It is ridiculous to set a detective story in New York City. New York City is itself a detective story.

– Agatha Christie (qtd. in Wertsman)

The political importance attaching to languages derives from their being regarded as signs of race. Nothing could be more false.

– Ernest Renan (16)

On 6 June 1993, the *Golden Venture*, a freighter carrying nearly three hundred illegal Chinese immigrants, ran aground only a few miles away from downtown New York City. Aware that the vessel was taking on water, crew members ordered the passengers to swim ashore in the choppy, cold waters. Of the two hundred or so who complied, at least eight drowned before reaching the shore. The remaining passengers were rescued by Coast Guard cutters and subsequently were arrested and imprisoned by the United States government. Major television networks provided live coverage of the rescue and arrest operations, and thousands of American citizens watched the Chinese immigrants splash to shore or be plucked from the water with gaffs and ropes. Literally and figuratively, the *Golden Venture* of these hopeful emigrants was broken upon the forbidding shore of New York City, and their journey toward freedom and prosperity was interpreted to the American public through a media spectacle of abjection.

Written around the time of the *Golden Venture* and published in 1995, Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* includes a version of the incident at the novel’s crucial transition point. *Native Speaker* charts the rise and fall of a mayoral challenger who is racially marked as an immigrant in the turbulent New York political scene of the mid-1990s. John Kwang, a Korean American businessman and city council member, runs a permanent campaign for mayor in his attempt to become part of the political “vernacular … a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight
sphere of his family” (139). Kwang’s challenge to the racially insular New York political establishment leads to his eventual disgrace and exile to Korea. By depicting the infiltration of Kwang’s political organization and deportation of his key supporters as illegal immigrants, Lee demonstrates the powerful array of forces brought to bear against the full political enfranchisement of New Yorkers who can be constructed as both racially minoritized and foreign. However, Lee complicates this reading of Kwang by framing the story of his destruction against the anti-Bildungsroman of another Korean American, Henry Park, the narrator of the novel and corporate spy who infiltrates Kwang’s campaign. The self-doubts and tensions resulting from Henry’s infiltration of Kwang’s political organization and concurrent attempts at rapprochement with his white American wife Lelia restate on a micro level the questions of political and social enfranchisement posed by Kwang’s sabotaged campaign for mayor. The interplay of the domestic and political plotlines allows Lee to critique the dominant paradigms of racial enfranchisement in the United States and the status of “ethnic” literatures within the American publishing industry and literary canon. The book’s title draws attention to Lee’s self-conscious complicity in the racial marketing of his book, and the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the novel’s “native speaker” (Park? Lelia? Kwang? Lee the author?) sharpens the edge of the novel’s paratextual critique. Ultimately, the novel moves beyond New York and its political/publishing establishment to address the roles that immigrants have played historically in the literature and politics of the United States, a trajectory that Lee traces from the colonial era through the democratic vision of Walt Whitman and into the dystopic world of twentieth-century media culture.

The Golden Venture incident contributed to fears among the American populace of an “Asian invasion” facilitated by unscrupulous smugglers and international networks of organized criminal syndicates (P. Smith 2). The exceptionally harsh treatment meted out to the Chinese immigrants on the Golden Venture was meant to serve as a warning to aspiring immigrants around the world that they were not welcome in the United States. Most of the passengers on the Golden Venture were imprisoned for periods extending into years, and the last of the Golden Venture detainees were not released until fifty-three of them were pardoned by President Clinton in March of 1997, nearly four years after their disastrous entry into the country. The White House press secretary’s comments on the occasion of the pardon give a clear summary of the reasons for their long imprisonment:
The Administration’s policy of detaining smuggled aliens has deterred smuggling by organized criminal syndicates, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of alien smuggling vessels that have reached U.S. shores. Moreover, the newly enacted immigration bill's provisions that permit the expeditious exclusion of smuggled aliens has significantly strengthened our ability to deter alien smuggling.

While the insistent repetition of “alien” is meant to distinguish the government's policy from the reception given to legal immigrants, the treatment of the *Golden Venture* detainees is only a more extreme version of the exclusionary attitude faced by other racially marked minorities within the national culture of the United States. Lisa Lowe describes the exclusion of Asian immigrants from full participation in modern American society as the result of a national memory [that] haunts the conception of Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the “foreigner-within,” even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before. (5–6)

Due to the *a priori* construction of Asians as inescapably foreign within a domestic visual economy brokered by the mass media and popular culture, Asian Americans are not fully naturalized into American national culture. Thus, the threat of detention and expulsion aimed at “smuggled aliens” can also be used against Asian Americans who threaten in some way the economic or political dominance of citizens who are visually constructed as “native.” Like all citizens of non-Anglo-European descent, Asian Americans undergo a double scrutiny when attempting to enjoy the full spectrum of rights guaranteed to Americans, regardless of race. Lee invokes this experience of containment, exclusion, and potential expulsion throughout his novel.

