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"Remember, or now know":
Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and the Politics of Melancholia

Abstract: While the extensive criticism on Chang-rae Lee's 1995 novel *Native Speaker* (which upon its publication immediately became the most successful Korean American novel of all time) has not failed to assess the novel's negotiation of issues of ethnicity and identity, as well as of the possibilities and pitfalls of political enfranchisement, it has generally concluded that in the last analysis, *Native Speaker* despairs of the possibility of political change. By paying attention to the (ostensibly apolitical) question of how the novel deals with strategies for coping with personal loss, with histories of dispossession, and with social injuries, this essay argues that the political significance of the novel lies in its dismissal of a melancholic conception of political agency and its concomitant recognition of the need to develop adequately explanatory social narratives for coming to terms with experiences of loss (a process that is related to Freud's notion of mourning). As such, the novel undertakes a wide-ranging critique of the recuperation of melancholia as an adequate ethico-political posture in critical theory in the last quarter century.

I

Since its publication in 1995, Chang-rae Lee's debut novel *Native Speaker* has generated a remarkably large and continuous stream of critical work. The criticism on the book has not failed to assess the novel's negotiation of issues of ethnicity and identity, as well as of the possibilities and pitfalls of political enfranchisement. While such criticism leaves no doubt that the book is thoroughly occupied with political issues, it has generally concluded that in the last analysis, *Native Speaker* despairs of the possibility of political change. The novel ends with the disgrace of the Korean American politician John Kwang, who embodies a vision of political hope throughout the book, and with the main character's renewed attempt to gradually restore his relationship to his estranged wife. It seems easy enough to conclude that whatever hope for political change is featured in the book is ultimately destroyed and displaced to the private sphere. In this article, I focus on an aspect of the novel that may initially seem quite remote from political concerns: its attention to strategies for coping with personal loss, with histories of dispossession, and with social injuries. In a paper from 1917, Sigmund Freud famously distinguished two ways of dealing with loss: a 'healthy' approach that consists in the work of mourning, which slowly learns to let go of the lost object, and a pathological path that consists in an uncompromising melancholic attachment to loss. In the last few decades, many critical discourses have tended to depathologize melancholia

and promote it as an adequate strategy of political resistance. By looking at the way *Native Speaker* addresses different ways of dealing with loss, I show that it diagnoses the disastrous private and public costs of melancholia, and instead proposes a more accommodating process of mourning as a chance for political renewal. Mourning emerges in the novel as more than a private strategy, and as a vital aspect of the attempt to overcome political despair. The novel embodies the insight that, as Seth Moglen has noted, just as "political despair" is a social form of melancholia, "[p]olitical hope is a social form of mourning" (Moglen 2005, 164). At the same time, *Native Speaker* is a powerful testimony to the crucial role that literature can play in forging personal as well as collective strategies of mourning.

Native Speaker uses a spy plot to interweave questions of artistic responsibility, personal loss, and ethnicity. The book's main character, Henry Park, a second-generation Korean American, works for a New York spy firm that provides reports on political activists, dissidents, and fundraisers to multinational corporations and foreign governments. It specializes in "[f]oreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans" (Lee 1998, 16). The staff is ethnically diverse, as it is more effective to have subjects spied on by people who share their ethnic background. This tension between a privileged insider perspective and the suspicion of betrayal also marks Chang-rae Lee's own relation as a writer to the Korean American community: having written the most successful Korean American novel of all time (Song 2001, 79-80), Lee can easily be suspected of having capitalized on his ethnic identity and become a "traiterous informant" who has sold out to the white mainstream (Parikh 2002, 249).[1] The spy plot is one of the novel's strategies for thematizing that concern.

Henry Park's spy work can at the same time be understood as the novel's commentary on the place of Asian Americans in American society. As has been well-documented, Asian Americans have in the last four decades often been designated as a 'model minority.'[2] This discourse promotes Asian Americans as a 'model' for other minorities to follow, and has historically served to legitimize the discrimination of (especially black) minorities who could, for socio-economic reasons, never hope to live up to that standard. It has served to "obviate radical critique of existing social relations" and to strengthen the "legitimacy of cultural explanations of black poverty, not structural ones" (Kyung-Jin Lee 2002, 245-6).

