



MONEY, POWER, AND IMMIGRANT SONS IN CHANG-RAE LEE'S *NATIVE SPEAKER*:

Looking for the American Father

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single country in possession of a good fortune must be in want of immigrants.” This reading of Chang-rae Lee’s novel, *Native Speaker*, takes its cue from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to examine the role of money and social position in the desires—overt or disguised—of immigrants arriving in the United States, desires plotted, dramatized and performed in much of Asian American literature from the earliest publications in Chinese-language poems chronicled as Gold Mountain songs to contemporary non-fiction texts and novels.¹

Born in 1965 in Korea and accompanying his parents to the US in 1968, Lee is categorized as a one-and-a-half generation American, whose formation of self, acculturation or assimilation, and command of English are fairly distinctive from that of first-generation immigrants like his parents.² Lee’s first novel *Native Speaker* appearing in 1995 when he was only thirty, and still broadly considered the best of his five novels, is ostentatiously a domestic tale, a marriage plot of a relationship gone awry, with the Korean American husband, Henry Park, psychologically working on himself

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1. See Marlon K. Horn’s translations of Cantonese songs published in 1911 and 1915 and Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir *The Woman Warrior*, where the immigrant mother persists in working in the fields despite her age and attainment of material comfort.

2. See Chang-rae Lee’s “The Faintest Echo of our Language” (1990). This autobiographical essay/creative non-fiction narrative discusses, in particular, Lee’s relationship with his mother and issues of language and assimilation.

to win back his dissatisfied white wife, Leila, the narrative concluding in a strongly suggested happily-ever-after reconciliation scene. On one level, this mating-marriage tale is a male version of chick-lit; but on every other level that matters, the marriage plot serves as romance appeal to a more complicated convergence of three other US/or US-related narrative traditions—the immigrant story of assimilative struggle and eventual success toward full American national identity, often taken as the master plot for many ethnic American narratives, whether non-fiction or fiction³; second, the genre of espionage/detective novels, like Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*⁴; and third, socio-political-economist fictions, such as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, that dramatize the tragic dynamics between ambition, money, power and moral loss. This last tradition, particularly assertive in a socio-political domain constructed on a capitalist superstructure, continues to drive much of the American imagination, as demonstrated in popular culture, in films such as *Wall Street*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*.⁵

Native Speaker meshes these four major novelistic traditions, to offer a late 20th century narrative of the formation of the new immigrants in the US, a nation with a different melting pot dynamic, where earlier Euro-and, particularly, Anglo-norms are contested by multicultural, multilingual forces driven by globalized hyper-capitalist superstructures. In this unsettled setting, the common 20th century master plots of white-as-native tensions with non-white-immigrant-as-the-Other are interrogated, fragmented and re-assembled in a kinetic metropolis of multiple

3. Mary Antin's 1924 *The Promised Land*, Lin Yutang's 1949 *Chinatown Family*, and Carlos Bulosan's 1943 *America is in the Heart* offer exemplars of this national assimilation narrative.

4. See Tina Chen's "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts: The Double(d) Agent of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*." *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, for a discussion of the novel's deployment of the genre of espionage narratives.

5. Ashley Clark's 2014 review "Ten Great Films About Money" does a nice summative survey of movies from 1936 to Martin Scorsese's 2014 *The Wolf of Wall Street* <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-films-about-money>>.

Otherness, in which money and power, two intrinsically intertwined forces, rule. In the novel's increasingly melodramatic narration of disillusionment, violence and murder, its more primal emotional trajectory arguably is not heterosexual romance, with which the novel begins and ends, but with the quest for a male identity congruent with the US nation. In the novel, male identity is problematized by its embedded contextualization in multiple-tongued, duplicitous and abject ethnic identities, still subordinate or subaltern to white-Anglophone-centric norms. The elder Korean male figures (the father, the political mentor), present in the novel, fail to, or cannot, serve as American fathers.⁶ Without fathers able to nurture the immigrant son to a psychologically successful manhood (dramatized as a subject possessing authentic agency with the capacity to sustain intimate and social relationships), the novel's late 20th century re-inscription of the quintessentially American theme of quest for individual self takes the English language (also allegorized in the figure of the upper-class white wife, Leila) as the sentimental trope by which a national manhood is to be achieved—a post-immigrant salvation that is figuratively and literally articulated.

We see this male immigrant drama most clearly in the protagonist, the one-a-half-generation Korean American Henry Park, and his initial alienation from his father and his Korean origins. The complication in Henry's filial aversion, a manifestation of what the cultural theorist Rey Chow has dubbed as *ethnic abjection*, must be understood not simply as a character. Rather, Henry's developing contempt, hostility and rejection of his first-generation Korean father and the culture that the father represents, serve to emphasize the social dissolution of kinship structures brought

6. John C. Hawley in *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration* studies the complex father-son relationship in *Native Speaker* to examine this recurring theme in Asian American literature. Hawley argues that the revelation of Kwang's duplicity causes Henry to reluctantly accept his father, acknowledging that despite the father's flaws, his hard work and honest sacrifice stand as positive masculine attributes. I argue that Henry's negotiations between his biological and surrogate fathers suggest his struggle to reconcile conflicting self-constructions, a struggle that concludes in a celebration of new immigrants to the US in their raw, still unassimilated states, yet each shaped by the spirit of capitalism toward an American identity.