Lee prefigures the significance of the *Golden Venture* incident to the Kwang subplot by incorporating the image of a shipwreck into the narrative fulcrum of Henry and Lelia's relationship. Separated previously by their culturally disparate responses to the death of Henry's mother and the accidental smothering of their biracial son, Henry and Lelia undergo an emotional journey of reconstruction after the death of Henry's father. This journey leads eventually to Henry's reconciliation with both Lelia and the
ambivalent effects of the cultural heritage passed on to him through his familial relationships. Henry and Lelia’s restored physical intimacy represents the turning point in the subplot of marital accommodation. Lee connects the scene of conjugal intimacy with the crisis of political visibility through a careful use of descriptive language that associates sex with the arrival of smuggled immigrants:

She wanted me to push down on her harder. I couldn’t, so then she turned us around and pushed down on me, the slightest grimace stealing across her face. Her body yawed above me, buoyed and restless. I held on by her flat hips, angling her and helping her to let me in. Mixed-up memories, hunger. It was like lonesome old dogs, all wags and tongues and worn eyes. This was the woman I promised to love. This is my wife. (230)

Initially, Henry is in a traditional posture of male dominance, but Lelia demands that Henry exert more leverage—more dominance—than he is capable of in order to consummate her physical pleasure and his full penetration of her body. She therefore inverts their sexual/political roles and uses the greater (social) force afforded to white bodies to facilitate Henry’s sexual penetration of her body and the consummation of her pleasure. In the moment of reversal, Lelia’s body is figured as a seafaring vessel, associating her with the immigrants of the *Golden Venture* and also invoking the memory of Puritan immigration. Henry is pushed down into the floor as Lelia’s body “yawed above.” Buoys and angling (tacking) continue the maritime imagery as Henry “help[s] her to let me in.” The crossing of boundaries is here described as a consensual act in which the pilgrim Lelia is nonetheless a gatekeeper who must initiate a more aggressive form of hospitality in order to achieve sexual union. Lee returns to this metaphor at the novel’s close when Henry and Lelia ironically agree to call Henry a “long-term guest. Permanently visiting” in Lelia’s apartment (347). Lelia’s contractual claim to her apartment can be understood as a legal fiction that requires her to undercut her own “natural” rights in order to live with her husband, another instance in which she must acknowledge the superior status afforded to her as a white American and the concomitant need for her to restore the historical equivalence between immigrants like her and Henry within America’s political and economic worlds. The definitive shift in the novel is signaled by the transition from past tense into present. Henry declares, “This is my wife,” and for the rest of the novel the use of the present tense indicates the unfixed possibilities of narrative develop-
ment, a syntactic expression of hope in contrast to the narration of past events that heretofore gave the novel its determined atmosphere of helplessness and despair.

Upon this transition, Henry and Lelia reminisce freely about their past and speculate about its effects on the course of their lives. A barrage of past events, landmarks, and cultural icons serves to illustrate the political and historical currents that have affected Henry and Lelia’s sense of themselves: World War II, the Korean War, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, a ferry ride, spy thriller movies, racial slurs. In a redoubling of their physical union, they make love again. Afterward, they watch the local news. The first report they watch involves the most recent in a string of cabby murders. New York cab drivers are drawn from all nations, “recently arrived Latvians and Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Hmong” (246). The cabbies are an exploited immigrant labor pool, perpetually in motion as they fulfill their instrumentality as a means of transporting white subjects from work to home, and from home to work and play. The vulnerability of these immigrants to economic violence is emphasized by the physical violence that circumscribes their lives. Linguistic barriers, a theme I will treat at some length, exacerbate the problem. Henry muses, “I wonder if the Cuban [cabby] could even beg for his life so that the killer might understand. What could he do? Have mercy, should be the first lesson in this city, how to say the phrase instantly in forty signs and tongues” (246, Lee’s emphasis). An appeal to mercy is the most urgent lesson for immigrants to America, and tellingly, the linguistic barriers indigenous to the city require facility in “forty signs and tongues.” Like the Golden Venture incident, Lee adapts the story of cabby murders from readily available news sources. Since 1990, two hundred and forty-three cabbies have been murdered in New York City, and the tragedies emerge into the media as “news” whenever a sufficiently large number of murders occurs close enough together in time to constitute a “string.” In addition to dramatizing the spectacular nature of violence against immigrants, the narration of the cabby murders also suggests the existence of pan-ethnic coalitions constructed by the negative force of that violence. Other instances of pan-ethnic grouping appear in Native Speaker, most notably the money club managed by Kwang and Hoagland’s Glimmer & Co., but these groupings are also the result of economic expediency and political contingency, negative origins that Lee appears to portray as teleologically bounded by the logic of racial exclusivism.²

Following the cabby story is the fictionalized version of the Golden Venture incident, a “small freighter that runs aground” with fifty smuggled
Chinese men who leap from the sides of the boat into the choppy waters. Lee’s fictional Chinese immigrants face the same treatment as their historical models: “The drowned are lined up on the docks beneath canvas tarps. The ones who make it, dazed, soaked, unspeaking, are led off in a line into police vans” (246–47). The spectacle of shipwreck recapitulates the theme of immigrant experiences in America already associated with Henry and Lelia through Lee’s description of their initial sexual rapprochement. At this point in the novel, the narrative tension flows from Henry and Lelia’s sexual union into the rising subplot of Kwang’s political demise. Henry and Lelia’s restored intimacy is punctuated by the next news report, footage and interviews describing a bombing and double murder at Kwang’s campaign headquarters. The refusal of John Kwang’s staffers to comment in the news story on the bombing of his main office thematically repeats the cabbies’ silencing and the unspeaking Chinese immigrants. Through this litany of spectacles involving the death, silencing, and imprisonment of immigrants, the private space of rapprochement in Henry’s marriage becomes linked to the public crisis of John Kwang’s political fortunes. This oscillation between the personal and the private, the physical and the political, is a part of a larger strategy of articulation in which Lee’s novel stands in as a commentary on New York and the fate of immigrants in the no-less-violent world of fact. The competition between fact and fiction, political commentary and plot development, dramatized in Lee’s narrative indicates how the novel is embedded within the literary and literal context of New York. Attention to the historical context of New York in the 1990s is needed for a fuller explication of Lee’s realist and subversive technique.

