"Visions of me in the whitest raw light": Assimilation and Doxic Whiteness in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker

Tim Engles
Eastern Illinois University, tdengles@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Engles, Tim, ""Visions of me in the whitest raw light": Assimilation and Doxic Whiteness in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker" (1997).
Faculty Research & Creative Activity. S2.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac/52

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
"Visions of me in the whitest raw light": Assimilation and Doxic Whiteness in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

Tim Engles

In Chang-rae Lee's first novel, *Native Speaker*, the protagonist is jolted by the death of his son and the subsequent departure of his wife into intensification of a lifelong identity crisis. The book's guiding metaphor, figured in Henry Park's job as a spy, cleverly elucidates the immigrant's stance as a watchful outsider in American society, but Henry's double life also figures largely in his equally representative struggles to decide for himself what kind of person he is. As a child of immigrant parents, Henry is, in Pierre Bourdieu's useful terms, endowed with a bifurcated "habitus," two sets of culturally induced predispositions. By novel's end Henry has achieved an implicit resolution of his crisis, largely by identifying certain of his own habitual patterns of thought and behavior as cultural inheritances from his immigrant Korean parents, then rejecting them.

As with many works in which central characters move throughout the story toward new conceptions of their own identities, it is tempting to read Henry's self-recognition as something he attains on his own by critiquing his conception of himself from some neutral space outside its borders. As Henry puts it in an aside on his work, he chose the field of spying because it seemed "the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in one place and take half steps out whenever he wished [. . .] I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture" (127). However, while Henry does make a determined effort throughout his account to come to terms with his own identity, his outward movements toward a seemingly objective, private perspective are indeed but "half-steps." As I will argue throughout this paper, while Henry does register at times the recognition that he can never be fully objective about the effects Korean culture has had on him, he seems oblivious to the effects middle-class white culture has had on him. Immersed as every American is in a sea of undeclared whiteness, Henry reveals that he has tended to adopt unwittingly a middle-class white perspective on himself, a tendency only heightened by his marriage to a white woman, Lelia.
Doxic Whiteness

That Henry's adoption of this perspective on himself goes largely unacknowledged should come as no surprise, given the relative indiscernibility of middle-class white culture itself. As George Lipsitz notes, "as the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (369). As many cultural and literary critics have begun to discover, and as Henry's blindness to the whiteness buried within this self-appraisal demonstrates, whiteness is difficult to detect and delineate because it organizes both social relations and individual conceptions of identity "by seeming not to be anything in particular." Bourdieu's conception of "doxa" offers a useful heuristic with which to conceptualize whiteness. Bourdieu defines doxa as "that which is taken for granted...the established cosmological and political order [which] is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned..." (166). Bourdieu's coinage distinguishes doxa "from orthodox or heterodox belief [which imply] awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs" (169). Whiteness can function as a form of doxa, then, by means of a "primal state of innocence," an acceptance of its own terms as not terms that have been established in the course of human interactions, but rather as the way things just "naturally" are and ought to be. This is not to say that within mainstream American social relations the "self-evident and natural order" necessarily constitutes exclusively the ways of all middle-class white Americans, nor that these ways have not been fully influenced by and, in many cases, appropriated from other cultures and subcultures. Acceptable, mainstream American behavior and mores are doxically white in that they match most closely what have become the ways of most middle-class white Americans, while their status as such tends to pass unmarked.

Henry's efforts to reify and eventually reject certain "Korean" parts of his identity must take place from somewhere "outside" of his Korean American cultural frame, for as Julio Cortazor notes, "Nothing can be denounced if the
denouncing is done within the system that belongs to the thing denounced."2 Also, as Lee himself has described the novel, Henry can be said to become a "native speaker of his self" in the process,3 a person who has fulfilled the urge Elaine Kim sees in Asian American literature toward "inventing a new identity, defining ourselves according to the truth instead of a racial fantasy" (147). However, it is my contention here that Henry achieves no such autonomy. If we are to understand more fully the process by which Henry attains what he appears to consider (and what has been read as) a satisfying resolution of his identity crisis, we must position ourselves so that we can perceive Henry's acquiescence to the unspoken designations doxic whiteness makes of how people ought to think and act. We can then perceive the true costs of America's persistently assimilationist sentiment as exposed by Lee, and we can further establish as our goal the project of "speaking" this native aspect of American experience that Henry leaves enshrouded in silence, as well as the steps a person in his position might take toward achieving something closer to an independently constructed conception of himself.

Lelia: The Most Significant White Other

As Charles Taylor has noted, conceptions of self can only be formed dialogically, "as we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things significant others want to see in us" (79). Henry's evolving sense of his own identity is largely shaped by his current and recollected interactions with a host of significant others, most particularly his wife Lelia, the Korean American politician John Kwang, and his own father. By sensitively delineating emblematic instances of the attraction and repulsion Henry feels to each of these figures in his life, Lee's novel succeeds in exposing a tension in America between (in Bakhtinian terms) the dominant culture's centripetal assimilationist sentiment and its centrifugal, stratifying tendency to hold people of color at arm's length. Lee also reveals the price many second-generation Asian Americans pay by presenting a Korean American character who achieves an illusory sense of wholeness in response to these forces by virtually severing himself from the culture of his parents. Largely in response to the caring but disgruntled proddings of his wife and his own subsequent
disappointment over the failed promise of John Kwang, Henry casts his supposed emotional reticence as a cultural inheritance that has kept him from sympathizing with the pain of others, allowing him to exploit minority targets for the shadowy clients of his employer. By novel's end he would seem to have attained a newfound empathy and an ability to express it, but this new self-conception entails neglect of other aspects of his identity that could well be viewed as positive cultural inheritances.