from Korea to the US, a territorial/cultural migratory disruption from where come the disintegrative pressures on originally robust familial relations.⁷

The earliest Korean immigration to the US dates from the Japanese imperial colonization of Korea in 1911, after which, under the Gentleman's Agreement between Japan and the US, Korean colonized subjects were permitted to enter the US as cheap field labor to work in the Hawaiian sugarcane plantations.⁸ Benefiting from this treaty Japan negotiated, Korean women were permitted to join their husbands, unions often formed through proxy marriages, as in the picture bride practice. But unlike the representations of this first wave immigration, fairly well covered in earlier literary texts such as Kim Ronyoung's *Clay Walls* and Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey, Native Speaker* focuses on the second and even third-wave Korean immigration after the Korean War of 1950–1953, a war that resulted in the 38th Parallel (DMZ) division between the communist North, and the democratic South Korea. This mid-fifties to seventies migration included many educated, military-trained men, who settled in metropolitan sites like Los Angeles and New York, and who, with intense, unrelenting focus (a quality the novel sometimes notes as overlapping with a ruth-

7. Rey Chow in her cleverly titled book's play on Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* theorizes that literary representations generally offer "numerous sociocultural and/or geopolitical situations in which difference has led not so much to emancipation as to oppression (135). The dramas in Henry's developmental trajectory, as a hybrid Korean-(born)-US-aculturated subject, desiring integration with native-speaking whiteness, yet internally marked by his original difference as alien/outsider, are narrated through a monological interior point-of-view that is characteristically abject in affect; that is, as Chow notes of ethnic writers, Henry's confession of self is characterized by "anger, pain, melancholy, shame, and abjection" (138).

8. See Sucheng Chan *Asian Americans: An Interpretative History* for a succinct recounting of the early history of Koreans, then Japanese subjects, migrating to Hawaii and the West Coast. In contrast, Ronald T. Takaki's "Struggling Against Colonialism: Koreans in America" focuses on well-known Koreans, such as the agricultural entrepreneur Kim Hyung-soon, and their rise to success. Takaki's conclusion that these immigrants established associations and other socio-economic instruments to help one another succeed in America, accounts for the dynamic that drives the rise of a John Kwang, who more inclusively deployed such collective financial instruments for his New York multiracial constituencies.

less drive), did not wait for their second-generation children to make fortunes for their community. Instead, with the wealth accumulated over a mere few decades of entrepreneurial labor, the post-Korean War immigrant parents set the bar high for their children's full assimilation into, and success in, the US—also in terms of education in top-tier universities facilitating the entry into elite American society.⁹ The drive for the attainment of success in education is, after all, related to traditional Korean Confucianist ethics that foreground the values of education and familial as well as communal relations that rest on mental and spiritual self-discipline. In the US, however, these two benchmarks—elite education and elite social mobility—demand, as a prior given, proficiency (if not fluency) in American English. In *Native Speaker*, the elided distinction between this prior given, the purchase of English fluency for success and the status of English fluency itself—the command of the language possessed only by a native speaker—serves as a major plot priority, the two-as-one (English fluency and native-speaker fluency) scoring the major achievement that marks success in the United States.¹⁰

9. Park's *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* investigates the Korean American grocery/produce business, particularly in the Korean-American community in Queens, New York, to conclude that Korean merchants use entrepreneurship to pursue their version of the "American Dream," while at the same time attempting to preserve "anjong" or "stability." Other studies, such as Susan Lee's, argue that ethnic cultural ideologies help shape the 1.5 generation of Korean Americans; the hierarchical structure that Korean families and communities brought with them to the United States involves obligations that individuals must fulfill to have a position, and thus also a proper place, in their society. See also Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim's "Are you sure you don't want to become a doctor?"—a study of the 1.5 generation and of pressures placed on children growing up with traditional Korean parents.

10. Young-Oak Lee's "Language and Identity: An Interview with Chang-rae Lee" looks at broader issues of language identity and interactions between individuals who do not share a common language. The interview also illuminates how and why the intimacy between Lelia and Henry is stressed by psychological incompatibilities, with their different language formations resulting in divergent cultural values. Henry, however, by identifying himself with English as a language of multiple registers rather than the English of a "native speaker," develops a more receptive openness to difference in others and in himself.