**DE ROOS, NEW AMSTERDAM, AND THE PERMANENCE OF RACIAL STRUGGLE**

In early 1994, Rudolph Giuliani took over from David Dinkins as mayor of New York City. This signal transition in New York politics ushered in “Giuliani time, not Dinkins time,” a phrase reportedly chanted by New York City police officers as they assaulted Abner Louima and repeatedly sodomized him with a broken-off broomstick. According to Neil Smith, the beating of Louima, a Haitian immigrant, expressed succinctly the mood of revanchist New York politics in the mid-1990s: “Revanchism is in every respect the ugly cultural politics of neoliberal globalization. On different scales, it represents a response spearheaded from the standpoint of white and middle-class interests against those people who, they believe,
stole their world (and their power)” (196). The attack on Louima in 1997 expressed symbolically the consummation of a politics of nativism and blame that helped determine the 1993 mayoral election. Louima’s tortured body gave lurid expression in a physical register to the political climate for racially constructed immigrants. “Giuliani time” thus describes both an eruption into public discourse of violence against racially marked immigrants and a particular historical moment in which a majority of New Yorkers expressed their political and racial allegiances.

Although Rudolph Giuliani is mentioned by name only once in *Native Speaker*, “Giuliani time” is an important concept in the novel’s implicit world. Henry and his co-worker Jack speculate that their employer, Dennis Hoagland, treasures a signed photograph from Giuliani in his office—a sign of Hoagland’s political and cultural allegiances (32). Glimmer & Co., founded by Hoagland in the 1970s, is an espionage firm that focuses on immigrant populations who threaten in some way the economic or political interests of “multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, [and] individuals of resource and connection” (18). Henry eventually learns that the Immigration and Naturalization Service is the client who has hired Glimmer & Co. to infiltrate John Kwang’s campaign, and the INS uses the information provided through Henry’s espionage to fulfill the general pattern of immigrant containment, brutalization, and expulsion characteristic of “Giuliani time.” Instead of dealing more extensively with Giuliani, Lee establishes a ruse character who functions as Giuliani’s stand-in. By giving the incumbent mayor a Dutch name, “De Roos,” Lee invokes New York’s historical nature as a long-contested site of political and linguistic allegiances as well as the apartheid-era government of South Africa. Founded as New Amsterdam in 1626, New York has long been the most visible site of the struggle over American identity as it has been domestically and transnationally constructed. Linguistically and ethnically diverse from its founding, the colony was held together by a common desire for profit. Conquered by the English in 1664, New York became a royal colony and grew rapidly through an influx of English settlers, but the Dutch influence persists today, making the choice of “De Roos” as a character name a subtle indicator of both the permanence of ethnic difference and the dynamic of assimilation that hides the social, economic, and political value accruing to whiteness.

Like De Roos, John Kwang makes a claim for legitimacy as the inheritor of New York’s political tradition. Henry describes him as someone who didn’t want to be “just another ethnic pol[itician] from the outer boroughs” (303). Instead, he would become “the living voice of the city,
which must always be renewed…. He would stride the daises and the stages with his voice strong and clear, unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between” (304). Kwang’s mark of success is his ability to give voice to the city as a native speaker. Language becomes the figure that equates both Puritans and Chinese as “boat person[s],” immigrants from other lands with equal claims upon the privileges of citizenship. Kwang’s optimism in this regard runs up against the vested interests of Glimmer & Co.’s clients. Kwang sinks into a depression after the bombing at his headquarters, and he goes on a drinking binge that ends with a car wreck in which an underage illegal immigrant bar girl is killed. Henry’s research revealing that John Kwang ran a Korean-style money club with hundreds of illegal immigrants is then leaked to the press, and Kwang’s destruction is complete. In place of his dream of full political inclusion as mayor, Kwang is assaulted at his home by a crowd carrying banners reading “Smuggler Kwang” and “AMERICA FOR AMERICANS.” One of them shouts, “We want our fucking future back” (331–32). Kwang’s fate is thus the result of both his racial exclusion from full enfranchisement and the revanchist features of New York politics at the time.4

