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Publication Date

2000-06-30

Peer reviewed

Three Korean American Dreams:

Performing the Model Minority in Chang-rae Lee's
Native Speaker

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That's what all of America was like to me. When you see it for the first time, it glitters, beautiful, like a dream. But then, the longer you walk through it, the more you realize that the dream is empty, false, sterile. You realize that you have no face and no place in this country.

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, 110

Like the good Reverend King
I too "have a dream,
but when I wake up
I forget it and
remember I'm running late for work.

Paul Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle*, 226

Like other immigrants, many Koreans come to the United States to pursue the American Dream. In this paper I will look at the dreams of three characters in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*: the protagonist's immigrant father, the protagonist Henry Park, and John Kwang, a politician. In analyzing their dreams I ask some of

種既有的人文資源，人文新的創造新的發展將是無本之木，無源之水。二十一世紀作為“人文世紀”，應當成為各個國家、各個地域、各個民族的人文兼容并蓄、互相爭妍、共同繁榮的世紀，多元化多樣化人文共生與共創、交融與互補的世紀。

人文世紀是歷史的呼喚。人類為了自身生存與發展，承攬起創造人文世紀的歷史使命，當義無反顧。

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the following questions: What are these Korean American dreams? Are they about individual success or do they embrace a larger social vision? Do Korean immigrants and their children share the same dream? What are the costs involved? I believe that different as the three dreams are, Henry Park, his father, and John Kwang all try to perform one aspect of the stereotype of the Asian American model minority as the self-made immigrant, the self-effacing and dutiful subordinate, and the overachiever respectively.

Judith Butler argues, in her discussion of gender and performance: *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender...* The parody is of the very notion of an original... a production which, in effect... postures as an imitation (Butler 138). The performance of drag thus "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (137). A similar argument can be applied to American immigrant experience. Lee, in showing how his Asian American characters perform the model minority and American national identity, reveals the stereotype and the original "American" success story to be likewise something compulsory yet fictional.

On the surface, the stereotype of the model minority seems rather innocuous and even benign. To understand why the stereotype is a troubling one, we must go back to its genesis. The myth of the Asian model minority arose in the 1970s in the wake of the civil rights movements, during which African Americans were pressing for political and social reforms. White conservatives argued that if Asian Americans can do well despite the fact that

they too had been victims of racist practices such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment, African Americans should likewise be able to take care of themselves. The government need not intervene to help racial minorities; the other minorities can just follow the Asian American example (see for example Petersen; Bell; "Success Story"). Thus the most insidious aspect of the model minority stereotype is the way it is being used to pit Asian Americans against other people of color, especially African Americans.

There are several problems associated with the reasoning of the conservatives. First, most recent Asian immigrants have brought with them considerable economic and cultural capital, unlike African Americans who suffered centuries of slavery and attendant poverty and illiteracy. Second, just because Asian Americans do not seek welfare or medical aid from the government does not mean they have no need of such help: they simply lack the wherewithal (such as fluency in English and knowledge about the U.S. social system) to tap into such resources. Third, the myth of the model minority homogenizes all Asian Americans, when many Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Cambodians still live below the poverty level.

Finally, while Asian diligence, deference, and tractability have often been attributed to Confucian culture, living in the U.S. - where people of Asian descent have historically been treated as undesirable or enemy aliens - has undoubtedly reinforced the need to be compliant and invisible. This response to fear is eloquently articulated by the protagonist in Shawn Wong's *American Knee*,

who served in the U.S. army during the Vietnam War: "All he could remember was the fear he'd felt when the sergeant had called him a 'gook'. That, and the desire he'd brought back from his few months in the army to be anonymous in the world. There was safety in being Asian American at home in America. *We work hard. We keep quiet. I am the model minority. Don't shoot me*" (59). The model minority is merely the flip side of a gook: the solution to being treated as enemy alien is to be a member of a docile and invisible minority.