In the representations of Henry's struggle with his Korean father, both Mr. Park and Henry use English as a weapon for social dominance. Of the father, the novel notes:

Sometimes, when he wanted to hide or not outright lie, he chose to speak in English. He used to break into it when he argued with my mother and she would plead, "No, no!" as though he had suddenly introduced a switchblade into a clean fistfight. Once, when he was having some money problems with a store, he started berating her with some awful stream of nonsensical street talk, shouting "my hot mama shit ass tight ass tight cock sucka," and "slant-eye spic-and-span motha-fucka" (he had picked it up no doubt from his customers). I broke into their argument and started yelling at him, making sure I was speaking in complex sentences about his cowardice and unfairness [...]. I kept at him [...] using the biggest words I knew whether they made sense or not, school words like "socio-economic" and "intangible." (63)

In the battle of English words, the acculturated Princeton-educated son is bound to prove superior to the Korean engineer-trained turned inner-city grocer. The irony that perhaps only first-generation immigrants can appreciate lies in the father's deep approval of this generational superiority, his prideful acceptance of the upward aspirational separation of his son from his own Korean immigrant origin. When the father opens a new store in up-town "Madison Avenue in the Eighties," he urges Henry "to show [the rich customers] how well [he] spoke English, to make a display of it, to casually recite 'some Shakespeare words'" (53), nudging him into a role of "princely Hal," as Henry sardonically notes, that he is to play as evidence of the family's success in achieving parity with the American elite.

In the novel's complex representation of how Korean American immigrants in the 1990s understood (and arrived at) success, the father's capital accumulation and Henry's elite educational achievements reproduce the stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority. But the novel repeats this stereotype with a difference—that difference being in its layered unpacking of the costs of such success both on the individual and on the collective: the family, community, and finally—the American nation. If the father accepts Henry's contempt of his poor English skills as evidence of his son's, and hence the family's, success in the US,

bearing the damage to his traditional status as patriarch silently,¹¹ the costs for Henry, apparently the victorious beneficiary in this hierarchical reversal, are much stiffer. His superior English proficiency that endows him with the American success also serves to interpellate him as a classed subject who holds himself above his father's immigrant strivings. To Henry, his father was his "low master," one who "knew nothing of the mystical and neurotic," insensible of every intelligence and ideal save "certain rules of engagement."

Your family was your life, though you rarely saw them. You kept close handsome sums of cash in small denominations. [...] You never missed a mortgage or a day in church. You considered the only forces to be those of capitalism and the love of Jesus Christ. (47)

This passage reproduces the standard vision of the US as a nation built on the Protestant ethics, in which material success is the chief sign of Christian grace generated by the American dynamo of material progress (based on scientific and technological development). It is the process that, already in 1903, Henry Adams saw as the overtaking of the earlier, European-oriented, social mythos of the Virgin, which incidentally is a thesis that (in the same historical moment) Max Weber would argue in his study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹²

It is no wonder, therefore, although dramatically surprising, that Henry seizes on his father's dying hours, incapacitated by a stroke, to berate him:

11. —a filial inversion that the Korean mother stoutly rejects: "my mother [...] whacked me hard across the back of the head and shouted in Korean, *Who do you think you are?*" (63).

12. Henry Adams in his autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* offers a late 19th century personal narrative that notes, with an ambivalent tone, the transformation of a civilization structured on hierarchical values (the spiritual ethos figured in the Virgin) to one in which science and technology (in the figure of the dynamo) are preeminent. Adams' binary schema may be glimpsed in the dramatic conflicts rising out of Korean immigrants' Confucianist hierarchical values and the technological rationality that undergird late capitalist US society.

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I spoke at him, that propped-up father figure, half-intending an emotional torture [...] for the way he had conducted his life with my mother, and then his housekeeper. And his business and beliefs. (49)

While his father had remained silent through the years of economic struggle, his wife's cancer and death, and other traumas, Henry now wants to wreak "an emotional torture" on him as he lies dying, to break through his stoicism—the father's personal and cultural characteristic valorized in Korean/East Asian culture, associated with uncomplaining patience, fortitude, endurance, resignation and similar traits that endow subjects with the capacity to survive extreme hardships. But Henry's revenge fails: "Nothing I said seems to penetrate him" (49), he admits.

This seeming absence of affect, ironically, is also what Henry's wife, Leila, dislikes about Henry. His abhorrence of his father's emotional distance is a projection of the protagonist's recognition of his own Korean-socialized, and thus American-alienated, self: a subject set at a distance from self-actualizing relationships, and prey to self-loathing. In leaving the marriage, Leila listed those characteristics of Henry that had led to her decision: not "a cheap parting shot," Henry thinks, but "terse communiqués from her moments of despair" (5). And among the listed features are many that Henry sees as faults in his father: a neo-American, emotional alien, anti-romantic, stranger. Leila's list recognizes the integral identification of son and father—"poppa's boy"—even as Henry actively denies it (5). "He's just a more brutal version of you," she tells her husband (58); but for Henry, the modern American son, his father

was obviously not modern. [...] He was still mostly unencumbered by those needling questions of existence and self-consciousness. Irony was lost on him. [...] For most of my youth I wasn't sure that he had the capacity to love. (58).