Yet despite his failure, Kwang’s vision of New York is truer to the city than the protests of the (presumably) white Americans who want to claim it and America exclusively as their own. As a symbol for the country, New York is a site of contestation and cultural pluralism. Home of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, Wall Street, Broadway, Madison Avenue, and the United Nations, New York is used as an important symbol in both the domestic and transnational imaginary construction of nation. Each of these national and international icons maintains a dual life as representative instances of material and political connections between New York and a global urban community. New York’s economic success and growth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries depended upon its participation in world systems of trade, most notably as an intermediary with China. Then, as now, New York existed not solely in the domestic imagination but also as a projection of world expectations and desires. France’s gift of the Statue of Liberty is a representative instance of such exchange of approbation and obligation. Although few would go as far as Ford Madox Ford, who claims in the title of his 1927 travelogue that “New York Is Not America,” New York is an undeniably transitional space between the domestic and the foreign and, as such, symbolizes the hybridity of American identity through its cultural centrality within the American national consciousness.
The novel's ultimate display of revanchism at Kwang's home emphasizes the national fantasies that would deny American identity's historical and contemporary hybridity. The demonstrators' impassioned declarations of American purity (“America for Americans”) enact what Homi Bhabha describes as the pedagogic function of the nation-state in contrast to the performative challenge brought by Kwang. In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Bhabha analyzes modern concepts of the state as an affective and delimited unity, a homogeneity determined by its valorized history and symbols. Bhabha questions the primacy accorded to national narratives that exclude the presence of the marginal, countering their spurious portrait of domestic uniformity and tranquility with the agonistic tensions of the performative and the pedagogical. Because of the “powerful master discourse” of the pedagogical State that busily constructs a homogenous (and wholly imagined) national origin, migrants are excluded from the cultural discourse of national construction (306).

Bhabha ultimately asks how we can recast the formative myths (narratives) of nations in a manner that accounts for the presence of marginal peoples. As the ordering principle of the nation replaces the affective ties of kin, culture, and geography, pedagogical theorists make enunciative attempts to clarify “the other” and “the insider,” much in the way that Mayor De Roos attempts to paint John Kwang as “just another ethnic pol.” In the heterogeneous nation-state, dominance has been accorded to declarative and arbitrary national symbols that exclude or ignore marginal, migrant voices, which in turn leads to a despotic and imagined homogeneity. In a remarkable gloss of Ernest Renan's aphoristic claim that a “nation's existence is … a daily plebiscite” (19), Bhabha argues that contemporaneity and locality are more important to a nation than affective (read: temporally constructed and ultimately arbitrary) ties to an envisioned or imagined past. If we construe the construction of the nation-state as iterative, liminal, and essentially performative in its contemporaneous construction, then “no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves” (299). “America for Americans” would be clearly exposed as a racist ideology of exploitation and exclusion. The Statue of Liberty could be acknowledged as oscillating in the symbolic realm between the domestic matron of unifying (and homogenizing) liberty and the immigrant as naturalized foreign gift. However, before engaging in a more detailed reading of the novel as an enactment of pedagogic and performative tensions in the narration of New York as an American zone of linguistic fluency and racial homogeneity, I want to
explore how Lee uses the novel to interrogate the status of “ethnic” literatures within the American publishing industry and academic canon.

**NEW YORK AS THE CAPITOL OF THE U.S. PUBLISHING INDUSTRY: LEE AS NATIVE SPEAKER**

*Native Speaker* was published in 1995 as the first title under a new imprint launched by the international publishing conglomerate that became Penguin Putnam. Susan Petersen, the founding editor, and four others formed Riverhead Books with “the goal of publishing quality books in hardcover and then in trade paperback—both fiction and nonfiction, including significant religious and spiritual titles—that would open readers up to new ideas and points of view.”

Riverhead Books was formed, then, in response to the economic imperative to incorporate potentially subaltern multicultural aesthetic and spiritual productions into the dominant national economy of entertainment commodities. Part of the salability of Riverhead’s offerings required a grounding of “new ideas and points of view” in the recognizably other bodies of racially constructed minorities. Lee’s *Native Speaker* played a significant role in the success of the Riverhead imprint and, consequently, in the promulgation of its particular ideology of multiculturalism, which required the commodification of minority subjects as aesthetic exemplars. Another early commercial success was James McBride’s *The Color of Water*, “a poignant memoir” that relates how a Jewish woman raised her twelve mixed-race children in predominantly black neighborhoods before seeing all of them through college. In addition to Kathleen Norris’s books on monastic Christianity, Riverhead’s religious offerings emphasize Asian spirituality, including two books by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. However, Riverhead’s most successful hardcover offering to date is Suze Orman’s *The Courage to be Rich*. The title and cover of the book, which features a large color photograph of a blonde-haired, white, smiling Orman, suggest again the publisher’s priorities and the financial grounds for its promulgation of this particular brand of editorial difference.

Given *Native Speaker*’s seminal role in Riverhead Books’ establishment and in Chang-rae Lee’s writing career, the marketing strategies engaged to bring about this success merit close attention. How does the literary “immigrant” fare in the publishing—and, arguably, the cultural—capitol of the United States? The cover of the book features three images of recognizably Asian subjects. The front cover contains a montage in which the mouth of a two-toned, gray-and-black image of an almost featureless and
indistinct adult Asian male face is overlaid with a small photograph of an Asian child dressed in festive cowboy attire. The mixture of images suggests both the dynamics of assimilation and the effects of a childhood spent immersed in American culture on the tendency of an adult Asian American toward speech or silence. The image montage also suggests how the death of Mitt, Henry and Lelia's biracial child, has affected Henry in his relationship with Lelia. The book's back cover is almost completely covered with a black-and-white portrait of a debonair-looking Chang-rae Lee, clad in a stylish turtleneck and sweater ensemble, his hair rakishly tousled. His mouth is closed, and his eyes look off into the distance. The effect of the portrait is to convey an impression of Lee as a youthful (he was twenty-eight at the time of the portrait) and suave standard-bearer of a distinctly Asian American literary tradition. The white turtleneck peeping up from the dark-toned sweater provides the necessary element of contrast in the photograph: whiteness held close to the skin, yet obviously distinct. The mirroring effect of the images, front and back, emphasizes the consonance between Lee and the novel's Korean American characters. The prominence of Asian faces on the cover further serves as a guarantee of the “difference” in the contents—visual evidence that the novel will contain “new ideas” from a “new point of view.”