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[1]   The anxieties surrounding the commercial and critical success of ethnic literature are, in the last analysis, but one instance of the more general dynamic of privilege and betrayal that characterizes the whole phenomenon of upward mobility. See Robbins (2007) for a literary history of this phenomenon. Parikh (2002) offers a discussion of such anxieties as inherent to the position of the 'ethnic intellectual.' Corley (2004) notes that the reception of *Native Speaker* as part of a particular ideology of multiculturalism was reinforced by it being the first publication under the Riverhead Books imprint, which strategically relied on "the commodification of minority subjects as aesthetic exemplars" (Corley 2004, 70).

[2]   For my discussion of the logic of model minority discourse, I rely on the earlier work of Huang (2006) and Kyung-Jin Lee (2002). I refer to Asian Americans here, although a more specific account would, among other things, note that Chinese Americans were the first ethnic group to be singled out in this way, while Korean Americans were only 'discovered' later (Kyung-Jin Lee 2002, 245-6).

As such, Asian Americans have been forced to 'betray' other minorities: by promoting one ethnic group as a model while furthering the discrimination of other groups, model minority discourse has broken the association between Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities (Huang 2006, 246-7) – a process that *Native Speaker* extensively chronicles. Again, the spy plot is a crucial device that allows the novel to reflect on these tensions.[3]

While the novel's blend of ethnic literature and spy thriller clearly touches on difficult issues of artistic responsibility, ethnic difference, and Asian American experience, many commentators have concluded that the novel fails to provide a vision of political and social hope. The Korean American politician John Kwang, whose team Henry Park is asked to infiltrate, is the most evident representative of the novel's political hope: attempting to bring different minorities together and to represent them on a political level, Kwang embodies the ambition to transcend the opposition between ethnic minorities as well as that between these minorities and the white mainstream. It seems that all hope for political and social renewal disappears from the novel together with the disgraceful end of Kwang's political aspirations when the dubious scheme that finances his incipient campaign is exposed. The book seems to end in the failure of the only political vision that it is able to imagine, and it fails to replace it with an alternative vision that survives Kwang's disgrace. As one critic notes, the novel ends "with Henry mourning the passing of a political dream in which he had come to believe, a political dream he had helped to destroy" (Kim 2003, 236).

The very last scene of the novel suggests a rapprochement between Henry and his wife, as he assists her during the ESL courses she is teaching to an ethnically diverse group of kids by playing the role of the "Speech Monster" (Lee 1998, 322). Henry kisses and hugs all kids, and the novel suggests that he has finally learned to accept a substitute, however minimal, for the memory of his son, who died in a playground accident; in this respect also, the book seems to end with a hint of a more or less successful process of mourning. Still, this awkward ending only seems to confirm the novel's ultimate withdrawal from politics, and it has been interpreted as a moment of resignation in which the novel leaves us with a merely private pseudo-solution to a political problem.[4] *Native Speaker* has been called a "*post-political text,*" because it

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[3]   I disagree here with reviewers and critics who see the spy elements as a mere distraction from issues of identity and citizenship. Indeed, I argue that the significance of the novel is precisely that the spy plot and issues of ethnic identity and of the writer's (or the intellectual's) responsibility develop together, and that it is very hard, if not impossible, to disentangle them. See also Kyung-Jin Lee 2002, 246-8 for a related argument against the line of reception I am also opposing.

[4]   James Kyung-Jin Lee writes that this ending shows how in order "to refuse the call of the model minority in the public sphere, in effect to be the nation's spies, mimicking to perfection its language and its vision, Lee's narrative suggests movement into a space of privatized enclosures" (Kyung-Jin Lee 2002, 253). Min Hyoung Song, for his part, notes that Henry's return to the private sphere signals his ultimate marginalization by the society of which the novel fails to offer an adequate critique (Song 2001, 96). Sämi Ludwig presents a curious exception to the prevalent negative assessment of the novel's concluding withdrawal to the private sphere;

ultimately point[s] toward the domain of literature as one of abundant recompense – as a site where the racial invisibility that reigns in the political order can be compensated by the kinds of representation to be attained in literary culture. (Kim 2003, 232)

On this reading, the book fails to derive a political promise from the different concerns it so adequately knits together, and it puts forward its own literary qualities and/or a private spectacle of mourning as illusory compensations for that failure.