Yet many Asian Americans have themselves internalized the stereotype as a cultural insignia. The disturbing consequence of this internalization is eloquently pointed out by the editors of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*:

The general function of any racial stereotype is to establish and preserve order between different elements of society... and enforce white supremacy with a minimum of effort, attention, and expense.... The stereotype operates as a model of behavior. It conditions the mass society's perceptions and expectations.... The stereotype operates most efficiently and economically when the vehicle of the stereotype, the medium of its perpetuation, and the subject race to be controlled are all one.... The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force.... For the subject to operate efficiently as an instrument of white supremacy, he is conditioned to accept and live in a state of euphemized self-contempt. This self-contempt itself is nothing more than the subject's acceptance of white standards of objectivity, beauty, behavior, and achievement as being morally absolute, and his acknowledgment that, because he is not white, he can never fully measure up to white standards.... This gesture of self-

contempt and self-destruction, in terms of the stereotype, is euphemized as being successful assimilation, adaptation, and acculturation. (xxvi-xxviii)

By internalizing the stereotype, the editors imply, Asian Americans run the risk of forever viewing themselves as no more than an inferior replica of white culture. Asian Americans may be viewed by the dominant culture as industrious, reliable, and courteous, but not daring and venturesome; they are not to be trusted with leadership positions. Hence the "glass ceiling" experienced by many Asian Americans who may otherwise be seen as "successful" in public eyes.

The stereotype that is the object of "racist love" turns just as easily into the object of "racist hate": a self-made man praised for his resourcefulness may be censured for his ruthless competitiveness; a subordinate appreciated for his deference and reticence may be reviled as passive and inscrutable; an overachiever touted for his superior intelligence or competence may be viewed askance as a threatening upstart or a hoaxer. Thus the stereotype of "yellow peril" is never far behind that of the "model minority".

The characters in *Native Speaker* nicely dramatize the effect of the stereotype on Korean Americans. The father of the protagonist, a successful green grocer, likes to think of himself as the exemplar of the American Dream:

In his personal lore he would have said that he started with \$200 in his pocket and a wife and baby and just a few words of English. Knowing what every native loves to hear, he would

have offered the classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient, resourceful. (49-50)

This is the classic story of the self-made man, the hardworking immigrant in the tradition of Horatio Alger. The reason every native loves to hear this tale is that it implies that the U.S. is indeed the legendary land of opportunity, that everyone who works hard can attain wealth and prosperity. But the tale also implies that those who cannot make it in this land of plenty should blame only themselves, and that society and the well-to-do citizens need not intervene in helping the poor and the needy.

While the father thus presents himself as the self-made American hero, his son is quick to point out the Korean cultural resource that lies behind his father's success: "The truth, though, is that my father got his first infusion of capital from a *ggeh*, a Korean 'money club' in which members contributed to a pool that was given 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). It is through the mutual aid of his Korean compatriots—rather than mere individual effort—that the father is able to obtain the necessary capital to start his business.

Material success is also accompanied by some high costs. The father may take pride in his financial success the new country, but he suffers drastic downward occupational mobility by coming to the United States. He landed on American soil with a Master's degree in engineering only to become a green grocer in New York. When Henry tries to ask about his green grocer business, his mother interrupts: Don't shame [your father]!.... He graduated from

the best college in Korea, the very top, and he doesn't need to talk about selling fruits and vegetables. It's below him" (56). Despite his pride he submits to daily indignities from white and black customers. For instance, he prevents his son from confronting a white woman who returns an apple to the fruit stand after taking a bite, saying, "She's a steady customer" (54). One night, having been physically assaulted in his store by blacks, he returns home "with deep bruises about his face, his nose and mouth bloody, his rough workshirt torn at the shoulder" (56). The father never mentions these humiliating incidents—nor his college degree—when reciting his success story.

Achieving the American dream of financial success also means devoting all his time to work rather than spending time with the family, thereby widening the gap between father and child. By working around the clock, by providing for Henry's education, the father thinks that he has done his paternal duty. But the son, who yearns for more explicit affection and attention, cannot appreciate his father's obsession with making money and has only contempt for his dream: "I thought his life was all about money. He drew much energy and pride from his ability to make it almost at will. He was some kind of human annuity. He had no real cleverness or secrets for good business; he simply refused to fail, leaving absolutely nothing to luck or chance or something else" (49). Instead of admiring such perseverance and iron discipline, the son finds his father's unrelenting sense of duty mechanical and selfish:

For him the world... operated on a determined set of procedures,

certain rules of engagement. These were the inalienable rights of the immigrant. I was to inherit them, the legacy unfurling before me this way: you worked from before sunrise to the dead of night. You were never unkind in your dealings, but then you were not generous. Your family was your life, though you rarely saw them. (47)

The generation gap is further aggravated by cultural and linguistic barriers. Because of the dominance of American cultural norms, the son interprets his father's lack of verbal and physical expression of affection as the true lack of it. He is unable to read his father's nonverbal gestures (such as coming home early after his mother's death and attending all of his son's basketball games) as alternative expressions of love. Furthermore, while the father can scarcely speak English, the son is not fluent in Korean. In a country in which English is a form of cultural capital, the son's greater command of English also translates into a loss of respect for the father.