As the novel opens, Henry recalls being left at the airport with the implicit suggestion of Lelia's cryptic list, her "visions of [him] in the whitest raw light," that he think more deeply about who and what he is (1). Because Henry goes on to do so, he finds himself increasingly unable to enact adequately the role-playing skills called for by his work as a spy. This slippage had already started by the time Lelia left; Henry remembers that during his assignment posing as the patient of a Filipino psychiatrist and "Marcos sympathizer," his employer had had to pull him from the job because he had "nearly blown cover" (21). Prone before an extremely sympathetic listener (at one point Henry remembers Dr. Luzan holding his hand), Henry the spy had been unable to maintain his intricate fictional identity, or as his Glimmer and Company cohorts call it, his "legend." He began, he says, "freely talking about my life, suddenly breaching the confidences of my father and my mother and my wife. I even spoke to him about a dead son" (22). As the spying trope suggests, of course, and as Henry comes to realize, he has worked throughout his marriage and throughout his life to construct a plausible "legend" of himself as Henry Park, son, husband, father, and so on. Lelia's subsequent decision to leave him, coupled with the blunt appraisals in her list, have accelerated the accompanying process of his own anxious, lifelong self-examination, resulting in further erosion of his efforts as a mole within John Kwang's nascent mayoral campaign. Less overt in this new phase of this process, though, is the importance he places on Lelia who, as a representative, motivating figure of whiteness, is the largely unacknowledged locus of judgment for the various "Korean" aspects of his identity that he brings to light.

It is tempting, of course, to read Henry's pattern of return to Lelia throughout his narrative as a manifestation of his lonely longing for their former intimacy (an intimacy that Lelia has come to doubt ever actually existed). Indeed, several reviewers have read the book as in large part a love song by Henry to his wife,
as it "begins and ends with Lelia" (Choi 34). Also, while the novel's shift to present-tense narration baffled or irritated several critics, it occurs just as Henry and Lelia achieve a reconciliation, the immediacy of present-tense narration signaling Henry's jubilant revitalization. Henry obviously does care deeply for his wife, but again, lurking within his attraction is his unspoken reliance on her as a speculum of whiteness, a figure who helps him focus the normative lens through which he views various apparently "Korean" aspects of his background. As she considers Henry, Henry's father, and Korean culture from her undefined, unspoken perspective, Lelia expresses discomfort and occasional dismay over such aspects of Henry's character as his tendency toward silence, his emotional reserve, and his apparently unquestioning acceptance of certain Confucian social roles and their expectations. Lelia most fully clarifies these critiques of her husband's character during her visits to the home of his father; Henry in turn often codifies certain aspects of his upbringing as manifestations of Korean culture by recalling his wife's reactions to apparent elements of his upbringing. Lelia's various expressions of discontent with Henry's character, along with Henry's dialogical negotiation with various other sites of expectation, prompt him into reification, consideration, and eventual rejection of these "Korean" traits.

The Dialogics of Inscrutable Whiteness

That Lelia regards Henry's behavior from a middle-class white American cultural perspective is evident almost as soon as the two meet. As they escape to a park from a hot, crowded party, she makes several frank observations regarding Henry's seemingly self-conscious behavior. "'You look like someone listening to himself,'" she tells him. "'You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker'" (12). Henry notes that Lelia often spoke later of the early days in their relationship, wondering if there were "traits or habits of personality that we had too readily dismissed, too easily obliged" (13). Henry's intensified consideration of his own identity throughout his account indicates his acquiescence to Lelia's eventual, implicit contention that certain of his traits and habits should no longer be "obliged," and, even more implicitly, that hers are beyond question. "Lelia is mostly wonderful," Henry reports (158), and she clearly is motivated by a concern for her husband's emotional well-being and a desire to keep their marriage intact.
Henry goes on to say, however, apparently without intended irony, that Lelia "has her shortcomings, certainly, but I won't go into them because once you start ticking things off they just keep going until they take on a life of their own, which neither truth nor good intention can withstand" (158). The irony, of course, is that Lelia's discontent with certain of Henry's traits and habits does "take on a life" of its own, becoming an integral, focusing component within Henry's identity quest.

One of Henry's characteristics, a trait that Lelia's social background largely discourages, becomes apparent during their first kiss. When Lelia pauses to ask Henry if he is enjoying it, he smiles and asks if she can't tell. "'No,' she said, now aroused, 'I really can't'" (13). While Henry's apparent emotional inscrutability excites Lelia at first, it becomes an irritation for her throughout their marriage, expanding into something unbearable when Henry displays such apparent control even after their son Mitt's death. Henry's portrayal of his wife suggests that she has made sincere efforts to understand him, and by extension the culture of his parents, but it becomes clear that Lelia's main motivation eventually becomes her discomfort with what she perceives as her husband's excessive emotional reticence, something that she claims renders him an "emotional alien" (5). Less willing than her husband to consider that which has shaped her own perspective, Lelia seems to consider her non-alien, "native" perspective beyond question. From this position, she helps Henry cast his reticence as a cultural inheritance from his Korean parents, most particularly during their stays at his father's house.

