, and only in part to spite him, I grunted my best Korean to the other men. I saw that if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me" (53). Notably, the significance of mastering Shakespeare represents to some degree a position of educated elite social status, as well as a mastering of the canon. The canon as the pinnacle of literary intellect may also connect not only to a mastery of contemporary Standard English but to the ability to navigate through the difficulty and difference of Early Modern English as well. In this moment, Henry abandons his native tongue for a language he has more difficulty with: Korean. He also defies his father's questionable social aspirations in order to attempt to connect and identify with the Korean employees.

Henry's father is seeking status from his clients by means of Henry's ability to recite Shakespeare, so the conflict here is based first on Henry's father's desire for acceptance as a legitimate part of the U.S. economy, and Henry's confusion as to whom to identify with. His father perceives that assimilation into U.S. culture is equivalent to assimilating into its economy. Second, Henry feels rebellious irritation that his father seeks the approval of his Caucasian clients. That his son's mastery of English in some way affects the business of his market and legitimizes his identity as an American displaces what is actually being sold and promotes familial achievement as "business" instead. It is clear, too, that it is specifically the business of the whites that Henry's father finds valuable. He is always suspicious of other ethnic minorities shopping in his store,
especially African Americans. By demonstrating the linguistic assimilation and educational elitism of his offspring, Henry’s father hopes to prove his own successful assimilation, thereby making his market “worthy” of its white patrons. Micheal Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s* discusses a similar idea:

> The assumption is made that each minority faces the majority society alone. Successful achievement of mobility—the achievement of high group status—reflects group willingness and ability to accept the norms and values of the majority. The ‘difference’ that characterizes a minority group, once incorporated, will be outweighed by the commonality it shares with the majority. (21)

Though English proficiency in the United States may be a necessity for an entrepreneur whose clientele includes native citizens, language proficiency is not the focus for Lee or his characters. An above average knowledge of English and its history is a means to the kind of upward mobility that Omi and Winant examine. The arguably misidentified relationship between Shakespeare’s works and the majority of Americans as a commonality is interpreted by Henry’s father as a way of incorporating his business, and himself, into America.

Despite his desire to become upwardly mobil through economic assimilation by way of his son’s linguistic and intellectual achievement, Henry’s father attempts to cling to certain social organizations that support the ways of the Old World. Namely, he initially participates in a *ggeh*, or a Korean money club, that included a large number of illegal immigrants. Members of a ggeh are expected to contribute money weekly to a
pot, which then goes to a different Korean family each time. The problem, though, was that too many families left the ggeh after receiving the pot, which dramatically reduced the participants' contribution and unfairly distributed responsibilities to those who remained in the ggeh. Even though he tries to remain a participant and contributor, this eventually wears on Henry's father enough that, "in the end [he] no longer belonged to any ggeh...In America, he said, it's even hard to stay Korean" (51). This points to the problematic expectations of assimilation: For a variety of reasons, creating and maintaining an American identity that includes the nativisms of the immigrant is too hard. Perhaps his father is suggesting that the ggehs are being corrupted by U.S. cultural values, and that complete assimilation into the values is synonymous with corruption. Because of economic and cultural incompatibility, the struggle and hardship in trying to hold on to the old ways outweighs the reward, so ultimately, assimilating is simply easier for the immigrant.

Importantly, a ggeh is the superficial reason that the target of Henry's espionage company falls. Henry's target, the Korean American New York mayoral candidate John Kwang, is the target of the Immigration and Naturalization Services. INS hires Glimmer and Co., who put Henry on the case to infiltrate Kwang's political campaign. That Kwang's platform is partially based on attempting to smooth the tensions, as well as the philosophical and theoretical borders, among the city's racial lines (i.e. the mutual misunderstandings and/or biased discriminations between the Korean shopkeepers and the African Americans shopping in their stores) further illustrates the novel's focus on race, communication, and identity.
Henry’s internal tensions over his own identity are amplified when, despite his shared cultural background with Kwang, he is expected to manipulate this potential bond with Kwang rather than genuinely identify with him. Henry’s research reveals that Kwang helped run a ggeh. When leaked to the press, the revelation that this politician (in an indirect way) helped to fund and support illegal immigration brings about Kwang’s downfall and his removal from his party’s New York platform. More simply, Henry has participated in destroying Kwang based on the information that Kwang was financially helping other, poorer Koreans. Ironically, both the Korean and American cultures that Henry shares with John Kwang (that one would assume bonds the men) become linguistic opportunities for betrayal because, by way of language, Henry has gained Kwang’s trust along with the information needed to bring him down. Because Henry is a spy who pledges his allegiance to no one person, platform, or country, he can debatably be interpreted as a traitor, which is made possible because of his ability to manipulate his identity through language.