The book's title also contains a dual signification in that it refers both to the linguistic facility of John Kwang the character and the luminous prose of Chang-rae Lee the author. Kwang's tragedy lies in the fact that his English fluency cannot erase in Mayor de Roos and the INS's eyes—and ultimately in the eyes of the mob that assails him—the interpretation that his face connotes foreignness, not nativity. Likewise, Lee's lyrical writing and mastery of craft take a back seat to the predictable marketing of the book as “Asian American” fiction, treating customary themes of immigration, “biculturalism, racial conflict, generational conflict, and resistance to U.S. hegemony” (R. Lee 107). However, following Dorinne Kondo’s notions of complicitous critique, Lee's title and choice of genre can also be seen as performing an opposition which is “both contestatory and complicit and yet still constitute[s] a subversion that matters” (11). Kondo distinguishes between western forms of orientalism, autoexoticisms by Asian subjects, and counter-orientalisms that subvert western modes of apprehending discursively produced Asian identities. The blurred lines of significance in the different uses of stereotypes define what is potentially a very muddy project: the differentiation of subversions that succeed from those that fail. Lee's commodification as an author within the publishing industry's code of orientalism does not, in this view, eliminate the contes-
tatory value that may result from the counter-orientalisms deployed in his text, even as certain autoexoticisms within the text insure that *Native Speaker* is read as a novel with a commodifiable difference. Although Lee’s sea passage into print occurs at a price, the characters in the text remain as evidence of a repressed reality within the national culture.

Lee has stated in interviews that, while “he does not define himself as an Asian-American writer, he acknowledges that he has used the Asian-American experience for his inspiration so far” ("Chang-rae Lee"). *Native Speaker* enunciates this tension in its choice of genre and its sustained engagement with Walt Whitman's poem, “The Sleepers,” from which the novel’s epigraph is taken. *Native Speaker* can be characterized as a spy/thriller novel, described by many reviewers as a “page-turner”—a standard term of praise in this genre. In contrast to immigrant literature, which is often read as following the pattern of Bildungsroman, Lee’s novel moves from unity to dissolution in the Kwang subplot, the portion of the novel in which the espionage genre is prevalent. Lee maintains the tension in this plot through the clever construction of the novel’s audience as white and, therefore, invested in the exclusion of Asian Americans from full participation in American national culture because they are visibly “foreign” and not “native.” To the degree the espionage plot engages the reader, the novel interpellates its audience into the subject position of the INS agents who hire Glimmer & Co. to investigate Kwang’s campaign (R. Lee, in conversation). The assumption that Kwang has something to hide, that his success in the New York political scene masks some dirty secret that makes him a threat to the city’s tranquility, reveals both reader and revanchist government agents as invested in constructions of Asian Americans as ineradicably foreign and hence a threat to the tranquility of American society. In fact, the novel is framed by a confessional second-person narrative in which Henry Park addresses the reader as the target of his infiltration: “I won’t speak untruths to you … I make do with on-hand materials, what I can chip out of you, your natural ore. Then I fuel the fire of your most secret vanity” (7). “You” in this case, and in the asides throughout the novel, is not primarily the immigrant subject to whom Henry would normally be assigned by Glimmer & Co. Instead, it is the representative white American who constructs his or her national identity as one that excludes racially differentiated immigrants, whose “natural ore” is a hermeneutic of suspicion toward political or social accomplishment when unaccompanied by a white face. It is this discursively produced subject that Park targets in his narrative.
Lee performs here the same inversion charged against Henry Park by his estranged wife—that of being a “genre bug” (5). In the act of refusing to conform to expectations of commodifiably multicultural Asian American writers who are expected to write autobiographies or tortured tales of assimilation, Lee presents his spy anti-hero as the “most prodigal and mundane of historians” churning out “remote, unauthorized biographies” (18). Henry is here figured as a stand-in for the writers of biographical and autobiographical Asian American works that can be commodified as “simple” immigrant literature. This counter-orientalist maneuver contends that the role of a writer in the employ of the late capitalist state is that of a hack, alienated from his subject material and constrained to produce the portrait already determined by those who commission the investigation. As the commodifiable Asian American writer, Henry Park expresses his ambivalent relationship to the repressive work of Glimmer & Co. through an uneasy acquiescence to a profession that seems to suit him perfectly and yet is used against him and others with whom he comes to identify, most notably the psychiatrist Emile Luzan and John Kwang himself. Henry's eventual break with Glimmer & Co. and his refusal to reveal the most damning evidence against John Kwang represent his limited agency in a profession that can be death to leave. Likewise, Lee's attempt to “turn” from the spectacle of Asian immigrant exploitation and its eventual literary recuperation within late capitalism does not succeed in allowing him to fully “extricate himself” from the “confused, the past-reading” (vii), that constructs him as a literary outsider regardless of his linguistic fluency. To fully understand, however, Lee's engagement with the American literary tradition, we must look more carefully at the novel's epigraph, from which the quotations expressing Lee's authorial strategy in the previous sentence are taken.