The father's increasing financial stability leads ironically to greater social isolation. The more the father subscribes to the American ideal of rugged individualism, and the greater his economic advancement, the more cut off he is from his fellow countrymen. When the family first arrived in the U.S., they lived close to other Korean families and had many Korean friends. These families would gather in the park during weekends, having a picnic and playing soccer together. But when the father has made enough money, the family move to a white suburb where they lose contact with other Koreans:

I know over the years my father and his friends got together less and less.... But it wasn't just him. They all got busier and wealthier and lived farther and farther apart. Like us, their families moved to big houses with big yards to tend on weekends, they owned fancy cars that needed washing and waxing. They joined their own neighborhood pool and tennis clubs and were making drinking friends with Americans. Some of them, too, were already dead, like Mr. Oh, who had a heart attack after being held up at his store in Hells Kitchen. And in the end my father no longer belonged to any *ggeh*, he complained about all the disgraceful troubles that were now 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)

The passage brings out the paradox that the greater the (monetary) gain, the greater the (social and perhaps also ethical) loss. The death of Mr. Oh tells us the degree to which Korean storekeepers put their lives at risk in their attempt to make it in America. The superficial "drinking friends" met at the wealthy white suburb are implicitly contrasted with the poor but reliable Korean friends in the ghetto. The passage also implies that the American emphasis on individualism and personal success is in part responsible for the decline of the *ggeh*, that communal source of mutual sustenance. Henry wonders whether his father,

if given the chance, would have wished to go back to the time before he made all that money, when he had just one store and we rented a tiny apartment in Queens. He worked hard and had worries but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in.... They had lots of Korean

friends that they met at church and then even in the street, and when they talked in public there was a shared sense of how lucky they were, to be in America but still have countrymen near. (51-52)

The father, the narrator implies, pays a high price—debased occupational status, daily affront from customers, lack of respect from his son, and social isolation—for his dream. His need to see himself as a “heroic newcomer” can thus be viewed as defense mechanism against the losses incurred by the migration.

Paradoxically, holding oneself up as a self-made individual means conforming to the American ideology, as well as accepting the dominant culture’s designations of Asian Americans as the “model minority”. *Native Speaker* shows that immigrants like Henry’s father who insistently play the role of the model minority have subconsciously accepted the American racial hierarchy: “we believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stories and offices burn down to the ground” (53). Being a model minority thus involves not only pleasing the white majority (by being impeccable, hardworking, and uncomplaining), but also sharing the dominant culture’s prejudice against African Americans. Such prejudice surely had something to do with the actual killing, over a quarrel about a bottle of orange juice, of a black teenage girl—Latasha Harlins—by Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocer in Los Angeles, a crime for which Du received a very light sentence. This incident, together with the Rodney King beating by white police

officers and the subsequent “not guilty” verdict, helped fuel the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, which I will discuss later. Suffice to note here that the novel draws a connection between the American ideal of the self-made man, the stereotype of the model minority, and the management of race. It also reveals that the dream of self-made manhood and material betterment is ultimately a selfish dream that does nothing to redress existing social inequalities.

Markedly different from the father’s American Dream is that of Henry Park, the protagonist. The immigrant father dreams of financial success and a good education for his son. The son, on the other hand, dreams about cultural assimilation and acceptance by society as fully “American”—as a “native speaker”. To attain this dream, Henry tries his best to penetrate American culture and to master English. Yet he finds that even though his English is impeccable, people like himself “are always thinking about still having an accent” (12). The line suggests how difficult it is for people of Asian descent, no matter how assimilated, to be fully recognized as “American”—a term that still continues to mean “white” in the eyes of the dominant culture. Lelia—Henry’s wife—tells him in their first meeting that though he speaks English “perfectly” she can tell he is not a “native speaker” partly on account of his “face” (12).