Critics such as Liam Corley argue that the economic, social, and political significance of New York as a backdrop for the novel is key to its understanding. Corley’s essay, “‘Just Another Ethnic Pol’: Literary Citizenship in Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker,” draws attention to the historical and social significance of New York, particularly during the 1990’s. He points out that the publication of Lee’s novel follows the real-life incident in which the Golden Venture, a small freighter, ran aground while attempting to smuggle illegal Chinese immigrants into New York. A fictionalized version of this event appears at the beginning of Native Speaker. “As a symbol for the country, New York is a site of contestation and cultural pluralism. Home of the Statue of
Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, Wall Street, Broadway, Madison Avenue, and the United Nations, New York is used as an important symbol in both the domestic and transnational imaginary construction of nation,” writes Corley. He continues: “Each of these national and international icons maintains a dual life as representative instances of material and political connections between New York and a global urban economy” (68). While his argument certainly lends weight and understanding to the iconic importance of New York in the novel, it is still incredibly difficult to pinpoint an exact meaning in New York as a setting of cultural pluralism when organizations like the ggehs appear to be both failing and causing the failure of others. Surely, New York can be considered the multicultural epicenter of America, but the collapse of the ggeh that Henry’s father belonged to reinforces the impression that it is incredibly difficult, complex, and trying to remain culturally, ethnically, and racially other in America. The question becomes whether or not New York City represents a site of assimilation or a site of pluralism, and the answer seems unclear.

Also, the ggehs undoubtedly represent a grassroots transnational (those who receive the pot often send a portion to family members overseas who have not immigrated to the U.S.) and urban economy, yet these kinds of “material and political” connections among New York and the global economy do not contribute to the stability of the U.S.’s economy, so they create problems. This points out that, in spite of the association between immigration and New York’s Ellis Island, the taboo attached to non-native cultural activities like the ggehs reveals that immigrants, though perpetually racially other, are expected to assimilate into American ways, and trying to foster an organization such as a ggeh that excludes those in power is rarely welcomed.
Further, it is important to note that associations between opportunity, New York icons, and immigration are legitimate only in terms of legal immigration. Economically, full participation in capitalism, which includes being a legal, documented, tax-paying immigrant, is a non-negotiable requirement in assimilating to American ways. Further, English is the medium by which capitalism is globally communicated. The ggehs and similar groups are intended to survive, but fail to be accepted independently from capitalism, capitalists, and their medium of communication.

Henry creates his niche in American capitalism and its economy in a complex way. Henry’s job distorts Asian American stereotypes by blurring linguistic and cultural differences because he is supposed to appear to identify with the target on many levels. Because he manipulates these identifications in order to expose and professionally destroy the target, Henry is situated as a traitor and a spy, and neither an American or an Asian, but as ethnically neutral as possible. Because this is problematic, if not impossible for human beings, Henry ultimately rejects his former profession and uses the skills acquired to help others, relieving his own psychic restlessness caused by an over-generalized, false identity. His experience allows him to feel a degree of sensitivity when helping Lelia instruct her ESL students, as well as to break his own habits of silence. Significantly, he has taken the skills learned as a spy with him to teach children to linguistically survive in America. He approaches Lelia’s students not as children with a language-speech pathology, but as children who must be taught to navigate through both the scabrous mouthful that is English, and those who will continue to generalize, racialize, and marginalize an identity based on multilingualism. Henry tells the reader, “I love my job. I wear a green rubber hood and act in my role as the Speech Monster...I
gobble up kids but I cower when anyone repeats the day’s secret phrase...[The phrase is] hard for some of them to say, but it helps...to slay me, subdue me” (349). The children are taught that, though English may be difficult to learn and speak, its acquisition symbolizes the subduing of a metaphorical beast. The point is that the beast can be subdued. He can also lend the knowledge of coping skills to students who may feel the friction, conflation, and conflagration at the border of two languages, the borders of language and speech, and the borders between speech and silence.

Chang-rae Lee continues to examine the idea of the American experience and how it relates to language and identity in his second novel A Gesture Life (1999). During an interview with Booksense.com’s Ron Hogan, Lee compares the protagonist, 70+ year old Franklin Hata, to Native Speaker’s Henry Park. He explains that at the core of the novel is Franklin’s continuing struggle with how he thinks he should construct himself as a Korean-born, Japanese-raised immigrant to the U.S. He says: “Hata in some ways is dealing with the same kinds of ideas as Henry Park...He’s not as self-conscious of that perhaps, but I hope he says enough that it becomes pretty clear what he’s thinking about” (www.booksense.com). While Franklin is exploring some of the same identity issues as Henry, his lesser degree of self-awareness allows Lee to highlight the use and non-use of language in decidedly different ways.

In contrast to Henry, A Gesture Life’s Franklin Hata is clearly a listener as opposed to a speaker. In the interview, Lee suggests that, unlike Henry, Franklin would never “give a huge confession, so the narrative would have to provide an acknowledgement of what happened without any real show of emotion when he tells you these things...and the distance between the act described and the calm and placid person
telling you about it would be so great that there would be some drama in the telling as well” (www.booksense.com). Even though, again, tensions between the said and the unsaid are key, and despite similarities between the characters, it is important to remember that Henry’s narrative is a tension-riddled confession directly addressing the reader. Not only the narrative style, but the title of the novel labels Henry as a native speaker. Franklin’s role is alluded to in the title of the novel: His life has mainly centered on fulfilling obligatory gestures of politeness expected from the “model minority” Asian American.

Historically, the idea of the Asian American immigrant as “praiseworthy for [his] supposedly patient, docile, and law abiding tradition…reflecting the cultural identity of an alien but safe minority…[and] the exotic but non-threatening otherness” deems him or her the model in terms of an ethnic and minority population (Ling 36). Franklin’s speech is generally limited to responding “appropriately” and he has assimilated into the small town American way of life as a popular resident of Bedley Run. This extreme example of the social and linguistic domestication of the immigrant, though, is not necessarily meant to reinforce the idea of the model minority. Rather, Lee intends to expose the tension and complexity behind Hata’s reality: he is trying to seem the model minority through stereotyped mannerisms, but trying to appear as a model is separate from actually being the model.