Ironically,¹³ it is the same doubt, the doubt concerning Henry's capacity to love as demonstrated in his absence of affect, that motivates Leila to leave her husband after their ten-year-old son Mitt dies in a tragic accident. Henry recalculates his immigrant

13. —the irony lost on Henry at this point of his character development.

father's sacrifice ("you worked from before sunrise to the dead of night" [47])—not as an act of familial love, but as a result of the capitalist drive. Thus, Henry notes,

I thought his life was all about making money. He drew much energy and pride from his ability to make it almost at will. He was some kind of human annuity. (45–54)

Henry thus makes an observation that separates capitalist success from human striving and dehumanizes that striving reducing it to a mere financial instrument: the father's humanity, no matter how flawed, degraded to an annuity. The father's American success in accumulating wealth and his work ethic intrinsically related to his psychological stoicism that collectively result in the family's social mobility, all exert an intense pressure on the second generation to succeed on terms defined by this first generation's economic success. This social mobility pressure explains the rupture between the son and the father. Henry, enmeshed familiarly in this materialist dynamo, laments that he shared no mental or affective commonality with his father. "What belief did I ever hold in my father?" (48), Henry asks rhetorically, thus verbalizing the irreconcilable distance that lingered even after the father's death when the son admits to the "troubling awe and contempt and piety [he] still hold[s] for his [father's] life" (333–334).

And yet, in the same early chapter, the novel also carefully contextualizes that apparently discounted, discredited, first-generation Korean American's triumph in capitalist America. This historical context instates a fresh representation of the American immigrant story, a late 20th century narrative that does not simply parallel earlier Chinese American upwardly mobile tales of laundry businesses (as in Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*), or the Japanese and Filipino American narratives of hard labor in the Hawaiian plantations and Californian fields (see Milton Murayama's *All I Asking For is My Body* and Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*). Although *Native Speaker* covers a similar Asian American immigrant thematic trajectory, from alien subject to assimilation, it is distinguished by its incorporation of financial instruments specific to the Korean immigrant community, which play a pivotal role in the plot complications and which

ultimately offer a vision of immigrant ethnic identity radically different and new both in Asian American cultural productions and in US literature.

Henry as protagonist is hailed into being by ideologies shaped by the US state apparatuses that his father uncritically accepted (“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” [47]). This American ideology includes a classed and raced structure that intensifies prejudices against poor and colored people who are held up as examples of the lack of success in material striving, their capitalist and social failures demonstrating the absence of God’s grace that incites and excuses outright racist sentiments. Beginning his financial climb as an owner of grocery stores located in inner cities, serving black customers, his father, Henry acidly notes,

after all those years [...] felt nothing for them. [...] a black face meant inconvenience, or trouble, or the threat of death. [...] For a time he tried not to hate them. [...] Eventually he replaced the black workers with Puerto Ricans and Peruvians. The ‘Spanish’ ones were harder working, he said, because they didn’t speak English too well, just like us. (186–187)

In passages such as this, *Native Speaker* may be said to have boldly seized the third rail of ethnic representation, to move beyond the standard binary of white-ethnic/other power relations, beyond the dualism of superior and subaltern, native citizen and immigrant newcomer, English and non-English speaker, two poles equivalent to the empowered and the powerless, oppressor and victim. The Korean immigrant who both internalizes and reproduces, albeit in differently manifested ways, the class and race discriminatory ills of the US society, expands and complicates the American race relations to incorporate a new immigrant ethnic to a classed national elite. This complication is not merely a reimagining of US immigrant experience: it en-plots a paradigm-shifting text that instates the transformed socio-political realities of late 20th century immigration. First, we note that the first-generation Korean characters serve as nominal figures, as do all the ethnic immigrant characters that crowd the novel’s New York setting.

“Ethnic nominalism” identifies a group labeled with an ethnic marker by objective characteristics, e.g. forms of family and kinship ties. The categorization assumes all members sharing these characteristics will identify with that very ethnic group. Thus, employing him as an industrial spy or private investigator, Henry’s firm assumes he will nominally identify with—and therefore understand—the Koreans in New York, specifically the subject under surveillance, John Kwang, who is believed to be running for the position of the mayor of New York City. At a deeper narrative level, such focused ethnic nominalism shapes representative figures, with the father, Henry and Kwang as characters in a national allegory of power, conflict, and emergent identities, much in the way in which Fredric Jameson had theorized the deployment of the allegory as a genre for third-world national imaginaries.¹⁴ In this figuration, the father’s economic success, Henry’s second-generation ‘assimilation,’ and the generation gap manifested in their psychological conflicts also testify to the persistence of broad race and class hostilities, sedimented in the US history of Indian removal, slavery and civil rights legislative struggles, that remain unresolved. Except, in this immigrant story, it is the newest immigrant, the Korean American, who has internalized all of the above to enact and reproduce the historical injustices in race and class discriminatory formations.

But even such a shift in the paradigm, to insert Asian/Korean American internalized and overt racist relations with other Americans of color, and particularly with African Americans, is reductive, and does not apprehend the layered complications of new immigrant realities in *fin de siècle* 20th century US. For that more comprehensive understanding, the dramatic action has to be read in its historical setting, the 1980s’ context of the first burgeoning of Korean American socio-economic achievements. In New York City of the period in which the novel’s action is set, Koreans formed 85% of produce retailers, 70% of independent grocery retailers,

14. Despite Jameson’s too broad collapsing of representations coming out of emergent nation states with the literary strategy of the allegory in his essay, reading the novel’s deployment of characters as nominal figures through Jameson’s concept of national allegories illuminates the ways in which these nominal characters operate to thematize an allegorical meaningfulness to the various threads in the narrative.