Prior to discussion of the most significant of these visits, the one during which Lelia solidifies her conception of certain Korean attitudes as untenable, it is worth noting here that Native Speaker is laden with metaphorical imagery, nearly as much so as another allegorized depiction of a racial identity search, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. In each novel, an extensive symbolic network highlights various aspects of the protagonist's racially-inflected identity crisis. In Native Speaker, one strand of this network consists of a series of geographical images that work to suggest various aspects of what amount to Henry's ruminations on the human desire for intimacy, ruminations prompted by Lelia's increasing discomfort with his apparent emotional inscrutability. Lelia's restless interest in probing and explaining the landscape of Henry's character is figured at one point in his comment regarding his wife's
preparations for her island vacation that she is "a woman of maps. She had dozens of them...Her routes, stenciled in thick deep blue, embarked inward, toward an uncharted grave center...She had already marked out a score of crosses that seemed to say 'You are here!'" (3, emphasis in original). Lelia seeks to "map out" the contours of Henry's character in search of who (or where) he is, largely through analysis of his apparently Korean traits. She remains largely oblivious, however, to the subjective, middle-class whiteness framing her judgments of a person inscribed with the imprints of another culture. Henry's initial response to Lelia, prone as he already is to self-appraisal, is to be attracted to someone so apparently interested in his identity.

Lelia's discomfort over Henry's reluctance to express himself emotionally leads him to ruminate on the subject of human connections, searching for the sources of his own apparent tendency toward emotional closure. Henry casts this subject in terms of another geographical metaphor, islands. As Lelia leaves for the Mediterranean, for instance, Henry tells her that she's "just trading islands," his figure of speech acknowledging the validity of her complaints about his emotional isolation (3). After describing the horrific death of his son, he suggests the impossibility of ever achieving intimacy when he writes that "we are the living, strewn about in the lengthy expanse of an archipelago, too far to call one another, too far to see" (106). His implication at novel's end, though, is that thanks in large part to Lelia, he is finally able to reach out to other people, having decided that as islands, we need to construct bridges of intimacy and empathy between ourselves and others. Before doing so, he goes through an arduous examination of what he comes to perceive as his habitual, culturally induced reluctance to do so.

Thus, largely as a result of contact with middle-class white American culture throughout his upbringing, followed by marriage with an imprinted bearer of this culture, Henry describes himself as a person who cannot react appropriately to stressful situations: "When real trouble hits, I lock up. I can't work the trusty calculus. I can't speak. I sit there, unmoved. For a person like Lelia, who grew up with hollerers and criers, mine is the worst response. It must look as if I'm not even trying" (158). Henry also recalls that when he first met Lelia, he decided she was a person who "could really speak" (10), and the implication of the novel's extensive concern with speech has been taken to be that while Lelia is able to express herself emotionally and thus "speak" truly
and accurately of what she is feeling, Henry can begin to do so only at the end, finally becoming "a native speaker of his self." However, such a critical assessment of emotional reserve would be unlikely within the context of Korean culture. Significantly, Henry reports that his strongest attraction to Lelia is her opposite tendency: "She must be the worst actor on earth. And perhaps most I loved this about her, her helpless way, love it still, how she can't hide a single thing, that she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy. That I know at every moment the precise place where she stands" (158).

Henry recalls that in contrast, his parents seemed to be constantly acting, ever conscious of the impression they were making on others. Those times when he himself has trouble understanding the behavior of his parents occur largely because he regards them unwittingly from a middle-class white perspective, detaching them from the context of Korean cultural influence in the process. If we are to gain a more objective understanding of the judgments Henry makes, we must consider the behavior of such people as Henry's immigrant parents within the fuller context of Korean culture, mores, and traditions. While doing so, though, we must also bear in mind Laura Uba's admonition that not all immigrant behavior can be explained by reference to a former culture, and that "some Korean immigrants adhere less strongly to Korean values in the United States than they did in Korea; other Korean immigrants adhere to traditional Korean values more strongly than their former patriots do in Korea" (20). Thus, while the vicissitudes of individual experience render precise explanations for Korean immigrant behavior impossible, we can still gain a greater general understanding of it, and of Henry's countervailing adoption of middle-class whiteness as a basis for judgment, by delineating certain relevant, explanatory elements and principles of the Korean cultural context.

Like Father, Unlike Son

As portrayed in Henry's dramatized, emblematic memories, Lelia also feels compelled to reflect on Henry's parents, and as with Henry, her scrutiny is motivated by connections she seeks to make between Henry's inclinations and those of his parents. She makes her most explicit connections between her
husband's "traits or habits of personality" (13) and what she perceives as Korean traits during their summer stays at the home of Henry's father. Henry reports that much to his surprise, his father had acquiesced rather quickly to Henry's engagement with a white woman, eventually welcoming the budding family into his home for extended visits. Lelia gets along well with her father-in-law, but she has reservations about him, one of which she has worked up into a solid "gripe." Henry writes that "the one complaint she'll make" about his father arises when Henry "lock(s) up" in moments of stress or trouble, thereby performing what she calls his "father's act" (158). Lelia's complaints at such moments give voice again to her culture's disdain for what it deems sullen behavior. Having already been prodded by interactions with the more vocally expressive members of middle-class white culture into reification of Korean emotional reserve as an undesirable trait of his own, Henry's depictions of this trait are enhanced by another set of metaphorical images, the closely described details of various types of housing and shelter. The house of Henry's father, for instance, with its "single-paned window in the shape of a face" (66), represents this Korean immigrant in several of its details.