Illuminating the use of a stereotype as an antithesis to the stereotype is not characteristic only of Lee’s fiction. The Native American writer and critic, Gerald Vizenor, author of “Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance,” theorizes that “Manifest manners are the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that
are read as the authentic and sustained representations... [and] are new indications of a narrative recreation, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance” (Norton, 1979). Vizenor argues that ethnic notions of the dominant are a fabricated representation of the ethnic minority created by those in power. For example, in the stereotyped portrayals of Native Americans in John Wayne movies, that is, the Native American who can be only brave and stoic or brutal and savage, have continued to be accepted by whites as representative of their culture as recently as a few decades ago. The “simulations of the dominant,” then, are revisions of those stereotypes by the ethnic or minority writer to emphatically underscore the false but continued prevalence of those racist stereotypes. Though Vizenor’s theoretical framework is contextualized in contemporary Native American literature, it is arguably useful for other ethnic or minority writers who intentionally employ an ethnic stereotype, much like Lee, to indirectly challenge and question that stereotype. Notably, Lee shows Franklin as superficially representative of the “ideal” immigrant, but more significantly as an immigrant who is beginning to examine his identity, which is seriously complicated and compromised by his past as a Korean-born lieutenant in the Japanese Imperialist Army. The reader is able to recognize that, in the face of his past, Franklin is struggling to adhere to a stereotype. He is a “simulation” of the dominant, but his narrative eventually exposes his strategy: He is not a stereotype, though he acts like one.

Despite his popularity in Bedley Run as the socially and verbally accommodating, “Doc” Hata, though the title “Doc” is misrepresentative and misleading because he is not a doctor (and “Hata” is a shortened version of Kurohata, meaning “black flag of death” in Japanese), his life pre-immigration stands in startling contrast to the present. As a former
lieutenant in the Japanese Imperialist Army stationed in Burma, Franklin's past and present straddle three lives, three cultures, three uses of language, and three identities that seem nearly irreconcilable. The novel's structure, or the simultaneous telling of three stages in his life (past pre-immigration, past post-immigration, and present) illuminates both the topical questions that surface regarding race, citizenship, and identity, along with his unresolved and deeper preoccupations with who he was and who he has become (or who and what he has constructed himself to be). He intermittently revisits his life in Japan while examining his present life. At other times, he revisits his experiences with his daughter, Sunny, and his ex-partner, Mary Burns. Each incident revisited is an attempt to explore questions regarding his past identities as well as who he is now. It would be a major oversight to gloss over the significance of the structure as a case of "typical" nostalgia; this is an interesting and peculiar case of nostalgia particularly comparable to Eva Hoffman's memoir, *Lost in Translation*.

Hoffman, a woman who has emigrated from Poland to the United States, feels nostalgia, like Franklin's, that represents a kind of threat to the desire for seamless assimilation into the American way of life. "Even nostalgia has its politics. The conservatives of the sentiments believe that recovering their own forgotten history is an antidote to shallowness. The ideologues of the future see attachment to the past as that most awful of all monsters, the agent of reaction," she reasons (395). Similar to Hoffman, Franklin is unclearly located somewhere in between a conservative of sentiment and an ideologue of the future. He is beginning to realize his apparently complete superficial conformity to the ideal of the model minority, or the passive, agreeable, and docile Asian, as troubling. Consequently, he feels the urge to recall and
examine his life prior to immigrating to America. Yet what he begins to recall is in
direct conflict with his current “American” identity, or to a further extreme, his overtly
“un-American” former identity, or the Japanese persona that introduces another version
of “the compliant Asian.”

Even more significant, in the midst of active duty, Franklin is forced to verbally
reconsider the importance of his biological Korean origins, though he was adopted young
and raised as Japanese. The recognition complicates both his effectiveness as an
authority figure and his emotional bond with a female Korean “volunteer” on the base.
He was a medical doctor whose authority was controlled by those above him and limited
to helping “prepare” women on the base for sexual relations with the officers.
Comparable to the use of “Doc,” the euphemism “volunteer” is again an intentional
manipulation of word meaning and language use, as the volunteers are actually young
women forced into captivity and sexual slavery on the base.