Chang-rae Lee grew up in New York City, and that may be reason enough for his choice of setting. However, New York's status as the capitol of the United States publishing industry inflects that choice in a way that Lee's invocation of “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” makes explicit. Walt Whitman, poet of America, boldly claimed a universal perspective that subsumed all differences within its capacious vision. Whitman was also a rough, a dandy, a man of the city. Whitman's literary star has brought him from the margins of American literary studies to the center. Throughout Native Speaker, Lee performs an equivalent claim to universality that depends, as Whitman's did, upon a narcissistic focus on the embodied self as the representative figure of humanity. Instead of escaping from the particularity of a “wide immigrant face”
(343), Lee focuses upon it and the contradictions it presents to an American national culture that has repressed knowledge of its hybridity and the racially based categories subsumed within the concept of abstract citizenship. Through his narrative, Lee revises Whitman’s heritage of representative Americanness to include the immigrant experience as central.

The epigraph, taken from the fourth poem in “The Sleepers,” is worth considering as a whole and in context to better understand how Lee accomplishes this revision: “I turn but do not extricate myself, / Confused, a past-reading, another, / but with darkness yet” (546) The spectacle from which Whitman turns here is a shipwreck. The image of a “beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of the sea” (545) and battered to death by the waves against the rocks on the shore in the third poem of the cycle has been transformed in the fourth poem into the more representative tragedy of a shipwreck. The poet can “hear the howls of dismay” (546) as the passengers are cast into the waters, but he is powerless “to aid with [his] wringing fingers.” Though he turns away from this horrific scene of death and destruction, he is unable to escape it. In the morning, the poet is drawn back to the shore and helps to “pick up the dead and lay them in rows in a barn.”

Lee charges this poetic scene with multiple meanings through his numerous visual and conceptual citations of it in Native Speaker. The starting point for any explication of the poem’s meaning within Native Speaker is the spectacle with which this paper began: the wreck of the Golden Venture as it is fictionalized in the novel. Even as John Kwang claims a continuity with the Puritans as “boat people,” so is the traumatic experience of immigration into a nativist and exclusionary society here associated with Whitman’s vision of a shipwreck, a searing, inescapable vision. The immigration tragedy Henry views on television ends when “[t]he drowned are lined up on the dock beneath canvas tarps” (246–47). Order is imposed on both Whitman’s and Lee’s spectacles of suffering by the organization of the dead into uniform spaces. Within the novel, the comparison of the Golden Venture scene to Whitman’s poem serves to link the spectacle of immigration to universal experiences of human suffering such as Whitman explores in “The Sleepers.” For Henry, this scene also links his nautically described rapprochement with his wife to John Kwang’s political destruction. As an epigraph, the passage also serves to explain how Lee, who has “turn[ed] away” from a self-definition of Asian American that he deems limiting, cannot extricate himself from the market pressures that force him to collaborate in his own commodification
as an Asian American author. Nonetheless, Lee’s “wringing fingers” create a story of considerable power and beauty. In spite of the double-bind experienced by both Kwang and Lee—of being fluent and acculturated and yet also constructed as foreign and other—Lee is able to contest the interpellation of racially marked immigrant subjects as always already excluded from the category of American by making the more controversial claim that terrorizing and exploiting immigrants is quintessentially American:

My ugly immigrant’s truth … is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. This forever is my burden to bear. But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold…. 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. (319–20)

Here, Henry returns to the second-person form of address in order to more clearly label and indict his audience. Henry's “ugly immigrant truth” is America’s, and his memoir of complicity with John Kwang's investigation and destruction is “your own history,” the legacy of immigrant and racial minority scapegoating that is instantiated in “Giuliani time.” The “lyrical modes” of Lee's novel participate in and subvert the circulation of orientalist marginalizations of Asian American writers as “ethnic authors” cut off from the mainstream of American literary creation in much the same way that Henry Park participates in and resists the destruction of John Kwang. Or, in the words of Walt Whitman at the end of the seventh movement of “The Sleepers,” “[t]he diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite—they unite now” (549).

The diverse facets of American national culture that flow and unite in Whitman's poem are no less diverse for being ignored by homogenizing constructions of national identity that achieve unity through the erasure in popular memory of historically vibrant instances of diversity and exchange. In this vein, Traise Yamamoto has argued that “the private contains all things that exceed normative categories. To bring these things into public culture affects the construction of the national imaginary.” Earlier in my discussion of revanchist New York politics and the repression of material history it entailed, I alluded to the question of performative
American identities and how they reveal in the private realm historical truths that exceed the normative categories of public culture. It is to this mode of theoretical explication that I wish to return in conclusion as a means of illustrating Lee’s argument in *Native Speaker* that American history is repressed history.