Lelia’s parents exemplify some of the prevailing attitudes toward Asian Americans. His mother-in-law, though she “completely adores” Henry, describes him as “old-style charming, like back in 1957” (118). Henry comments, “I’m her exotic... Like a snow

leopard. Except I'm not porcelain" (118). His father-in-law, Steward (Stew) discloses to Henry: "when I first found out that Lelia was dating you I didn't like it one bit.... I'm saying, who in the hell were you? Sure, some bright Oriental kid. And then when she told us you were getting married, I nearly yanked the phone out of the wall (120). While he later looks favorably upon Henry, who has become his son-in-law, his image of Henry merely switches from the stereotype of the undesirable alien to that of the model minority: I can see now why Lelia chose you.... There's so much that's admirable in the Oriental culture and mind. You've been raised to be circumspect and careful (121). To Stew Henry's father epitomizes the admirable self-made Oriental: "I saw a man who didn't have to make a display of himself. You knew he walked every inch to where he is. He owes no one, and he can't conceive of being owed some thing" (121). Stew's laudatory comments only reveal the extent to which both Henry and his father are viewed according to stereotypes. And what Stew admires most about Henry's father is his self-sufficiency—the fact that he does not need to be helped by the U.S. government or by the tax-payer.

Not surprisingly, in the same breath Stew praises Henry's father he—in line with the conservatives who first designed the model minority myth—casts aspersions on Africans Americans:

That's the problem with us right now, it's that we have a country here of people, both rich and poor, who think they're entitled to everything good in life. I read a newspaper article about a young couple with two small children. You know the story. Hot-dog gumbo for dinner. Of course, neither of them is

working. they're on welfare and food stamps but they still somehow have enough money for cable and long distance. (121)

His speech demonstrates how divisive the myth of the model minority is, for it is seldom invoked without its invidious corollary—why can't African Americans emulate Asian Americans.

Where Henry's father-in-law uses the stereotype of the model minority to insinuate against African Americans, however, the editors of *Attieeeee!* argue that African Americans have in fact left a much more distinct mark on American culture than have Asian Americans: "[The Asian American] is supposed to feel better off than the blacks, whose American achievement is the invention of their own American culture... [Blacks] have been cultural achievers, in spite of white supremacist culture, whereas Asian Americans' reputation is an achievement of that white culture—a work of racist art" (xxv). The editors imply that by trying to live within the confines of the stereotype, Asian Americans are destroying their own sensibility. Henry's father's life of toil certainly does not elicit gratitude from his son. Instead of singing the father's paean at his deathbed, Henry showers him with abuse: "I spoke at him, this propped-up father figure, half-intending an emotional torture. I ticked through the long register of my disaffections, hit all the ready categories... my berating him for the way he had conducted his life... his businesses and beliefs, to speak once and for all the less than holy versions of who he was" (49). The deathbed scene reveals the emptiness of the father's life despite his material success; the "propped-up father figure" is what remains of the self-styled "heroic new comer".

Henry's own career illustrates the successful operation of the stereotype which, according to the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*, "results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force" (xxvii). He has tried so hard to be what the dominant culture wants him to be that he has lost his sense of self. He has tried so hard to be the image of the model minority—deferential, self-effacing, invisible—that he no longer knows himself. *Native Speaker* opens with the line "The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was" (1). By dint of a list of idioms, Henry tells us, Lelia has produced a "vision of [him] in the whitest raw light, instant snapshots of the difficult truths native to our time together" (1). The list contains words and phrases such as "illegal alien", "emotional alien", "Yellow peril: neo-American", "traitor", "spy" (5). But more perturbing than the list itself is the way Henry cherishes it:

I read through the list twice... Later I would make three photocopies, one to reside permanently next to my body, in my wallet, as a kind of personal asterisk... in case of accidental death. Another I saved to show her again sometime... The last, to historicize, I sealed in an envelope and mailed to myself. The original I destroyed. I prefer versions of things, copies that aren't so precious. (4)

Henry's adoption of Lelia's list as a kind of personal identification symbolizes the degree to which he allows white "idioms" to define himself, the degree to which his own identity is buried under stereotypes. Calling these idioms "instant snapshots", he implies they do capture his image. The "original" is unimportant because it

is not a true original—himself—but is something scripted by (an)other. His "original" is at risk because all his life he has tried to be a "copy" of the image approved by the dominant culture. He reveals that on his first encounter with Lelia: "I did something then that I didn't know I could do. It was strangely automatic. Instantly I was thinking of the lover she might want... I made those phantom calculations... so that I might cast for her the perfect picture of a face" (13). What Henry offers Lelia is not his face but the "picture of a face".