One particular Korean volunteer, Kkutaek or “K,” has a permanent impact on
Franklin’s life and how he constructs himself. She forces him to reexamine his identity
while he struggles with the questions she raises. His official job on the base is to act as a
provider of medical care to the soldiers, but much more of his time is spent looking after
the volunteers because he is ordered to examine, quarantine, and treat women who have
contracted sexually transmitted diseases after being raped by the soldiers, and then to
isolate them from the men when they are fertile in order to avoid pregnancies. While he
is examining K, she addresses him in Korean, recognizing that he is Korean despite his
position as a lieutenant for the Japanese. Tellingly, Franklin is familiar with the language
and observes that K sounds “much more confident and mature in her own tongue than
when she mumbled and half whispered in Japanese” (234). Though his instinct is to silence her (particularly because she uses an “inferior” language), he is taken aback and caught off-guard when she re-positions herself through their “common language,” a language she is more confident using. He initially denies that he is Korean, illuminating his need at that time to construct a purely Japanese identity. As a result of his use of the language, though, she is able to deduce what he is trying to cover up and responds, “But I think, sir, that most Japanese would never bother to learn to speak Korean as well as you do. And if they did know how, they wouldn’t reveal it” (234-5). Commenting on the impact of K’s words, Young-Oak Lee, in “Gender, Race, and the Nation in A Gesture Life,” argues that, empowered by “the knowledge of his secret and using the language to reinscribe his relation to Korea, K defines Hata’s national identity and makes him feel powerless. He cannot insist that she is wrong in her assumption because clearly, a colonizer would not voluntarily speak the language of the colonized or reveal the fact that he knows it even if he does” (149). Only as a result of this incident does the reader learn that Franklin was born to a Korean family who gave him up for adoption to the children’s authority, who in turn placed him with a Japanese family when he was very young.

At this point, he is unable to hide that he is ambiguously located both in the Korean and Japanese cultures, and he is propelled to reevaluate where he is positioned between the warring nations. Further complicating his loyalties, K points to the advantages of a sometimes necessary pro-pan-Asian stance, which directly conflicts with his compliance as a medical officer to the volunteers. Or basically, that sometimes Asian cultures as a whole face a bigger threat than each other. She recalls that her father, familialy revered as exceptionally wise, once said that he “would never have [Western
literature] in his library” because “we should revere our Asian heritage and protect it from foreign influence, that whether Chinese or Japanese or Korean we were rooted of a common culture and mind and that we should put aside our differences and work together” (249). K’s father obviously considered the solidarity created by the union of varying Eastern cultures as the only way to resist the influence of the West.

Because Chang-rae Lee presents theoretical advantages and disadvantages of an over-generalized Asian identity in Native Speaker and A Gesture Life, this topic warrants a pause for brief discussion. As many scholars suggest, Asian American interests converge usefully on some points and diverge dramatically on others. As a result, we can argue that what matters most perhaps, as far as an “Asian” culture is concerned, is who is positing the pan-Asian notion and for what purpose. In The Accidental Asian, Liu denies that there is a genuine pan-Asian culture and says:

What’s missing from Asian American is culture...[but] what about Zen Buddhism, feng shui, Karaoke bars?...the problem, though, is that these and other forms of culture inherited by Asian Americans are ethnic in origin. The folkways are Chinese, for example, not “Asian.” The holidays are Vietnamese, the language Korean, the dress Japanese. As far as an organically pan-Asian culture is concerned, there isn’t much there.

(79)

Implicitly, it seems logical that the notion of a shared Asian culture and shared practices is assumed by those unfamiliar with the specific cultures, or in other words, non Asians. It is the oversimplification and overgeneralization of Asians by non-Asians that lead to racism. On the other hand, when Liu argues “I agree that in the form of a coalition—this
is, as a set of political alliances among organized groups—the Asian American identity can be quite important” (76) he is pointing to a considerably different use of the pan-Asian identity by Asians than the previous example. Like Native Speaker’s John Kwang, who attempts to effectively represent all cultures under the “Asian” umbrella, and like K’s father, who contends that Asian cultures must unite to protect themselves from larger enemies, the political benefits of a generalized identity work to promote power in numbers, as well as protection, not to purposefully flatten distinct cultures to promote borders that simply mark some as “other,” or separate a minority group from the dominant culture. Here, commonalities outweigh the differences. Likewise, it may be beneficial to unite against a more threatening common enemy—an enemy who misunderstands and assumes one movement to be synonymous with one race or ethnicity.

That K has Franklin reexamining his identity (especially in light of his authoritative position which demands that he disregard, like Henry’s profession, any potential bond to his victim) becomes more apparent because of the emotionally intimate moments they begin to share. K reveals that as a child, her father refused to directly address any of his daughters, be it by asking them a question, engaging in a discussion with them, or calling them by name. We are led to believe that, although this was disturbing to K, this was not because her father considered his daughters worthless, but because culturally, daughters were traditionally treated more distantly. More importantly, K represents one example that examines various points of address and titles within the novel. The counterpart to K’s inability to be addressed, both as a daughter and as a volunteer “comfort woman” occurs when she disregards the taboo against addressing any of the soldiers by name and pleads for her freedom to Franklin, not just by using his
name, but by using his discarded Korean name given to him by his biological parents. She does not plead for literal freedom, or for him to allow her to physically escape the camp and the demands of the Comfort House, but for Franklin to mercifully kill her. As a Korean, she has been politically colonized by the Japanese, so what she is asking is that Franklin end her life to stop the colonization and violation of her body. She begs, "Please, Jiro," calling attention again to the aspect of his heredity and identity that he wishes to ignore in order to consciously continue to construct himself as he has. She is also conceptually highlighting the physical borders of the camp as a captivity that is escapable only through death, as well as noting the colonization of her and the other volunteers' bodies as confining borders to which death is preferable. Though she vocalizes her desire that he kill her, she emphasizes her wish intentionally through her choice of language used—Korean—and by addressing him by his birth name, Jiro.