Henry recalls that by working relentlessly, his father had managed to acquire a home in a relatively exclusive, largely white suburb of New York City. Various details of this house are related in such a way that they enhance both sympathetic and critical observations Henry makes of his parents. For example, the position of the immigrant, forced to adopt to a new culture while clinging to vestiges of the old, is figured in Henry's description of their house as a "split-level" (61). This and other descriptions of architectural detail form a significant metaphorical strand within Henry's ruminations on immigrant life. The implications of Henry's description of his parents' house as a "split-level" acquire resonance when coupled with their echo in the description of the "split-level" home of another immigrant, Henry's co-worker Jack Kozantokas, whose house is further described as "the kind of house [Henry] knew best, the one immigrants must dream about" (34); located within the constellation of such images throughout the novel, the suggestion is that such a house represents the bifurcated immigrant "dream" of achieving success in America while holding onto various traditions, values, and habits from the old country. Lee's novel succeeds in suggesting to the contrary, however, the difficulty of achieving such a dream in the face of the subtly insistent pressures urging American minorities to assimilate.
In a more specific way, the house of Henry's upbringing is rendered emblematic of his parents themselves, carefully maintaining the facade they display for the public while occupying their apparent roles in American society. A "tiny secret room... tucked behind a false panel" can be taken to represent his father's "real" self, lurking within the scrupulously maintained persona he has constructed for public view (66). His careful maintenance of this persona is suggested by Henry's memory of cleaning the exterior of the house with him, scouring away blemishes in the "bug screens" (75). The connection between this action and his father as a specifically Korean man is further suggested by Henry's description of his father assuming a distinctly Korean posture while doing so, "balancing on his flat feet with his armpits locked over his knees and his forearms working between them in front" (75). Western observers are often struck by this distinctly Korean posture, commonly assumed (mostly in smaller towns and rural areas of Korea these days) by Koreans as they wait for buses or trains and as they do various sorts of work on the ground; the flattened feet make it an especially difficult position for those not raised in Korea to assume. Indeed, Henry himself, having already taken steps towards the construction of his own, non-Korean public persona and having also already adopted the dominant culture's critical view of his parents, retreats from public view to the privacy of his own bedroom to try out this "strangely apelike" position, "to see if the posture came naturally to us Parks, to us Koreans. It didn't" (75). As a child, then, Henry was already actively engaged in the cultural analysis in regards to himself that he fully enacts throughout the novel as an adult, parsing out the differences between habitual, culturally induced behavior and supposedly "natural," but more often than not middle-class white American, behavior. Again, however, Henry is only scrutinizing one side of his bifurcated, Korean American cultural inheritance; that most Americans have adopted the habit of squatting on their toes rather than their flattened feet does not make doing so any more "natural," any less of a culturally induced predisposition.

The episode of cleaning the household exterior is rendered as one of the novel's few moments of levity when Henry remembers horsing around with his father and the water hose, but the memory remains tinged by its emblematic function within Henry's network of cultural critique as focused on his parents. Henry's motivation for this critique is again a search for specifically Korean cultural inscriptions within himself. That Henry does see himself as a bearer of this tendency to maintain meticulously the features of his own persona is suggested by Lelia's early note of his self-conscious behavior, and by his detailed description of another habit he enacts while living with Lelia. In another act of
structural maintenance, Henry "roam(s) the apartment...trying knobs, the window locks"; significantly, he does so after hearing from his boss that he'll be assigned to John Kwang despite his poor maintenance of his facade on the job with Dr. Luzan (23). Thus, because his lifelong self-appraisal takes place largely from a perspective shaped by doxic whiteness, Henry casts himself as a bearer of this cultural tendency to "lock up" and conceal his true emotions, thoughts, and intentions within an inscrutable facade. He also casts this tendency itself as precisely what he and Lelia are trying to unlock, a problem "ever urgent" for them, "the big one" (158).