80% of nail salons, and 60 % of dry cleaners. Korean enterprise in the US did not fit most immigrant entrepreneurship theories. These small business owners were drawn from professional ranks, were highly educated, but had turned their energy to enterprises requiring little English proficiency.¹⁵ Their initial success rose from their access to capital raised on the communal loan system of the *ggeh*s, a financial instrument open only to members of that ethnic group. Mr. Park's entrepreneurial success appears thus to figure this socio-economic reality.¹⁶

15. Eui-Young Yu and Peter Choe's "Korean Population in the United States as Reflected in the Year 2000 U.S. Census" offers a broad history of Korean Americans and their current significant presence and strong role as small business owners.

16. For some background on the significance of *ggeh*s as socio-economic instruments in Korean American communities, see Douglas Frantz's "Hanmi Bank Uses Ancient Lending Practice to Help Koreans" discussion of a Korean bank with branches in the United States that took the form of the *ggeh* (spelled as *kye* in his article) and applied it to bank loans. Using the *kye* as a legitimate banking practice opened the door for the legitimization of *kyes*. President and CEO of Hanmi Bank, Benjamin B. Hong, acknowledged that he hoped to bridge the gap between the Korean and American cultures in helping immigrants with *kye*-style loans. In 1993, Jack Doherty analyzed Judge Edward M. Ross's, a Superior Court Judge's, ruling that confirmed the illegality of private loan systems such as *kyes*. Doherty's sources, however, suggested that not only would Judge Ross' ruling make way for *kye*'s enforced by contracts, thus making the practice legally acknowledged, but that this system would flourish also because of *kyes*' importance for the Korean-American community. Judge Ross's ruling confirmed the incongruence between the US financial laws and the Korean *ggeh* practice, emphasizing the US banking structures' unwillingness to comprehend and support it. Cultural Studies scholars have noted the pivotal role the *ggeh* plays in the novel's dramatic actions. Daniel Kim's 2003 article argues that *Native Speaker* deploys the *ggeh* as the unifying dramatic force to create an interracial rather than Korean or Asian American community. Because John Kwang's *ggeh* was not set up solely for Koreans or Korean-Americans, the dramatic action both undermines and re-constructs the fundamental structure of *ggeh*'s as one that demands new inter-racial, integrative social bonds to replace legal bonds that have proven unhelpful to immigrant communities of color. Jodi Kim's *MELUS* article, contextualizing the novel in the history of the Cold War on Korean politics, examines the ways in which non-legally bound exchanges of money behind closed doors may prove detrimental to the ideals of democracy and capitalism. Kim suggests that minority groups that move undocumented capital around, the way

In the same way, therefore, his antipathy toward blacks that plays a significant part in alienating Henry must be differently understood, not as a character flaw (the way that Henry views it in his father), but as a material construction formed by super-structural pressures rather than by private and individual prejudice. The incidents of tense, violent encounters between Mr. Park and black shoppers—or criminal predators (the two indistinguishable to the besieged shopkeeper)—re-inscribes the overt clashes between Korean American businesses in inner city neighborhoods and their black customers that were commonly reported in the 1980s and early 1990s. One of the first such incidents took place in Brooklyn, in May 1990, following the first boycotts held in 1988 against Korean-owned stores to protest their racist treatment of blacks.¹⁷ These simmering tensions rising out of competitive class and race structures, culminated in May 1992. A Los Angeles Korean American storekeeper, Soon Ja Du, shot a black teenager, Latasha Harlins, whom she suspected of stealing a container of orange juice. She was convicted, but during the turmoil resulting from the not guilty verdicts for the police whose brutalization of Rodney King was caught on tape, the rioters in Los Angeles turned their resentment and wrath against Korean businesses.¹⁸ They burned down a mini-mall and over a thousand buildings, most of them Korean shops in South Central L.A. *Native Speaker* alludes explicitly to this history of inter-ethnic violence and economic conflict:

ggeh's do, can purchase themselves racial-minority representatives within the government, the way *Native Speaker's* John Kwang's supporters do.

17. Felicia R. Lee's *New York Times*' December 1988 article quotes "Blacks like Robert (Sonny) Carson, who has been involved several black grass-roots protests, and the Rev. Lawrence Lucas, pastor of the Resurrection Roman Catholic Church at 276 West 151st Street in the Harlem area of Manhattan, [who] said such capitalism had historically left blacks on the outside as they watched successive waves of immigrants take over their neighborhood stores and become rich from black dollars that leave black communities."

18. See Eric K. Yamamoto's *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post Civil Rights America* (249–250) for a brief contrast between the ways in which these conflicts were perceived by blacks and by Korean citizens through Korean media. A fuller examination of this history is found in Kwang Chung Kim's 1999 edited collection *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans*.