Later, Franklin’s name is significant again. He is generally referred to as Doc Hata in Bedley Run. This title itself is riddled with contradiction. He is not a doctor, and Kurohata is the last name of his adoptive family, therefore neither are his real name. He has shortened Kurohata to Hata, again possibly because Kurohata means “black flag of death” in Japanese. The reader is supposed to recognize the irony in a title that combines doctor and death. Doc Hata, then, is Franklin’s own construction, intended to clearly define his post-U.S. immigrant status separately from both his identity as a Japanese citizen and his biological birthplace and heredity, which Franklin’s reflection eventually leads him to recognize does connect with his WWII identity directly.

Titles, the way they are used, and in what contexts they are used continue as a theme throughout the novel. As an American intent on being quietly accepted by the
community as an average citizen, Franklin persists in linguistically constructing himself through titles. The most thematically central occasion when titles matter most occurs with his adopted daughter, Sunny. Franklin adopted Sunny as a child, though he was initially disappointed that she was part Korean, and part black. He had hoped for a full-blooded Korean child based on his own anxiety that his child look as much like him as possible, thereby creating the appearance of a "real" family. Though the text seems to subtly indicate that he has never fully accepted her hybrid ethnicity, he endeavors to successfully invent the appearance of a genuine father-daughter relationship by way of gestures or non-verbal communication. At first, Sunny is understandably uncomfortable when confronted with how to address Franklin. Instead of empathizing with her position and hesitance, as he has experienced something remarkably similar himself, Franklin is more concerned with constructing the exterior façade of their relationship and demands that she call him Poppa.

Young-Oak Lee identifies national identity as a major theme of immigrant literature, and more specifically points out that Hata, in this novel, is biased against the black race, cannot bring himself to "genuinely welcome this mixed-blood, part-Korean, part-black child for she thwarts Hata’s effort to fit seamlessly into his environment...Throughout the novel, his foremost preoccupation is belonging...By his actions in attempting to colonize, subjugate, and control Sunny, he only succeeds in turning her into a socially marginalized runaway" (154). Even though he cannot entirely accept her as his daughter, he must produce the outward show that he has, consequently demanding that Sunny make it a habit to verbally refer to him as “Poppa” (and not just father, which denotes the relationship, but not the show of warmth). In young adulthood,
for the sake of opposing his desire for appearance, she refers to him as “Doc,” to which he accuses her of “playing word games” (30). Perhaps she is calling him “Doc” in order to point out that, in fact, he is not a doctor, a parallel to the fact that he would prefer she call him “Poppa,” even though he is not her father. They experience continuous tension rooted in her disappointment caused by his frequent disapproval of her behavior, and to Sunny, this is compounded by the recognition that he is extremely loved and respected by the community.

Briefly, their tumultuous relationship is clearly another treatment of a stereotype commonly associated with both Asians and Asian American literature. Works such as Maxine Hong-Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* are often looked to as authoritative texts on the familial and generational tension between Asian immigrants and their Asian American children. Kingston’s parents, who did not fully trust her because she had “been born among ghosts, taught by ghosts, and [was herself] ghost-like” (455) arguably exploit the idea of the association between Asians and a “master” narrative revolving around immigrant parents who refuse to completely trust the “ghosts,” or Caucasians, as well as their children, who comfortably interact with the ghosts. But in *Immigrant Acts on Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe maintains that it is a mistake to interpret Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation [that] essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurability of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racializing ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first generation/second
generation struggles displaces social differences into privatized familial opposition. (63)

Lowe implies that stories of generational conflict, like Kingston’s, should not necessarily be considered the only kind of “master” narrative generated by Asian American authors. In *A Gesture Life*, Lee dramatizes the theme of generation conflict, but in a much less typical way. First, it is impossible to dismiss the “particularities and national diversities among Asians” in this case because ethnic and racial diversity are even more virulent sources of contention between the two Hata generations; Franklin unambiguously has a problem with the fact that Sunny is half black. He specifically desires a full-blooded Korean daughter not only for the appearance of a “natural” family, but also as an attempt to compensate for the guilt he feels in his complicity in the fate of the volunteer “comfort women.” On a personal level, Franklin has also experienced the impact of facets of national diversity: he is Korean, Japanese, and a fully assimilated “model minority” of the U.S. Finally, much like Henry’s father, Franklin anticipates a smooth integration into general society for his child, never really taking any issue with the “ghosts.” Lee is, again, using manifest manners to simulate and reject those stereotypes misread as authentic. The “model minority” is not truly a model, and Sunny is unable to smoothly integrate into society during her childhood and young adulthood.

Employing silence is also another one of the primary stereotypical behaviors manipulated by Lee. Although Henry uses silence as a kind of ammunition, characters in *A Gesture Life* use it for other purposes, largely either to defy or to agree—clearly dichotomizing its function, while resisting the racist connotation between Asian silence and mystery. Both Franklin and Sunny engage in gestures and non-verbal
communication, Sunny usually to defy authority and Franklin to avoid overtly disagreeing with authority.