The Transparent Mask of Whiteness

An elucidating moment for Lelia in her project of "mapping out" the inner landscape beneath her husband's supposedly inscrutable facade occurs at the climax of her foiled attempts to probe beneath the surface of another Korean. During a summer visit to the home of Henry's boyhood, Lelia tries to get to know "Ahjuhma," a woman brought from Korea to take care of Henry and his father after the death of Henry's mother. Ahjuhma is not this woman's name, but rather a form of address roughly equivalent to "ma'am" in English. Henry's use of this term instead of this woman's name becomes for Henry and Lelia a crucial example of cultural difference. Henry recalls that as a child he was baffled by this woman on the night she arrived, and that his incomprehension was only furthered by his father's initial reenactment of his habitual refusal as a Korean authority figure to explain his decisions and actions to a subordinate, his son. Life undoubtedly proceeds a bit more smoothly with a Korean American son, though, when the Korean immigrant father does accede occasionally to demands for explanation of various rules and regulations; having brought this woman into the same house as his undeniably Americanized son, Henry's father does feel some compulsion to explain her presence to him. Significantly, because explaining his actions to a subordinate is a demand made of this Korean man from a person largely imprinted by interaction within a non-Korean cultural context, he unconsciously slips into a non-Korean language (English) to do so. Henry has thus succeeded, however minimally and briefly, in adjusting the rules within his father's house into closer alignment with those of the larger American social context. However, when Henry refuses to accept Ahjuhma's presence, as well as the sudden news that
the three of them will be moving into a bigger house, his father reconfigures the social context and its rules back to a Korean context by reverting to his native language to announce the unquestionable authority of his decision: "Let's not hear one more thing about it...This is what I have decided. Our talk is beyond usefulness. There will be no other way" (64 emphasis in original). That Henry is much more "Americanized" than his father is also discernible in his subsequent reactions to Ahjuhma, whom he "sometimes...thought was some kind of zombie" (65). It is quite understandable, given the lack of explanation offered by the significant others of his upbringing who bear the imprints of Korean culture, that Henry would reach out to bearers of the middle-class white perspective instead, since they do vocalize their own, albeit uninformed, interpretations of Ahjuhma. The young Henry, unable to fit her into his incomplete Korean interpretive framework, occasionally listens sympathetically to the perspective offered by his "talkative white friends" instead (65).

Enacting as a teenager the budding skills he later converts to cultural capital in his career, Henry and a friend spy on Ahjuhma during one of her regular forays into the village of Ardsley. "She's a total alien," Henry's friend observes, reinforcing Henry's own impressions. "She's completely bizarre" (78). Henry also remembers that the only time he ever saw her "dressed up" was on the day he graduated from high school: "She looked like a huge trout," he recalls, further dehumanizing her (79). Rather than sympathize with his hardworking father's attempts to adjust to American notions of "dressing up," and rather than realizing that doing so properly in Korea would not pose fashion problems for either his father or Ahjuhma, Henry recalls that "My father had horrible taste" (79). Henry's estimation of Ahjuhma, of his father's treatment of her, and by extension of certain aspects of Korean culture, are all cast with the help of a critical, normative white perspective, one which does not encourage him to consider as well certain explanatory elements of Korean culture, consideration of which would certainly soften his judgments.

Henry is again thrust into consideration of who and what Ahjuhma is during his summer stays with Lelia and Mitt in his father's house. Lelia is initially intrigued by this relatively silent, seemingly mysterious woman. Her interest is eventually sharpened by the connection she makes between Henry's apparent lack of genuine concern for Ahjuhma, which she comes to see as fostered by
Korean culture because of Ahjuhma's subservient position, and the possibility that Henry regards herself, his own wife, in a similar way. Lelia makes this connection one night when she asks Henry for details about this woman he has lived with for years, and he repeatedly admits his ignorance. Lelia's mounting incredulity reaches a peak when Henry admits that he doesn't know her name. Interestingly, when Henry posits himself in dialogic relation to his father, predispositions instilled by interaction within the dominant cultural context tend to emerge; when he sets himself in such a relation to his white wife, he often enacts in his responses predispositions instilled by the Korean habitus. Here, Henry ponders the differences between white and Korean perspectives on such matters, explaining for his readers that he "couldn't blame" Lelia for her lack of understanding, for not knowing that "there weren't moments in our language – the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants – when the woman's name could have naturally come out. Or why it wasn't important" (69). Lee carefully marks Lelia's perspective here as a specifically white one by having Henry describe her "long Scottish face" as she continues to voice her disbelief in his "stunning ignorance" (69, 68). Significantly, though, Henry fails to provide Lelia with explanatory details of the Korean cultural context that would surely soften her condemnation, as well as the condemnations Henry eventually makes of parts of his own cultural inheritance. As a result of his own leanings toward the middle-class white perspective on Ahjuhma, Henry does little to counter his wife's assertion that Ahjuhma is another isolated, island-like figure, "an abandoned girl. But all grown up" (72). However, Lee the author does eventually provide countering evidence to Lelia's conclusion that Ahjuhma's life is one of tragic, socially enforced solitude.

As part of the novel's constellation of mask imagery, which on the whole works subtly to suggest Henry's growing alertness to that which lies beneath the surfaces people present to others, Henry focuses repeatedly on people's faces. His description of Lelia's visage in this scene suggests that she has achieved a harsh initiation into Korean ways, her tear-swollen face no longer striking Henry as Scottish but instead "almost Asian" (73). Lelia has decided with something close to horror that if Henry's father "switched [Ahjuhma] now with someone else, probably nothing would be different" because both Henry and his father seem to regard her as nothing more than a servant (70). Lelia also wonders whether or not she herself represents little more than an easily replaceable wife figure to Henry, who declares morosely that "This was the way, the very slow way, that our conversations were spoiling" (70). Architectural metaphors again say more than Henry does here; Lelia retreats to
the tiny room with "the face-shaped window," and the metaphor is further stressed half a page later when we are told at the peak of her enlightenment regarding Ahjuhma that "she looked out the window" (71, 72). The implication is that she now occupies and thus understands something about the position of Henry's immigrant father, whom the house also represents, by having gained insight into a darker aspect of Korean culture. A great irony lies, however, in Henry's inability to see that on the contrary, Lelia fully retains her white "face" or facade here, having condemned Korean culture's handling of this woman, and by extension all Korean women, from a middle-class white perspective. In other words, in her rush to equate the relationship between Ahjuhma and two Korean men with her own relationship with a Korean man, Lelia does not perceive that despite how harshly such a woman would probably have been treated in Korea, the connection between Ahjuhma and Henry's father is not a case of ruthless, dehumanizing exploitation. Awareness of certain elements of Korean culture, beyond those offered Lelia by Henry and those offered Henry by his father, as well as consideration of certain clues to the relationship between Ahjuhma and the elder Park that Henry himself chooses to overlook, suggest that both Lelia and Henry render their extensive judgments of Ahjuhma's presence in America on the basis of limited, decontextualized evidence.