The press was having a field day. They had multiple boycotts to cover. Vandalism. Street-filling crowds of chanting blacks. Heavily armed Koreans. Fire in the night. (192)

Using a summative technique and then Henry's sympathetic analysis of Kwang's inter-ethnic dilemma, the novel offers a nuanced, Korean-empathetic point-of-view that it had previously withheld in the portrayal of Henry's father:

[Kwang] couldn't even speak out against the obvious violence and destruction, after black groups had insisted they were 'demonstrations' against the callousness of Korean merchants and the unjust acquittal of the Korean storekeeper who'd shot and killed Saran Harlans [...] What I was noting most was the liberty [reporters] took with the Koreans [...] The Koreans stood there, uneasy, trying to explain difficult notions in a broken English. Spliced into the news stories, sound-bited, they always came off as brutal, heartless. Like human walls. (193)

In this setting of violent Korean-black hostility, the master critique of the coercive assimilation machine, the melting pot, into which every ethnic immigrant is allegedly thrown, in order to emerge normed as a monolingual middle-class Anglo-American, fades into the background, albeit it never disappears. The novel instead crucially revises the ways the new immigrant, like Mr. Park, is able to take on the powers of the (white) race and (upper) class elite, through a strategic seizing of state-legitimated apparatuses of capital accumulation, *and* through the added advantage not available to non-Koreans: the quintessential Korean financial instrument of the *ger* or *kye*, spelled in the novel as *ggeh*.

Increasing his profits through labor exploitation is only one of the capitalist tools Henry's father deploys (54). But his other business strategies, according to the novel, are intuitively figured, a testimony to a native genius in the field of business. When Henry questions his father on reasons for a pricing decision, the father responds: "'Stupid boy,' [...] clutching at his chest. His overworked merchant's chest. 'It's feeling.'" (55). The 'feeling' for business explains his capacity to make money, as the novelist notes, "almost at will" (55). Thus, while Henry views his father critically as a non-modern man, Mr. Parks' ability to make money proves Henry's analysis is false; the power to succeed as a capitalist in the US demonstrates instead the father's power as a subject

fit to act, to resist those social forces that might impede his business genius, and thus his gaining an independent autonomous dimension, with an ability to change and transform his initial immigrant abjection in order to eventually arrive at some form of elite status in the US.

The novel makes visible, critiques, and finally celebrates the central significance of money and work in the formation of a new American identity.¹⁹ *Native Speaker* achieves this reconciliation of moral merit with money striving through the distinction between money as a trope for immigrant survival and assimilative desire and money as covertly and corruptly liaised with power. That is, money, the figure for capitalist striving, is not one thing and does not operate across groups and individuals as one reified dynamic. For example, assigned by his private investigation company to uncover information on the charismatic John Kwang, probable candidate for the New York City mayor, Henry meets Kwang's constituents in the working-class, heavily immigrant, borough of Queens. He comes to understand his father in the larger context of first-generation American nation formation: a complexification that gradually leads him to soften his harsh judgment of his father's capitalist drive. He is now able to empathize, after his commingling with diverse ethnic immigrant small businesses through his work assisting the assemblyman Kwang, who represents this polyglot citizenry:

[R]espect is often altered or lost in translation. [...] in the mixed lot of peoples, respect (and honor and kindness) is a matter of margins, what you can clear on a \$13.99 quartz watch, or how much selling it takes to recover when you give one away. [...] The Vietnamese deli, the West Indian takeout. Stay open. Keep the eyes open. You are your cheapest labor. Here is the great secret, the great mystery to an immigrant's success, the dwindle of irredeemable hours beneath the cheap tube lights. Pass them like a machine. Believe only in chronology. This will be your coin-small salvation. (188)

Henry, having observed similar strivings among ethnic immigrant small businesses, arrives at a differently angled focus of judgment

19. Parallels can be made with how Jane Austen's novels similarly criticize, yet finally accept and even celebrate, the central role of money in the social relations that result in marriage.

than the one he had made of his father, understanding at this point how incommensurate cross-cultural ethics can be: “respect is [...] altered [...] lost in translation” (188).²⁰ His youthful mockery of his father’s pricing his stock at .99 cents now turns to respect, and respect well-deserved in light of efforts that succeed on small margins; “coin-small” gains that nonetheless he can now recognize as “salvation” (188).

Immigrant striving, literalized on the small margins of profit of the .99 cent pricing strategy, is plotted against the huge sums passed on covertly to John Kwang, whom Henry initially imagines as a more desirable father figure. Unlike Mr. Park, Kwang lives in a larger nation—one composed of apparently every immigrant ethnicity, and one in which he negotiates his way confidently. Henry finds Kwang’s genius in political leadership more admirable than his father’s business talents. Kwang is always impeccably groomed and dressed, he’s articulate, an immigrant who has successfully assimilated into multiracial America, with a vision in which class, race and gender differences are integrated into an inclusionary ideology. He explains to Henry:

I felt welcomed by the parades of young black men and women. [...] I tried to feel what they were feeling. [...] back here, the black power on the street! [...] I thought *this* is America! (195)

Kwang’s vision moves beyond the binary of black/white nation formation, apprehending the delicate position of a “minority” politician who must win votes across ethnic lines:

Everyone can see the landscape is changing. Soon there will be more brown and yellow than black and white. And yet the politics, especially minority politics, remain cast in terms that barely acknowledge us. (196)

20. As an ethnic *bildungsroman*, Henry’s final reconciliation with his Korean father is borne out in sociological studies that focus on young adult Korean Americans and their relationships with their Korean immigrant parents, as in the strains in parent-child relationship that come from ownership of a family business, and the difficulties of language barriers rising out of the parents’ monolingual Korean or limited grasp of English. See Hyeyoung Kang, Okazaki Sumie, Nancy Abelmann, Chu Kim-Priet, and Shanshan Lan’s “Redeeming Immigrant Parents: How Korean American Emerging Adults Reinterpret Their Childhood.”