Henry is so adept at adopting an artificial identity to suit his audience that when he is offered a job as a spy, he believes he has found "the perfect vocation... [his] truest place in the culture" (127). He has no trouble donning different masks for his different assignments, each of which requires a legend: "The legend was something each of us wrote out in preparation for any assignment. It was an extraordinarily extensive 'story' of who we were, an 'autobiography' as such (22). An autobiography is supposed to be a story of oneself; here it is unabashedly a "legend". The oxymoron of a legendary autobiography brings to mind the myriad autobiographies published by people of Asian descent in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century—works which are putatively about the (individual) author but which invariably conform to the master narrative of successful assimilation in the United States. One must therefore assume a certain tailoring of these life stories to fit popular demand. Where the performance in these personal narratives is implicit, Henry's performance is explicit. The praise Henry receives from one of his colleagues smacks of the superlatives

lavished on a Lawrence Olivier: "You were fucking magnificent!... You were brilliant. Tony, Erny, Academy-fucking-Award (42). Inverting the racist beliefs that Asians are inscrutable and cunning by nature, Lee shows that living out the American stereotype is what produces the cunning Oriental, the arch performer.

Another trait, besides the adeptness at adopting a protean identity, that predisposes Henry to being a spy is his ability to fade into the background, to refrain from asserting his presence:

I have always only ventured where I was invited or otherwise welcomed. When I was a boy, I wouldn't join any school club or organization before a member first approached me. I wouldn't eat or sleep at a friend's house if it weren't prearranged. I never assumed anyone would be generous to me, or in any way helpful. I never considered it my right to expect approval or sanction no matter what good I had done. My father always reminded me that neither he nor the world owed me a penny... So call me what you will. An assimiliist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. (160)

Once again Henry's unobtrusiveness is not intrinsic but a result of his fear of rejection by the dominant culture and of his father's mandate of self-made manhood. Henry embodies the Janus-face of the two seemingly opposite stereotypes: the model minority and the yellow peril. The duteous lackey is also the sinister spy—except that he is a spy for the dominant culture against fellow Asians. His occupation is thus a symbol of his own life. In being conscious of his complicity with the dominant culture—by playing out the stereotype—Henry is both a victim and an instrument of what the

editors of *Aiiieeeee!* have described as "racist love":

It is generally accepted as fact that Asians are well liked and accepted in American society, that they have been assimilated and acculturated and have contributed to the mainstream of American culture. There is racist hate and racist love. That is, if the system works, the stereotypes assigned to the various races are accepted by the races themselves as reality, as fact, and racist love reigns.... The secret lies in the construction of the modern stereotype... Society is conditioned to accept the given minority only within the bounds of the stereotype. The subject minority is conditioned to reciprocate by becoming the stereotype, live it, talk it, believe it, and measure group and individual worth in its terms.

(Chun et al. xxxv-xxvii)

The tragedy of Henry Park is that in constantly trying to censor himself, to know his place, to submit to the wills of others, he has become the perfect embodiment of the modern stereotype—the model minority. Henry lives in what the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* depict as "a state of euphemized self-contempt", accepting "white standards... as being morally absolute" (xxvii-xxviii).

When his son Mitt is born, Henry is secretly disappointed that he does not have more of Lelia's white features. He not only prevents Mitt from learning Korean but also refrains from teaching his son English himself so that the child can learn it from his mother—the "standard-bearer" of the language (12): "And despite Lelia's insistence that he go to Korean school on the weekends, I knew our son would never learn the old language... and my hope was that he would grow up with a singular sense of his world, a

life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not. Of course, this is assimilationist sentiment, part of my own ugly and half-blind romance with the land" (266-67). Henry's failure to be fully accepted in American culture despite his hyper-assimilation is epitomized by Mitt's death. Despite all his effort to whitewash Mitt's "half-yellow face", Mitt is exposed to racial slurs (chink, jap, gook, Charlie Chan, and mutt, mongrel, half-breed, banana, twinkie [103]) and racist violence, culminating in his death by an "accident" on his seventh birthday, when he is suffocated by a "dog pile" (105). Race, it seems, remains an unsurmountable barrier to complete acceptance. With Mitt's death, Henry is rudely and tragically awoken from his dream.