While Henry tells us that he has wondered about Ahjuhma's past, "imagining that something deeply horrible had happened to her when she was young," he neglects to pick up the clue offered by the "deep pockmarks stippling her high, fleshy cheeks, like the scarring from a mistreated bout of chickenpox or smallpox" (66, 62). Unwilling to search extensively for explanatory elements within the Korean social context that may have led to Ahjuhma's removal to America, Henry fails to consider that such a woman would undoubtedly have had a difficult time finding a husband in Korea, where, especially in the 1960s and earlier, spinsterhood was akin to a failed life. The primary recourse open to such women, who were thought to have shamed their families by being unmarriageable, was to work at various forms of menial labor, giving to their families whatever excess earnings they could muster. For such a woman, flight to the relative comfort Ahjuhma achieves in America could well have been a welcome alternative to her choices in Korea. It may be difficult from an outsider's perspective to counter Lelia's assessment that Ahjuhma is but an "abandoned girl . . . all grown up," but a culturally informed interpretation would counter Lelia's condemnation of the relationship between Ahjuhma and Henry's father, the crux of her condemnation of such supposed traits in Henry.
Instead of seeing the elder Park as a dehumanizing exploiter of immigrant labor (something Henry himself considers his father while pondering his treatment as a businessman of newly arrived Korean laborers), we can expand on the clues Henry unwittingly offers to the possibility of a benevolent, mutually satisfying relationship between Henry's father and Ahjuhma.

That Henry thinks of the relationship between these two as little more than a business arrangement is apparent when Lelia asks him if the two are friends. Henry replies, "I doubt it," as unable in Lelia's presence as she is to discern any affection between the two (68). On the contrary, though, Henry recalls several pages later that during his visits back home from college, he had seen evidence that the two did enjoy spending time together, working in the garden side by side and "seem(ing) to want it that way" (80). Henry also recalls fairly explicit evidence that the two spent time together at night behind the closed door of his father's bedroom (79). He reports, however, that when Lelia asked about this possibility, he "had to answer, 'Maybe,'" leaving unexplained why he had difficulty giving this answer (68). What goes unspoken here is further explanation of just what Henry accepts as being unacceptable about this possibility: either that part of Ahjuhma's duties include sexual services for Henry's father, or that the two share a mutually satisfying intimacy. The former possibility would only bolster Lelia's condemnation of Ahjuhma's subservient presence in this house, and the latter would strike her as inexplicable because the two do not otherwise act, in white American ways, as if they care for each other. Henry, ever more sympathetic to the uninformed middle-class white perspective than the Korean one, and most particularly when it focuses on decontextualized manifestations of Korean culture, couches his responses to Lelia's curiosity about this issue in muted, acquiescent terms. Henry favors the middle-class white perspective here, then, by sharing in Lelia's indignation regarding the possibility of an intimate relationship between Henry's father and Ahjuhma, as well as by accepting Lelia's extension of such indignation into her judgment of himself as a person who needs to shrug off certain restraints instilled in him by Korean culture. In the process, as I have been arguing, Henry not only decontextualizes certain elements of Korean culture, reifying them into undesirable traits of his own, he also neglects by doing so appreciation of other cultural inheritances which could be considered positive.
Throughout his account, then, Henry focuses with increasing clarity on his apparently inherited reserve; his tendency to "lock up"; his supposed inability to display his emotions; and even, perhaps, his supposedly inherited tendency to regard his wife as less than a human being. Because he looks at these tendencies from middle-class white perspective, he downplays or overlooks various behavioral manifestations of his contact with Korean culture. Among the more significant of his cultural inheritances is the emphasis placed in Korean culture on silent gestures, as well as an accompanying emphasis on heightened sensitivity to emotional cues, cues which strike most Americans as severely attenuated. Though his inclination toward a middle-class white perspective steers him away from reifying them as cultural inheritances, these markedly Korean predispositions have also been instilled in Henry. Henry's emotional reticence, for instance, while judged negatively by both Henry and Lelia as a culturally imposed silence, would be deemed a perfectly "natural" and even positive attribute within Korean culture, as well as a subtle, highly versatile form of communication. As King-Kok Cheung notes in Articulate Silences, her insightful study of the recognition expressed in the work of three Asian American writers that silence is often emphasized in Asian and Asian American cultures as a form of communication, "Silence can be a direct consequence of prohibition. But it also carries other functions and meanings that vary with individuals and cultures" (3). Henry recalls that as a child he had compared his family to "white" families, wondering as he did so why expressions of love and affection in his own family were so comparatively muted. "When I was a teenager," he tells Lelia at one point, "I so wanted to be familiar and friendly with my parents like my white friends were with theirs [. . .] I wanted just once for my mother and father to relax a little bit with me. Not treat me so much like a son, like a figure in a long line of figures. They treated each other like that, too. Like it was their duty and not their love." (221)

Again, this is a critical perspective on Korean aspects of his upbringing Henry would have difficulty forming were the interpretive perspective of whiteness not within reach. Henry and Lelia's overall approach to his "problem" is marred by their decontextualized pitting of certain white family ways against certain Korean family ways. Again, what goes unacknowledged within Henry's
dialogical negotiation between the perspectives offered by middle-class white American and Korean cultures is his favoring of one side, and in particular his adoption of that side's oversimplifying tendency to judge decontextualized bits of apparent cultural evidence (which is not to suggest that viewers from the Korean perspective don't tend to do the same). In the process, Henry loses sight of aspects of his Korean heritage that he would likely valorize otherwise, such as the emphasis placed in his family on silent but meaningful gestures.