The average citizen knows very little about American history, and this ignorance is perpetuated largely because the past exists for us only as it can be strategically deployed in contemporary arguments in which it is useful to “claim transcendent or metaphysical authority” (Bhabha 299). When Lelia complains that the “average white girl has no mystery any more, if she ever did. Literally nothing to her name,” Henry correctly replies, “There’s always a mystery…. You just have to know where to look” (10). Mystery, as Lee’s choice of genre emphasizes, has been displaced in American national culture onto racialized others who can then be constructed as spectacle, interrogated as foreign, and treated like aliens. If, in contrast to the orientalist assumption that Lee invites by his choice of genre, the mystery at the heart of *Native Speaker* is not the legitimacy of John Kwang’s campaign for mayor, then where else might we look for the target of Lee’s investigation? Rejecting the standard immigrant’s tale in which interracial marriage represents the plot’s consummation, Lee instead begins *Native Speaker* with the rupture of Henry and Lelia’s relationship, displacing the story of their romance into the narrative past. More private history is also encapsulated in Mitt, the fruit of their relationship, and the details of his life and death are slowly and tantalizingly revealed through hints and indirections. The exploration of Henry, Lelia, and Mitt’s mysterious and repressed past together provides most of the narrative tension in the first portion of the novel; the suspenseful unraveling of their private history thus stands in for the pressing critical interrogation of the originary American family unit they corporately represent. In such an interrogation, the symbolic role Lelia plays as a “pure” American native speaker can be analyzed in a manner that reveals her repressed cultural and racial heterogeneity.

Lelia’s complaint about mystery and white identity is prompted by Henry’s ethnographic interpretation of her surname. Her given name, however, receives less scrutiny, despite Henry’s assurance that “there’s always a mystery.” In this case, a second look at the first syllable of Lelia’s awkward given name suggests that Lee accomplishes more in this name choice than merely a parodic redoubling of consonants that are stereotypically difficult for many non-native English speakers to pronounce. Encoded in Lelia’s name is a syllabic evocation of the author’s name, an
association also suggested by Lelia’s aspiration to be a writer, her vocation of teacher, and the beauty of her linguistic ability, all characteristics shared by Chang-rae Lee. But “Lee” is only part of Lelia’s mysterious derivation and identity. Tim Engles’s discussion of Lelia as the novel’s symbol of doxic whiteness emphasizes her role in Henry’s refashioning of himself according to white middle-class norms. According to Engles’s reading of the novel, Henry “resolve[s] his identity crisis by unwittingly casting himself as a white manque” (45). Engles’s detailed analysis of Henry and Lelia’s interactions highlights the ways in which Henry comes to accept many of Lelia’s judgments about him as encapsulated in the list she gives him at the beginning of the novel: “visions of me in the whitest raw light” (1). Engles chooses to focus his reading of the novel on the “whiteness” of the light cast upon Henry throughout the book, as though Lelia represented a pure space of white, middle-class American identity—as if, in fact, there were such a thing at all. Although Engles’s interpretation is compelling to a point, he fails to account for the significant evidence throughout the novel that the most careful performer of American identity, in pursuit of the perfection that June Dwyer describes as the “greenhorn desire to fit in” (78), is Lelia herself. Far from fulfilling the role of “standard bearer” (12) she claims for herself at the beginning of the novel, Lelia, as Henry observes, succeeds by “executing the language” (10), a figure of speech that associates both death and formality with her verbal abilities.

At the point when Henry capitulates to Lelia’s demand that he abandon his Korean reserve and speak openly about his fears for himself and Kwang, Lelia begins to exhibit signs of cultural and racial heterogeneity. When Henry and Lelia clean out Henry’s boyhood home during the last stage of their journey toward rapprochement, surrounded by pictures and mementos of Henry’s Korean family and past, Lelia expresses her frustration at the effects of Henry’s espionage work on their relationship. Swinging her arms in emphasis, Lelia “accidentally knocked over the rest of her coffee onto the white carpet rug” (226). As the brown stain spreads over the rug, “[s]uddenly she looked exhausted, sodden in the face. ‘As long as you don’t get hurt, I won’t care…. I won’t say a word to you. I won’t even think it’” (226). The staining of the white carpet becomes an image of Lelia’s transformation as the coffee-soaked carpet is refigured in Lelia’s “sodden” face. At this point, Henry reveals the name of his mark: John Kwang. “I could see her turning the words inside her head…. She didn’t say anything, though, and I could see that she was trying her very best to stay quiet” (227). Henry recognizes her behavior as reflective of his own as a Korean man, the reserve Lelia has decried up to this point in the
novel: “Ten years with me and now she was the one with the ready method” (277). Finally, “in a voice [he] hardly recognize[s],” Lelia surrenders, both to Henry’s will as her husband and to his manner of speaking: “You just say what you want. Please say what you want” (277). By the end of the novel, Lelia is depicted as “horsing with the language to show [her students] that it’s fine to mess it all up” (349). The novel ends with Lelia’s vaunted linguistic facility challenged by the diversity acknowledged as belonging to the city. Dismissing her students by name at the end of the day, “she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speak a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are” (349). In a “difficult” sea voyage in which she must take “care of every last pitch,” Lelia finally discovers who “we” really are.

For Chang-rae Lee, who toyed at an early age with changing his own first name to something more typically American, like “Tom” or “Chuck,” foreign names are no barrier to an American identity. As an authorial calling card, “Chang-rae” indicates a much different trajectory of social incorporation than “Amy,” “Frank,” or “Maxine.” June Dwyer, among many reviewers of Native Speaker, recognizes the importance of language in the novel’s schema and denouement, but the significance of John Kwang’s becoming “a part of the vernacular” lies in his ability, for as long as it lasts, to bring his Korean identity along with him (139). Jack Kalantzakos, Henry’s mentor in surveillance, describes the constitutive function of Kwang’s speech this way: “‘He is in the language now. The buildings and streets there are written with him. In this sense he exists’” (169). Yet this movement from existence in the material world to constitution in language reveals troubling contradictions within America’s national culture. Kwang’s existence in language “helplessly heads end on” (vii) into his construction within the visual economies of race in the United States. The novel’s conclusion does not, as Dwyer claims, ask us to “listen to immigrants’ incorrect but highly expressive English” (82). It points out instead in a dual movement that native speakers, like Lelia, cannot equate their whiteness with ownership of the language unless they repress the material histories of other native speakers, like John Kwang. Being Korean and being a native speaker embodies a contradiction that requires the deconstruction of white English speakers as native. Lee does this by including Henry in Lelia’s work at the end of the novel and recording the “wonder in [the immigrant children’s] looks as they check again that my voice moves in time with my mouth, truly belongs to my face” (349). Henry challenges prevailing constructions of American iden-
tity in the same way Chang-rae Lee does in choosing to allow his book to be marketed with a picture of himself alongside the polysemic title *Native Speaker*.