Persuaded, even seduced, by Kwang's class and race activism, Henry looks up to Kwang as a surrogate father matching his assimilated ideal of one who speaks English fluently and eloquently, who identifies with a multi-ethnic community, is anti-racist and works for social uplift of the dispossessed and working poor—everything his father was not.

Moreover, Henry sees Kwang as the new American, who has succeeded in maintaining positive Korean traits, such as the language and love of family, even as he has been transformed into an American who speaks to and for a polyglot multiracial nation. As he is drawn ever more closely into Kwang's intimate cadre of assistants, however, he is disillusioned to discover that Kwang's public performance of male suavity and control is inauthentic, and that Kwang's patriarchal core persists privately in his physical abuse of his wife, extramarital philandering and aggressive egotism, a darker trait in contrast to Mr. Park's focus on serving as the protective breadwinner for the family.

The only commonality Mr. Park and Kwang seem to share is their use of the Korean practice of *ggeh*. Mr. Park "got his first infusion of capital from a *ggeh*, a Korean 'money club,' whose members contribute to a pool that is then allotted out on a rotating basis. Each week you gave the specified amount; and then one week in the cycle, all the money was yours" (50). The *ggeh* depends on mutual trust; no legal document tracks the members' contributions; and the member who scoops the collection for the week does not have to account for how he will use the money, although the aim of the club is to enable an infusion of capital, an indispensable first step for starting a business, and which is impossible to obtain as a bank loan without a credit history or some kind of guarantor: two prerequisites new immigrants often lack. Characteristically, Henry's father launched his business with the assistance of the *ggeh*, but

in the end [he] no longer belonged to any *ggeh*, he complained about all the disgraceful troubles that were cropping up, people not paying on time or leaving too soon after their turn getting the money. In America, he said, it's even hard to stay Korean. (51)

Where Mr. Park abandones his dependence on the *ggeh* as he achieves his own independent means, Kwang exploits this communal resource in a criminal endeavor to gain political advantage in a concealed pay-to-play strategy. Kwang opens his *ggeh* to all ethnic communities; collecting the funds secretly, he controls the disbursement of these means, and does so to buy influence, loyalty and recognition, the assistance provided to struggling immigrant families and businesses being a crucial step toward consolidating his political power. When Kwang's Dominican assistant Eduardo is killed in a mysterious bomb explosion, Henry learns that Eduardo had been operating this illegal money machine for Kwang, and that Kwang now plans to recruit Henry to keep the extensive lists of in and out payments that Eduardo had been recording:

a listing of names and addresses, names and ages of children, occupation, name and address of business or businesses, estimated yearly income, nationality, year-to-date dollar figures, percentage changes. Then, to the far right, double-underlined, the dollar amounts. (275)

Here is no "coin-small salvation," no small profit margin. The money that drives Kwang's political machine is private and covert, but, like Mr. Park's business profits, ironically, it is derived from operations grounded in a unique code of honor:

The money comes in weekly, some of them giving as much as \$250 and \$500, others as little as \$10. Most give fifty. We welcome them all. Ten dollars a week is what it takes to start, ten dollars for the right of knowing a someone in the city for you who are yet nobody. But then no one, no matter the amount, has his ear over another. It matters only that you give what you can. You give with honor and indomitable spirit. You remain loyal. True. These are the simple rules of his [Kwang's] house. (277)

This operation, altered or translated into US legal terms as a pyramidal laundering scheme (281) for influence peddling, is viewed by the urban, working-class ethnic participants in terms that speak to honor, indomitable spirit, loyalty, and truth; even the churches "funnel" contributions, "not just from Queens and the other boroughs but from Nassau and Westchester and Bergen counties" (278).