Having adopted the dominant culture's emphasis on spoken expression, Henry also neglects consideration of a certain sensitivity such a person as himself would no doubt have developed to unspoken forms of expression. In a culture that values various forms of reticence instead of seeing them as pathological indicators, people necessarily develop an accompanying acuity for more subtle indices of emotion. This sensitivity is especially encouraged in cultures (like that of Korea) which stress in every communicative interaction the primacy of vertical, hierarchical relationships over horizontal, egalitarian ones. The various levels of formality embedded within the Korean language itself make speaking to another person very awkward if one does not first determine that person's social or familial position in relation to oneself. While speakers of Western languages also habitually use markers of recognized social status (e.g., formal and informal pronouns in French, the use of first names and honorific vocatives in English, and so on), such markers are a more foregrounded feature of social discourse within such rigidly hierarchical cultures as that of Korea. Members of such cultures thus need to develop an acute ability to pick up on, among other things, the subtle cues and gestures which indicate the relative rankings of others, especially of those "above" themselves. Henry's closely observed descriptions of nearly every person he knows indicate that such a sensitivity is part of his cultural inheritance, but he downplays the significance of this aspect of his character that actually serves him, among other ways, as a valuable form of transferred cultural capital - having no doubt developed in his relations with his parents a heightened ability to penetrate the facades we all reside within during social interaction, Henry makes a "natural" spy. Because he accepts middle-class white culture's disdain for his characteristic forms of reticence, this potentially positive "Korean" trait receives little recognition as he reassembles his identity.
Koreans have a word for the heightened sensitivity instilled by their culture's emphasis on instantaneous rank discernment and attenuated emotional display: nunch'kö. Both Korean and Western observers have difficulty precisely defining this concept, variously describing it as "intuition," a "sixth sense," and "mind-reading." As Lee O-Young explains, Koreans "are a people with a developed sense of nunch'kö [. . . . Historically,] intuition developed more than logic, and the sensitivity of grasping...signs developed more than reason" (28, 30). Lee O-Young also explains that this sense develops from a position of insecurity, "an indication of the weaker examining the feelings of the stronger..." (29). A Korean American like Henry has been raised by parents who themselves grew up in a culture where, much more than in relatively talkative white American families, "so much goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition." Henry would thus no doubt have developed, in comparison to most middle-class white Americans, a highly keen (or "quick," as Koreans would say) nunch'kö.

While many critics broaden the novel's central motif of spying into a metaphor for the "immigrant's ability to observe without participating, and an outsider's longing for place and identity," Henry's vocation acquires nuanced significance when read as a more precise representation of Korean American experience. A person like Henry, raised in a household where emotional display is kept to a minimum, no doubt develops an exceptional sensitivity to subtle facial and gestural indicators, including those which signal for the careful viewers that which a person is trying to suppress. Henry's resultant nunch'kö has undoubtedly served as a form of capital in the field of spying, enabling him to read more easily than his ethnic cohorts the subtly evasive gestures of his subjects.

The overall significance of an understanding of nunch'kö for a reading of this novel in search of the effects of unspoken whiteness and their role in exerting assimilationist pressure is that in sympathizing with Lelia's caring but nonetheless uninformed critique of decontextualized aspects of Korean culture, Henry neglects appreciation of his own obviously heightened social sensitivity, something a person more able to evaluate objectively his or her own cultural inheritance would be likely to consider a positive inheritance. As an author, Lee demonstrates his own nunch'kö by sensitively delineating with Henry's case the symbolic violence endured by the children of Korean immigrants as they face
the undeclared, glaringly white light of assimilationist sentiment. Henry, however, having increasingly adopted a normative stance shaped by an unexamined cultural perspective, ignores this and certain other aspects of his upbringing that have served him well in his work, and that could continue to serve him well in his identity search if he were to consider them as positive aspects, alongside negative ones. Instead, Henry attains a seemingly satisfactory sense of identity as a person who has learned to build bridges between himself and others in a broad embrace of all immigrants and their children. However, its very lack of nunch'i, of sensitivity to the details of such lives, renders this newfound compassion ineffective in addressing the root causes of the misery to which he has become sympathetic. Left in the shadows during Henry's use of the "whitest raw light" to conduct his self-analysis, his nunch'i seems to whither into atrophied uselessness. The nunch'i he displays throughout the book, his inculcated sensitivity to subtle-yet-significant details, something he could take pride in as an invaluable asset in his job and then in his sensitivity to the details of the lives of others, is ignored in his movement towards Lelia's unexamined perspective on himself – unfortunately, Lelia is also too lacking in nunch'i to see it in Henry.