Henry's story does not simply indict the dominant culture, however. It is a cautionary tale for Asian Americans who try to "fit" into a pre-existing mold. Beaudrillard, in his discussion of simulacra, believes that what may begin as the reflection of a basic reality may eventually "mask and pervert" that reality through its mediated repetition, then mask its "absence", and finally exists as "its own pure simulacrum", bearing "no relation to any reality whatever" (170). Henry tells us that after years of performing he too has become a pure simulacrum, a perfect paper-mate:

On paper, by any known standard, I was an impeccable mate. I did everything well enough. I cooked well enough, cleaned enough, was romantic and sensitive and silly enough, I made love enough, was paternal, big brotherly, just a good friend

enough, father-to-my son enough, forlorn enough, and then even bull-headed and dull and macho enough, to make it all seamless. For ten years [Lelia] hadn't realized the breadth of what I had accomplished with my exacting competence, the daily work I did, which unto itself became an unassailable body of cover. And the surest testament to the magnificent and horrifying level of my virtuosity was that neither had I. (161)

The refrain of "well enough" brings to mind the template of the model minority. The simulacrum has taken over the original. Acting according to whatever script is handed him, Henry is unable to find a true self beneath his mimicry.

Of the three characters covered in this paper, John Kwang has the most expansive American Dream. Kwang, too, consciously performs his role as a model minority—in this instance that of an overachiever—but he also exceeds the boundaries of the stereotype. Kwang invokes the American success story—albeit with an Asian twist—for his political platform. His canvassers appeal to racially diverse constituencies: "In ten different languages you say *Kwang is like you. You will be an American*" (143). Yet Lee stresses the pains Kwang takes to bolster his American image and also the degree to which the visual factors are tailored by the media and public relations:

John Kwang dressed like a power broker. His taste for colors and fabrics was impeccable.... He had every kind of shoe for his occasions, brogans, oxfords, wing tips, Loafers, patent-leather pumps, deep-treaded boots. With his suits he mostly stayed to

the conservative, *what the people expected of him*... the American executive look, but at more internationally flavored events... you could see him working the room in something silken and double-breasted, the lines rakishly cut down to hug his youthful waist. (136, my emphasis)

Even his choice of car is dictated by political considerations: "he drove several different cars as well, and then only American models; a politician, especially an Asian-American one, doesn't have a choice in the matter" (179). Kwang must constantly project an American image, especially because he belongs to a race viewed by the dominant culture as perpetually foreign. In order to thwart the manipulations of the media, Kwang's publicity manager and her assistants (Henry included) spend an entire rainy morning doing a "walk through" of the appearance Kwang is scheduled to make the following day, conducting his precise paces and timing his stops and movements in order to forestall any attempts by the media to "sound-bite" and rearrange his comments (87). Henry remarks: "We must have looked like a small troupe of performance artists staging an imaginary event" (92). The literal "staging" of Kwang's political appearance highlights how Kwang, like Henry and his father, is performing from an existing script. He tells Henry: "When you are someone like me, you will be many people all at once... the most agile actor this land has ever know" (293).

While all politicians are to some degree actors—with roles constructed for them by their parties, their constituencies, and the media, such performance is especially tiring for an Asian American who must contend with the bounds of the model minority

stereotype on the one hand and pass for a native speaker on the other. As a member of a racial minority, Kwang—again like Henry—falls short of the cultural capital inherent in a native speaker. "For despite how well he spoke, how perfectly he moved through the sounds of his words", Henry says of Kwang's English, "I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race" (179). The passage re-emphasizes Henry's self-contempt—he cannot believe his kind can be impeccable, can be more than an imitation of the original; it also spells out the difficulty an Asian American has in being recognized as fully American. Henry continues: "There was something I still couldn't abide in [Kwang's] speech. I couldn't help but think there was a mysterious dubbing going on (179). The comment reminds us of Lelia's remarks concerning Henry's own manner of speaking: "You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker" (12). The words "dubbing" and "non-native speaker" suggest that for Kwang and Henry English is not their first, "original", language. The two characters are also un-original in the sense that they cannot simply speak their minds like a native, but must constantly monitor their own speech and performance. So much energy is devoted to image-making that Kwang feels an emptiness at the core when his political career comes abruptly to an end.

But unlike Henry's father (who pursues individual economical success) and Henry (who seeks cultural assimilation), Kwang puts himself where Asian Americans have traditionally feared to tread by being a high-profile politician. Henry remarks: "Before I knew

of him, I had never even conceived of someone like him. A Korean man... as part of the vernacular. Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family (139).