Sunny begins displaying behavioral problems as a teenager, most likely as a result of conflicting identity issues. There is an important moment in the novel when a teen-age Sunny is openly chastised on the street by Officer Como, a longtime friend of Franklin’s, for her behavior that disrespects her father (i.e. her drug use, promiscuity, keeping with the “wrong kind of crowd,” etc.). In response to Officer Como’s chiding, Sunny refuses to verbally defend herself, instead choosing to barely respond to Como’s insults and name calling because “she wasn’t the kind of bad girl who cursed or talked back…but rather she was intimidatingly and defiantly quiet. She just looked at you, or more accurately, she made it that you looked at her” (86). Part of Officer Como’s motivation in verbally assaulting Sunny was to evoke some kind of vocal response. Like Lelia during Henry’s frustrating silences, Como becomes more helpless the longer Sunny remains quiet. Como’s loss of control over both the situation and her temper emphasizes that a deliberate absence of words can be used in conjunction with a physically casual posture or gesture that is meant to silently defend an attack on one’s identity. Her silence is intimidating and it frustrates those attempting to verbally correct her, reshape her, and control her and that is why she frequently uses it to defend herself.

At times, Native Speaker’s Henry uses silence to avoid confrontation, but when Franklin uses silence, he uses it in a remarkably different manner. He generally uses it to hide or deny something without vocally lying, or to be agreeable in order to avoid confrontation. One of the most interesting examples of his indirect way of manipulating silence involves the ultimate exercise of control over his daughter’s body. Barely
eighteen, Sunny had returned home after one of the many times she had run away, nearly full-term in a pregnancy. Franklin, in retrospect, recognizes, "I might have realized how frightening all this was to her, how overwhelming and awful, but I sensed instead only the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house like banners of our mutual failure" (340). This is also a major revelation pointing to the novel's title: what appears to reflect on his identity as a father is more important than acting as a father should, as a fierce protector of his child and her identity. It is crucial to acknowledge the meaning behind his exact wording: he uses the symbol of banners around the house not as an object that would remind him of any possible paternal failure, but as a visual object that would expose their disgrace and failure to the world, tainting the identity he has created for himself in Bedley Run. Instead of being willing to compromise the interpretation of his identity, he instead chooses to compromise his personal morality.

Though Sunny believes her father is taking her to a clinic for an examination, he has actually made an appointment for an abortion. What is most telling is that upon discreetly meeting after hours to discuss the abortion with the physician who is performing it, the word "abortion" is never once said--it is consistently and ambiguously referred to as the "procedure." This must be because both men—Franklin and the physician—feel ashamed to linguistically realize the word; Franklin because he is exerting too much control over his daughter's body and the physician because of the prohibition against performing an abortion past a medically acceptable point.

Later, when Sunny asks if her father had been in the operating room when she had been anesthetized, he avoids answering directly. A measure of silence is again a tactic in protecting the societal perception of one's identity. Even now, almost fifteen years after
Sunny’s abortion, Franklin admits, “If Sunny were to ask me now, I would not tell her I was in the operating room throughout the procedure. I would have to lie” (345). This small passage highlights four major points concerning how Franklin wishes to be viewed by his daughter, by his community, and even by the reader. First, even at this point, Franklin still avoids the word “abortion” and continues to use the word “procedure.” Though he understands the reality, he is unable to verbally recognize the weight and the specifics of the reality of an abortion versus any other kind of medical procedure because it is more polite and easier to speak about. Second, he cannot define the procedure as an abortion because he would be internally incriminating himself by admitting that he physically assisted the physician in the abortion. Third, he is not willing to fully incriminate himself in a late term abortion, though he does disclose that, because of the developmental stage of the fetus, he is unwilling to recall the specifics of what he saw. Finally, in these moments when he seems to be critically examining himself the most—as a Korean, as a Japanese lieutenant, as a U.S. immigrant, and as a father—he is still unable to entirely confess his influence on, and participation in, the incident at this point. He is “silent” even to himself and tells the reader that he would now blatantly lie rather than use silence and avoidance to verbalize the truth. It is crucial that the perception of his identity must now be constructed by lies rather than confession. However, it is equally important that he recognizes and verbalizes his motivations rather than leaving it unaddressed because this demonstrates a degree of change in his communication.

The noticeable pattern of how he uses silence in order to protect his identity from the impact of his daughter’s behavior is not limited to Sunny’s abortion. Prior to the abortion, she had run away many times. Usually, Franklin did nothing when she ran
away, but because he had heard rumors that she was in danger, he finally reports an incident to Officer Como. He tells her, and only her, because he states, “I didn’t want her officially listed as a runaway, as I was afraid the designation would remain indefinitely on her permanent record...I just wanted to hide the real depth of the trouble, put it away...so I could try to forget she was my daughter” (98) possibly illustrating his desperate attempt to silence his own conscience and responsibility. He claims that not officially listing her as a runaway, which would greatly increase the chance of her being actively looked for and therefore found, is to protect her image. However, this shifts the focus from her safety to the maintenance of her image. Because physical safety is undoubtedly more important than the image perceived, it seems that Franklin is equally concerned with protecting his own image as he is with protecting Sunny’s.

Though not directly passive with Sunny, much of the generational conflict between Sunny and Franklin results from his use of the passivity and the silence that encourages society to view him as the model minority. This tension, to some extent, mirrors the problems seen between Henry and his father, specifically in the scene in the market when Henry is supposed to recite Shakespeare, proving himself to be the model son of a model immigrant. Hata, though, insists on pursuing the model while Henry resists the model and his father. It is similarly important to Franklin that his daughter is viewed as the perfect daughter (though he fails at this), which he in turn thinks reflects on him as a parent. Sunny, like Henry, is resistant to the pressure to “perform.” She disdainfully tells him:

You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You’re always having to be the ideal partner and colleague...You know what I overheard
down at the card shop? How nice it is to have such a ‘good Charlie’ to organize the garbage and sidewalk-cleaning schedule. That’s what they really think of you. It’s become your job to be the number one citizen.