America's White-man-ian Embrace

Henry's emblematic embrace at novel's end of the children of immigrants, connecting as it does with repeatedly sympathetic depictions throughout the novel of various struggling immigrant workers, recalls in its celebratory, sentimental sweep a white man, the Whitman of his story's epigraph. Having resolved his identity crisis by unwittingly casting himself as a white manqué, Henry no longer conceives of himself as a "man-a-curing," to borrow Lelia's earlier term; content in his new job, he now reports that when he takes off the mask he wears as the "speech monster [. . .] my voice moves in time with my mouth, truly belongs to my face" (349). The repeated possessive pronoun here would seem to indicate that Henry has become a native speaker of himself, one who has achieved autonomous subjecthood. However, as I have sought to demonstrate in this, paper, the voice framing his self-conception only seems like his own because it speaks from a middle-class white perspective that
functions by seeming not to be anything in particular, by not having to identify itself because it constitutes the dominant collocation of cultural beliefs, mores, and values. Lee's final irony, then, is that Henry, believing that he has finally shed his culturally imposed mask of reticent inscrutability, has merely donned another, through which he expresses the distanced affection of liberal pluralism for the struggling masses seeking purchase in America's melting pot. Reading Henry's reconstructed sense of himself as affirmative, then, as so many readers have, allows one to turn from the novel's final page with "a lingering hope, a faint smile, a new appreciation that there are native speakers from many countries..." as a reviewer for USA Today put it,12 having read the book as affirmation of America as a land of equal opportunity for those minorities willing to leave their cultural baggage behind. But as Henry's early conversation with Lelia's accepting-but-nonetheless-racist father suggests, white America continues to hold at arm's length even those otherized individuals who manage to partially whiten themselves.

An alternative is to view Henry as a person on his way to achieving something like a border identity, a strategic essentialism, "an auchthonous will, an indigenous Otherness if you like,"13 or any other of many such celebrations of postmodernity's supposed promise for liberated identity construction. However, even if such a state is possible, Henry could never reach it without first reviving his nunch'i, using it to perceive the latent whiteness informing his self-appraisal, and to perceive as well the forces in American society that broadly embrace people of color while simultaneously holding them, and the specificities of their systemic-induced difficulties, at a distance. Only then would Henry see as well that what he overlooks in his warm, fuzzy, White-man-ian embrace of immigrant masses is the historical and contemporary density of the context within which the struggles of various immigrant groups take place. Lee succeeds in depicting the price often exacted by America's prevailing will to monoculturalism by sensitively delineating a representative Korean American's cultural self-evisceration, and by casting this character's newborn empathy as one formed from such a distant perspective that it allows little discernment of the details of societal oppression, of its roots in the very same white gaze Henry so unwittingly adopts.

Notes
1. Richard Dyer, 141.

2. As cited in McLaren, 45.


4. While various reviewers have commented on the similarities between Native Speaker and Invisible Man, Nancy Applegate suggests a crucial distinction when she writes of the latter that it seems to be about the white creation of the black subject, "but...the story is really about the black narrator's perception of the whites who behold and create blackness. In other words, Ellison shows a black character's conception of the white creation of the African American Other" (17). As I argue throughout this paper, such an awareness is precisely what Henry fails to achieve.

5. Lelia's attempt in a poem to understand Henry's father is also framed as an analysis of representative items within his house.

6. At such moments in his account, Henry becomes half aware of how deeply one absorbs the promptings of habitus, of how inscribed the body itself is by cultural forces. Bourdieu's notion of "bodily hexis" helps to denaturalize such naturalized bodily dispositions: "Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of thinking and feeling" (1990 69-70). Later in the novel, as Henry sympathetically drifts toward John Kwang as an apparent exemplar of Korean American manhood, as a man capable of expressing himself in both Korean and American ways, Henry notices faded bodily inscriptions re-emerging; when he pours drinks for John Kwang he finds himself using two hands, an automatized Korean gesture of respect, and he does so again when he hands consolation money to Eduardo Fermin's grieving father.
7. Henry recalls harboring the belief when younger that his father was "cruel to his workers...like all successful immigrants before him [he] gently and not so gently exploited his own" (54). Henry's eventual rejection of his own work as a spy gathering damaging information on immigrant subjects is couched in similar terms as he moves toward denunciation of this work: "My ugly immigrant's truth, as was his, is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited" (53).

8. For further explanation of nunch'i, see Foster, Howe, Soh, and Lee O-Young. Explanations of nunch'i also sound remarkably like a similar faculty explicated by Gloria Anzaldúa: "'La facultad' is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more likely to develop this sense" (38).

9. As other interpreters of Korean culture have noted (from both Korean and Western perspectives), this sensitivity is largely the result of Korea's adoption of Confucianism, a secular system of principles which even today continues to prompt various observers to label Korea the most Confucian country in the world. While detailed explanation of Confucianism is beyond the scope of this project, awareness of certain of its principles – most particularly its emphasis on the maintenance of social hierarchy – is crucial to an understanding of both Henry's efforts to redefine himself and his reliance on Lelia as a base for consideration of himself from an exterior, unacknowledgedly white perspective.


12. James Kim, 5D.

13. San Juan, Jr., 104.

Works Cited


Kim, James. "Amid Intrigue, a Search for Cultural Identity." USA Today (May 12, 1995): 5 D.