In the representation of the incommensurable cross-cultural status of Kwang's secret money machine, the novel, through

Henry's evolving sensibility toward money as a signifier of American experience and national formation, illuminates a different hinging of immigrant story with money. In recording the money contributions, Henry has "steadily become a compiler of lives. [...] writing a new book of the land" (279). This recording of financial information on immigrant individuals finally grows Henry's character, enlarging this modern man expanding his self from the initial "existentialist" solipsist identity to a collective self that is finally able to understand—and identify with—immigrants like his father, through apprehending the meaning of money for these people:

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

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If Kwang's *gehh* signifies a form of capitalism based on an ethnic collective, the one anathema to the individual-oriented responsibility upheld by the American banking system—its "illegality"—may therefore be assessed as a matter of values lost in translation. Henry's explanation suggests the cross-cultural confusion of the understanding of money as symbolic value and money as power dynamic:

Small *ggeh*, like the one my father had, work because the members all know each other, trust one another not to run off or drop out after their turn comes up. Reputation is always worth more than money. In this sense we are all related. The larger *ggeh* depends solely on this notion, that the lessons of the culture will be stronger than a momentary lack, can subdue any individual weakness or want. This the power, lovely and terrible, what we try to engender in Kwang's giant money club, our huge *ggeh* for all. What John says it is about. (280)

This kind of overly explicit, anti-dialogical expository prose, usually a stylistic drag on a dramatic narrative, achieves here a swift clear summation of abstractions often untried, with good reason, in the realist novel. At the same time, framed through Henry's point of view, ironically reframed as his still uncritical acceptance of Kwang's public position—that the money operation is about the community, the culture of collective power—this concept

becomes undermined as Kwang's private flaws are discovered. The giant *ggeh* now appears to be all about Kwang's individual weakness and lack, an instrument he exploits for political ambition to feed the needs of his dominating ego. Kwang's villainy is complete when Henry learns of the latter's responsibility for the explosion that killed Eduardo.

If this thematic take were all the novel is about—how money rules in the US and how it corrupts individuals, society and politics—*Native Speaker* would be less of an achievement. But the novel pushes beyond the stale criticism of capital to a surprising denouement. While Kwang's ambition is not driven by the desire for money but for power (311), that ambition, like Mr. Park's drive for money, is also empathetically represented as an immigrant desire for a place in the nation. At the dramatic moment of Kwang's public humiliation, escorted by the police arriving in squad cars, Henry strikes at the mob assaulting Kwang in a moment of decisive identification. He sees in him "a broken child, shielding from [Henry] his wide immigrant face" (343). That is, the phenomenon negatively represented in mainstream discourse as the immigrants' compulsive drive for money and power, may be more sympathetically translated as constituted by the inexorable material conditions that the immigrants encounter. In exposing the list of contributors to Kwang's *ggeh*, Henry's investigative firm also exposes the identities of hundreds of illegal immigrants, now caught in the net and facing deportation. Kwang is publicly vilified most of all for his assistance to illegals: The demonstrators

chant that they want to kick every last one of them back to where they came from, kick him back with them, let them drown in the ocean with 'Smuggler Kwang'. [...] people stand behind two sewn-together sheets spray-painted with the words: AMERICA FOR AMERICANS. (331)

The moment of juncture between money, power, immigration and American identity is the moment when the novel moves beyond reductive dualistic representations of good and evil to a nuanced, layered humanistic review of immigrant motivation, translatable across cultures:

Kwang's particular thinking [...] the idea of the *ggeh* occurred as second nature. [...] He didn't know who was an 'illegal' and who was not,

for he would never come to see that fact as something vital. If anything, the *ggeh* was his one enduring vanity, a system paternal; how in the beginning people would come right to the house and ask for money and his blessing. [...] He had no real power over any of them save their trust in his wisdom. He was merely giving to them just the start, like other people get an inheritance, a hope chest of what they would work hard for in the rest of their lives. (334)

Henry's experiences with these struggling illegal immigrants finally endow him with the capacity to see himself in the same immigrant narrative:

By rights I am an American citizen [...] And yet I can never stop considering the pitch and drift of [the immigrants'] forlorn boats on the sea. [...] They know they will come here and live eight or nine to a room and earn ten dollars a day, maybe save five. They can figure that math, how long it will take to send for their family, how much longer for a few carts of fruit to push. (335)

With the news of the pickup and probable deportation of the illegal immigrants uncovered in Kwan's *ggeh* list, Henry says to Leila: "Imagine, though, if they told my father he really had to leave [...]. Can you see his face? It would be the death of him. Or worse." (336)

The tragedy of the deportation of the illegal immigrants is the dramatic action that finally transforms Henry's sensibility, one might say, almost reversing his development, from the modern upper-class American, exquisitely educated in irony, to a pre-modern immigrant American driven by basic needs:

We listen to their [...] stilted English. I know I would have ridiculed them when I was young: I would cringe and grow ashamed and angry at those funny tones of my father and his workers, all that Konglish, Spanglish, Jive. [...] But now I think I would give almost anything to hear my father's talk again, the crash and bang and stop. [...] I will listen for him forever in the streets of this city. (337)

"Listening forever" to the polyglot-inflected language of ancestral immigrants as an empathetic identification between the native citizen and the new arrival is the complex convergence where the novel leaves the reader.

The relations between money and immigration in the novel focus chiefly on the history of second and third wave Korean Americans, but this freshly nuanced drama of first generation

and illegal immigrant desire for success also significantly layers a multi-ethnic representation onto the narrative. Much like Jane Austen's novels of money and the marriage market, *Native Speaker* finely portrays the social conditions of capitalist America and the fears and desires of immigrants constrained within, yet also negotiating and ethically valued as subjects in this drama of money, desire and national identity.

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