His daughter revealing that he is called a “good Charlie” behind his back underscores the racist societal associations with his accomplishments in the community and his identity. Presumably, this indicates the suggestion of a relationship between the identity of Franklin, and the identity of 1930’s and 40’s comic actor Charlie Chan (a Chinese detective know for his helpfulness and use of wise and clever Chinese proverbs). This social reference implicates the whites who flatten—those in the community who believe that all Asians, if helpful and non-threatening, are comparable to a representation fabricated by dominant culture (the actor who actually played Chan was a Caucasian in the Asian version of “blackface”). Rather than being referred to simply as “a great community member,” his race is highlighted, and highlighted in a situation—the creation of a trash schedule pick up—that would seem to be undesirable to upper-class society.

Moreover, his identity is conflicted and at odds with both his community’s backhanded compliment, as well as his daughter’s shame at his “life of gestures and politeness.” His community status as a “good Charlie” reinforces the notion that the “Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation,” and that, despite what the “model minority stereotype would dictate, the Asian immigrant—at odds with the cultural, racial, and linguistic norms of the nation—emerges in a site that defers and displaces the temporality of assimilation” (Lowe, 6). He cannot be smoothly and completely absorbed by the community purely as
a model citizen, but specifically as a model minority citizen comparable to a familiar stereotype such as Charlie Chan. Bearing in mind Gerald Vizenor’s theory of the use of stereotypes by the ethnic or minority writer, creating an identity grounded in the desire to be a model citizen has done nothing other than bolster the community’s support for the stereotype of the model minority in Lee’s novel. Though Franklin may not immediately recognize this problem, his daughter and Lee’s audience are expected to recognize the problem with society’s perception and interpretation of Franklin as a community member.

Additionally, his daughter compounds his conflict by suggesting the shame she feels over how he is recognized in society. Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian* calls attention to the idea that,

The meaning of “American” has undergone a revolution in the twenty-nine years [I have] been alive, a revolution of color, class, and culture, [but still] the vocabulary of ‘assimilation’ has remained fixed all this time: fixed in whiteness, which is still of metonym for power; and fixed in shame, which is what the colored are expected to feel for embracing the power. (35)

And though Franklin may be consciously promoting himself as a stereotype, his daughter’s reaction implies that he should feel shame for how he has constructed his identity. In either case, he is expected to feel inadequate and that he is somehow less American because his race and immigrant status, rather than his community contribution, define his identity.
Part of the assumption that he is the model minority is based on his agreeability. As noted earlier, Franklin often uses silence, or at least limited language uses, with the aim of appearing agreeable so as not to cause confrontation or disagreement. The one real romantic relationship we see him engage in in his later years in the U.S. is with Mary Burns, an older woman who is also his neighbor. Their relationship remains relatively calm and uneventful, to the point that it looks as if the level of passivity is actually a dysfunction within the relationship. Young-Oak Lee examines this issue and suggests that Mary makes him feel ordinary, and his satisfaction in being accepted as ordinary rather than extraordinary "reveals how deeply he agonizes over the fact that his looks and language differ from those of his neighbors. Desiring not to look and be different, or at least reduce the differences so as not to be divided from the dominant collectivity, he is always ready to agree with her, so much that she gently chides Hata for trying too hard" (155). Even when Mary questions his parenting techniques with Sunny, he is receptive and responds almost too courteously to the inquiry regarding his suitability as a father. Her reply, "For goodness sake, Franklin, you don't always have to assent" (69), gives the impression that she is hoping to have a genuine dialogue with him and that his compliant nature is preventing such. Mary appreciates the idea that a healthy relationship involves open communication, and that partners need to use each other as sounding-boards. Comically, though, Franklin agrees with her that he is too agreeable. Agreeing with her, rather than disputing, that he is too passive and agreeable ends the discussion with minimal tension, yet he insists on sacrificing that vital moment in which he could have possibly explained himself or truly opened up to Mary. More crucially, he sacrifices moments of further self-understanding.
Moments like these, when Franklin refuses to verbally communicate, result in their eventual breakup, not unlike Henry and Lelia’s first breakup. Unlike Lelia, however, Mary passively and silently accepts the ensuing end of their romance. Regardless of her passivity, it is clear that the quiet in their relationship was not her choice. In hindsight, Franklin recalls, “I see now [that it] was a period of the most agreeable passivity, an inert state that neither of us—being alike in many ways—was willing to disturb,” but recognizes that despite her complicity in the passivity of the relationship, “Better for Mary Burns that I should be a man who could set her afire like a bowl in a kiln, better that I could so frustrate and anger her that I’d breach the thick jacket of her grace and unleash her woman’s fury, to make her finally crack, or splinter, or explode” (349). This possibly parallels Henry’s recognition that carefully premeditated word choice is not the only type of communication, but that “noisy” discussion is important as well. Mary is frustrated, ironically, by the fact that Franklin is hesitant to frustrate her. Anger is certainly a part of one’s average relationship—be it in a parent-child relationship, a friendship, or a romance—and his reluctance to disagree eliminates this natural form of problem-solving in a relationship.