Furthermore, instead of towing a conservative party line Kwang works toward interethnic coalition and democracy for all. Instead of pitting racial minorities against one another Kwang dismantles the myth of the model minority and stresses, the common history of suffering among blacks and Koreans. Speaking to a crowd that is "an even mix of Koreans, blacks, Hispanics, Kwang attributes interethnic hostilities to self-hate:

"A young black mother of two, Saranda Harlans, is dead. Shot in the back by a Korean shopkeeper. Charles Kim, a Korean-American college student, is also dead. He was overcome by fumes trying to save merchandise in the fire-bombed store of his family..."

"So let's think together in a different way... Let us think it is the problem of a self-hate... The problem is our acceptance of what we loathe and fear in ourselves..."

"If you are listening to me now and you are Korean, and you pridefully own your own store... Know that the blacks who spend money in your store and help put food on your table and send your children to college cannot open their own stores. Why?... Because banks will not lend to them because they are black... And if they do not have the same strong community you enjoy, the one you brought with you from Korea, which can pool money and efforts for its members—it is because this community has been broken and dissolved through history. (151-52)

Saranda Harlans is an unmistakable reference to Latasha Harlans—the teenager shot by Soon Ja Du—just as Charles Kim is an indirect reference to Edward Lee, a young man shot in an accident during the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Kwang echoes the editors of Aiiieeeee! in stressing the pervasiveness of self-hate among persons of color, and how that self-hate can express itself as hostility toward members of other racial minorities, the other underdogs. Kwang is especially astute in pointing out how the social structure at large (that permits banks to refuse loans to nonwhites, for example, and allows restrictive housing covenants to prevent people of color from buying homes) is responsible for the poverty and despondency of the oppressed—not the people of a different hue next door. (For an analysis of the unequal social structure in Los Angeles, see Davis, Harris, and Lipsitz.)

Kwang effectively explodes the myth of the model minority, which would have people believe that Asian Americans succeed by virtue of their industry and that African Americans fail because of their indolence. He points out, as does Henry earlier, that it is the communal aid that immigrants have brought with them from Korea—and not American opportunity—that allows people like Henry's father to establish a foothold in the new land. But he goes further than Henry. He explains how it is not the fault of African Americans that they lack similar resources, telling how they confront a brutal legacy of enslavement, disfranchisement, and dis-entitlement. By demystifying the model minority myth Kwang also disrupts the national narrative of self-made manhood, a narrative that is often shored up by unseen capital or unarticulated

“white privilege” (see McIntosh).

Kwang then attempts to bring Korean Americans and African Americans together by invoking a shared history of the colonized:

“We Koreans know something of this [African American] tragedy. Recall the days over fifty years ago, when Koreans were made servants and slaves in their own country by the imperial Japanese Army. How our mothers and sisters were made the concubines of the very soldiers who enslaved us.

“I’m speaking of histories that all of us should know. Remember... most of all the struggles to survive with one’s own identity still strong and alive...”

“I ask that you remember these things, or know them now. Know that what we have in common, the sadness and the pain and injustice, will always be stronger than our differences. (153)

His detailed rendition of the historical subjugation of Koreans by Japanese provides another implicit critique of the model minority myth, which lumps different Asian national groups together despite their unequal power relations and uneven economic conditions. In pointing to the parallel history of blacks and Koreans, Kwang’s speech is a far cry from those who believe in shooting black people as part of their Americanization. Instead Kwang suggests how racial minorities who are physically so different from each other can be made to feel a sense of kinship by virtue of their common tribulations. No less important, he believes in the legacy of surviving “with one’s own identity still strong and alive”, rather than the imperative to melt or “evaporate” into the mainstream. As Henry’s case illustrates, the identity crisis for Korean Americans is

no less acute now than for Koreans over fifty years ago. Kwang’s emphasis on the souls of black and Korean folks also implicitly decries the various masks of the model minority.