The claim that American identities are performative through language carries many consequences for contemporary debates within Asian American cultural studies about the status of Asian Americans within American national culture. Imperatives to “claim the language” and thereby claim a place within the American polity, which have impelled the enterprise of Asian American cultural nationalism, are valuable and yet incomplete. More recent emphases on the diasporic components of Asian American identity, in which private memory is used to link public contradictions with material histories of imperialism, hybridity and exploitation, enable a broader venue for critiques of American national culture as it has been constituted through repressed transnational exchanges. Vital, however, to both enterprises is the public recuperation of what Chang-rae Lee calls America’s “ugly immigrant’s truth”: the material success and social structuring of the United States that has depended from its earliest days upon the exploitation and alien/nation of racially marked others. From Peter Minuit’s founding of New Amsterdam on the backs of swindled Native Americans to the harsh treatment of immigrants such as those smuggled in the *Golden Venture*, “boat people” have always been a part of the American vernacular.

In the first movement of “The Sleepers,” Walt Whitman calls out what he views as the constitutive elements of American identity:

I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician,
The emigrant and the exile, the criminal that stood in the box,
He who has been famous and he who shall be famous after to-day,
The stammerer, the well-form’d person, the wasted or feeble person. (544)

By means of the universal “I,” Whitman brings the concepts of performance and political involvement into apposition with the categories of immigrant, exile, and criminal. He associates fame with speech and the body in a shrewd evocation of the marginality that defines the performative center stage of American identity. Homi Bhabha describes how “[m]inority discourse … contests genealogies of ‘origin’ that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority” (307). In the place of definitions of American society or literary canon that argue for the primacy and centrality of doxically white Americans, “[m]inority discourse
acknowledges the status of national culture—and the people—as a contentious, performative space.” The actor and the politician, the politician and the emigrant, the emigrant and the criminal—all combine in Chang-rae Lee’s evocation of the “contentious, performative space” in American literary and political citizenship.

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NOTES

1 See Paul Smith, Chinese Migrant Trafficking 1–4, for a complete description of the Golden Venture incident, including responses in national media.

2 Caroline Rody further discusses Lee’s ambivalent portrayal of interethnic collaboration in a paper given at the 2004 Modern Language Association convention entitled, “The Interethnic Imagination in Contemporary Asian American Fiction.” Rody associates interethnic coalitions in Native Speaker with similar instances of interethnic imagination in works by, among others, Gish Jen and Karen Tei Yamashita, and suggests that such groupings may grow in importance as contemporary Asian American writers grapple with the distinctive future of Asian America within an increasingly multicultural United States.

3 N. Smith uses revanche, the French word for revenge, to reference an 1890s French movement of reactionary populists known as the Ligue des Patriotes. These revanchists “mixed militarism and moralism with claims about public order on the streets as they flailed around for enemies” (185).

4 Lee is careful not to paint Kwang as an unequivocal victim of New York racism. The closing pages of the book reveal that the trigger event for Kwang’s decline, the bombing and deaths at his headquarters, is ordered by Kwang himself in a fit of rage when he learns that his closest associate—another Glimmer & Co. operative—has been collecting evidence against him. While Kwang’s personal failings of rage, alcoholism, and philandering played a role in his political destruction, they would not have had such a prominent effect if the INS had not hired Glimmer & Co. to infiltrate his campaign. In his failings, Kwang is not unlike many of New York’s and the United States’ most successful political leaders.


6 Taken from editorial endorsements included in the trade paperback edition.

7 Universality and Whitman is an extremely vexed subject in Whitman scholarship. While the suspect foundation of Whitman’s use of himself as a representative figure is rightly interrogated by many scholars, Lee is not here invoking Whitman as an example of how an all-seeing eye colonizes the subjects it surveys. Likewise, Whitman’s role in my argument about Native Speaker and literary citizenship should not be construed as casting Whitman into the role of unproblematic touchstone of American literature and identity. This is, however, very nearly the way that Lee uses Whitman, but only, I think, in order to link Whitman to a revised understanding of American identity as inclusive of Asian American immigrants.

8 Another, more poignant, symbolic evocation of this theme is the death of Mitt, Henry and Lelia’s biracial son, who is crushed to death by his white neighbors in a game of dog pile. Since the game occurs during Mitt’s birthday party, his nativity is highlighted. Mitt is the physical representation of American hybridity that the collective weight of (perhaps) unthinking White America definitively removes. This crushing moment can also be con-
trasted with Lelia’s desire to push down harder on Henry during their initial sexual rap-
prochement.

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