The agreeable identity that Franklin has constructed is illustrated most in his physical objectification of Mary Burns as aesthetic item when she is visibly disappointed in his lack of willingness to communicate: “I could see the disappointment ever settling in the fine lines of her face, her jaw perfectly steady...as if it were the keen wall of a canyon,” Franklin recalls. She represents an object of his assimilation. It is unsettling that, rather than feeling concerned that she is clearly upset, Franklin feels intensely attracted to her and realizes, “it was in these moments, strangely enough, that I believe I
found her most arresting and lovely, that she appeared to me exquisitely composed in character, her bearing deliberate and unrelenting” (53). It is problematic that he links her disappointment in him with a resulting “arresting loveliness,” as the physical composition of her character and her wish to verbally compose herself become the focus rather than the need to create an open and free dialogue at this moment. She is more of an object to Franklin than a partner, and his silence is highlighting his failing rather than a strategy.

Though *A Gesture Life* does examine the trauma and tension to the ethnic minority created by conformity to a stereotype, the novel examines themes beyond those typical of the “master narratives” of Asian American literature. Further, though Franklin’s story is embedded in generational conflict, it is a generational conflict significantly different from conventional master narratives. As a stereotype of the assimilated, model minority Asian, the disappointment that both Sunny and Mary Burns feel marks Franklin’s social and verbal accommodations as his failure rather than his ability to integrate into different surroundings and cultures. Even as he is unfairly stereotyped as the neighborhood’s “Good Charlie,” the reader recognizes that Franklin, too, has his own prejudices to confront with his problems surrounding Sunny’s son, who is half African American. Like Henry, whose identity is often confusing and contradictory, Franklin’s three identities, cultures, and languages echo three specific simulations of dominance: the Japanese service man as a threat, the mixed Asian ancestry as an undistinguishable “Asian,” and the Asian American as the assimilated and domesticated immigrant. The novel also briefly addresses the problems as well as the benefits of a generalized, pan-Asian identity when the reader considers both K’s father’s support for Asian solidarity against Western influence and Franklin as a “Good Charlie.”
Individually, each text demonstrates how voice shapes and highlights a distinguished, individual identity, crucially distinct from a glossed over and generalized Asian identity. The positioning and motivations of the speaker and listener are equally important in how they point to who is saying what and for what purpose. Words and silence can be simultaneously meaningful and meaningless, and that can heavily influence the interpretation of the role of the listener and speaker. Most importantly, both novels force the reader to reexamine and reinterpret notions of Asian American identity, as well as the definition of a legitimate American experience. Henry is able not only to use his language skills to help misunderstood children, but it appears that his communication with Lelia, and thus their relationship, will effectively and openly flourish. Franklin is able at least to begin mending his relationship with his daughter and her son, importantly on her terms, pointing to his acceptance of what he formerly considered her “flaws.” He no longer wants the perfect daughter or a particular kind of daughter, but more to be a father and a grandfather.

Both Lee’s Native Speaker and A Gesture Life challenge the notion of a generalized pan-Asian identity, specifically by examining language as the necessary agent of assimilation into the “American way of life.” However, this is approached in significantly different ways, leading to significantly different outcomes. Native Speaker’s Henry has mastered standardized English to the extent that he is able to create a personal narrative for a given situation. His linguistic mastery allows him seemingly to conform as well as to distinguish himself. On the other hand, A Gesture Life’s Franklin, as a result of his linguistic and cultural assimilation, is characterized as accommodating and the seamlessly domesticated immigrant. Importantly, this is juxtaposed with his
position as a lieutenant and his very pro-nationalistic membership in the Japanese Imperialist Army, and also with his location in both the Japanese and Korean cultures. Both of these issues clearly point to very specific differences that oppose the idea of a flattened and generalized Asian American identity. Both Henry and Franklin relate their American experience to the reader. Like many other contemporary ethnic and minority writers, Lee's work demands the inclusion of the racial and linguistic minority's story as part of the American experience, as well as confronting the false idea of one Asian American identity while calling for the realization that a hyphenated identity is no less American.

Rather than focusing simply on the problematic aspects of a hyphenated identity, Eric Liu affirms potential possibilities when he writes, "Whatever it is that I am becoming, is it any less authentic for being an amalgam?..In every assimilation, there is a mutiny against history—but there is also a destiny, which is to redefine history. What it means to be American—in spirit, in blood—is something far more borrowed and commingled than anything previous generations ever knew" (56). He argues that, "Alongside the pain of migration, then, and the possibility, there is this truth: America is white no longer, and it will never be white again" (56). Authors like Lee and critics like Liu illuminate that the restricted borders defining proper uses of language often create a kind of border between people and cultures. Highlighting and discussing these borders may be a way of experimenting with language and how its use is connected to race and identity versus simply using language traditionally. When the ethnic or minority writer uses language as an identity-shaping agent in narrative fictions such as Native Speaker or A Gesture Life, the implications are much different than, say, when Hemingway uses
language experimentally. Ethnic and minority authors may very well be challenging the
notion that “the language of hegemony subjugates those whom it marginalizes,” and
“delimits the subjectivity of those who dominate” (Yamamoto, 209) in all assimilations
through their ability to recognize, underscore, and explain language as a dominant factor
in the shaping of one’s identity.

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