In daring to dismantle the divisive myth of the model minority and to call for a common struggle against the dominant culture, Kwang ventures beyond the conventional boundaries for Asian Americans. But his excessive ambition is also his bane. As pointed out earlier, there is only a thin line between the model minority and the yellow peril, between Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. There is a strong sense among whites and nonwhites in the novel that Kwang is overreaching himself. It is as though everyone were watching Kwang with bated breath, waiting for the moment of his inevitable slip—linguistically and morally. When Kwang finally goes amiss, his downfall is swift and irretrievable. The actual reason of his fall, the narrative implies, is less important than the fact that it is inevitable. Suffice it to note that Kwang’s reputation is completely destroyed after a small conflagration in his office that kills his Hispanic aide and a cleaning woman (a firebombing that is revealed later to be the work of Kwang’s own affiliates) and after a car collision that echoes the one in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*—another novel about the elusiveness of the American Dream. Kwang’s auto accident is caused by his excessive drinking, and the “hospitality girl” who is his passenger remains in a coma after the accident (322). The media attention that has “made” Kwang now “unmakes” him: “with the barrage of questions and arc lights and auto winders he actually falters.... He doesn’t seem to be occupying the office, the position” (293). The “flash pictures”

of Kwang "leaving a downtown precinct house after his bail is posted are faint echoes of his once perfect image: "They have him walking away in half-profile, from the back, from the side, his suit jacket unfurled, suggesting flight... His tie is unknotted and his hair is dampened and mussed and he has a gauze patch taped above his left temple... the whole effect of him vapid and dislodged.... The shots are nearly criminal (321). Henry tells us that his deceased mother.

would have called John Kwang a fool long before any scandal ever arose. She would never have understood why he needed more than the money he made selling dry-cleaning equipment... What did he want from this country? Didn't he know he could only get so far with his face so different and broad. In turn, she'd proudly hold up my father as the best example of our people. (333)

Henry ponders on the difference between Kwang and his father, who comes to know that the sky was never the limit, that "the truer height for him was more like a handful of vegetable stores" (333). Different as their ambitions are, what Henry's father, Henry, and Kwang have in common is their betrayal of themselves in their attempt to make it in the U.S. Speaking for all immigrants, the narrator observes: "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" (279). Here the narrator reveals the underside of the work ethic attributed to the model minority.

Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* is a refreshing departure from

the plethora of success stories in Asian American literature. As suggested earlier, trade publishers have historically shown a predilection for Asian American personal narratives that stress the ability of Asian Americans to assimilate and accommodate, narratives that have collectively contributed to the current image of Asian Americans as the model minority. Although the recent works touted by the mainstream are more multifarious in content and genre, many of them still fall under what David Palumbo-Liu calls "model minority discourse": "The most popular texts tend to be perceived as resolutions to a generalized 'problem' of race, ethnicity, and gender.... There is, therefore, a doubleness in Asian American literary texts, which serve as representatives of an eccentric 'ethnic' literature as well as models of successful assimilation into the core" (395-96). Lee's novel, by contrast, is a dark reflection of the American Dream and a trenchant critique of the stereotype of the Asian American model minority, a stereotype that constrains each of the three characters analyzed to the norms, the ideals, the linguistic and racial hierarchy, the image-making and political maneuvering of the dominant society. The novel not only explodes the myth of model minority but also reveals the original American success story—the national narrative positing that anyone can make it on their own—to be void at the core. Much in the way that drag performance exposes the constructedness of gender, the performances of the three characters in *Native Speaker* expose the stereotype and the national narrative for what they are—regulative fiction.

Asian Americans who try to measure up to the stereotype or to the American success story may find themselves turning into a

simulacrum riddled with self-contempt. Such self-hate can become projected onto other people of color, who are regarded similarly as being inferior copies. The character John Kwang holds out the tantalizing possibility of interethnic coalition and cooperation. Instead of endorsing the American master narrative of success—through economic advancement, cultural assimilation, or political power—the novel implicitly urges Asian Americans and other people of color to recover from self-hate by authoring their own scripts or even collaborating on some new legends.

Native Speaker itself, in departing from the tradition of Asian American success stories, signals a new point of departure for Asian American literature and attests to the possibility of breaking out of the mold of “model minority discourse”. At first sight the author seems tame and likeable enough to a general reader by virtue of his lyrical prose, his command of Western classics, his mastery of understatement and his refrain from any open protest. For several months the novel was on the bestseller list. However, the protagonist seems to speak for the author in his apostrophe to his American education:

We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (320)

The passage calls attention to Lee's own double-voiced discourse. Beneath the lyrical modes of *Native Speaker* is a song furious and sad. The English language, the American education that has enabled the Asian American writer has also interpellated him as an alien, racially marked subject, or an assimiliist, a lackey. Like a double agent, Lee penetrates the language like a native speaker and uses his dual consciousness to dismantle the American myths of success, of the melting pot, and of the model minority.

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