In the rest of this essay, I argue that the note of mourning and the hint of recovery on which the novel ends do not signal its withdrawal from politics, but instead constitute the core of the political message that the book contains. *Native Speaker* not only traces how Henry in his private life manages to achieve a form of successful mourning that overcomes his melancholic attachment to the loss of his son, the death of his father, and his separation from his wife, but it also diagnoses the social and political damage inflicted by melancholia. *Native Speaker* undertakes a wide-ranging critique of the recuperation of melancholia in critical theory in the last few decades. Because the novel points to the social, political, as well as personal demoralization that melancholia entails, Henry's increasing insight in the debilitating effects of his melancholia and his growing ability to move beyond it also hold a political promise. By making its own literary language part of the work of mourning, moreover, the novel points to the vital role that literature can play in holding out the promise of political and social change.

II

In the last few decades, different critical discourses have often promoted melancholia as a commendable form of ethical and political resistance. While Sigmund Freud's seminal 1917 paper on "Trauer und Melancholie" ("mourning and melancholia") coded the difference between mourning and melancholia as that between a normal, healthy response to loss and a pathological and self-destructive one, more recent discourses have inversed that valorization. For Freud, in the 'normal' process of mourning, the mourner slowly and painfully reconnects to the outside world as she regains access to the energies that had been invested in the object that is now lost (Freud 1978, 243-5). The melancholic, in contrast, is unable to enter into a dynamic relation with new love objects, and even with the outside world more generally, as she fails to detach her energies from the object she has lost. The result is a loss of interest in the world, as well as a sense of inner desolation (Freud 1978, 248-51). Unlike in cases of 'normal' mourning, moreover, it is often unclear what has been lost, and this prevents the melancholic from making her condition intelligible to herself (Freud 1978, 245). Such a lack of understanding makes it all the more difficult to work through grief and to let go of the lost object.[5]

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for Ludwig, the private is "the only site where human agency can cultivate any kind of human healing" (Ludwig 2007, 239). Ludwig thus shares with other readers of the book's last scene the belief that it lacks a properly public or political dimension.

[5]   Freud's valorization of mourning as an eminently *possible* and a psychologically and socially *advisable* strategy can still be found in Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's important 1967

Mourning and melancholia are coded very differently in more recent discourses. Mourning has often been decried as a hegemonic normalization strategy that enjoins us to just get on with life without letting that life be derailed by accidental losses. The work of mourning, that is, is identified with the capitalist imperative to go on laboring and spending in the service of a system that remains perfectly indifferent to personal experiences of loss and injury. While Freud understood the process of mourning as a painful detachment from the lost object and a gradual rediscovery of the world, these critical discourses take mourning to task for its failure to hold on to the singularity of grief and the irreplaceability of each particular loss. Mourning, in this more recent interpretation, becomes an oppressive practice that imposes a sense of collective belonging and a dedication to the goal of economic progress while it refuses to acknowledge particular deaths and losses.[6] At the same time, melancholia is no longer seen as an *inability* to let go of a lost object, but rather as a heroic *refusal* to surrender the lost object to a public space that dishonors its memory, or simply forgets to remember it. It is identified as a stance that remains faithful to what it has lost by refusing to search substitutes for the love object.[7] Identities are often defined through the shared experience of particular losses and traumas, and so loyalty to those identities comes to involve a protracted and unconditional attachment to, and a melancholic cultivation of, these losses.[8]

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book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* ("the inability to mourn"). The Mitscherlich's analysis of postwar German society has more recently been retrieved in Paul Gilroy's analysis of Britain's "postimperial melancholia." Gilroy uses the term melancholia to account for such diverse phenomena as hooliganism and the British obsession with the Second World War, while arguing for the replacement of the repression of the colonial past with "the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history" (Gilroy 2005, 99). As I argue below, such a willingness to make the injuries of the past cognitively intelligible is a fundamental aspect of the process of social mourning.

[6]   One obvious example is the rise of AIDS in North American gay communities in the Reagan years, when moralizing public protocols of mourning often simply disavowed the losses that members of these communities suffered when they witnessed the numerous deaths of their companions and the disintegration of their way of life. See especially Crimp (1989).

[7]   In the domain of queer studies, this tendency often affirms homosexuality as a form of fidelity to the foreclosed identification with the same-sex parent. The most familiar politicized treatment of melancholia in its queer version is Butler (1997); see also Moon (1995) and Muñoz (1997). Postcolonial or ethnic versions for their part note that the specific legacy of ethnic groups is threatened by their confrontation with capitalist modernity, and conclude that these groups should therefore retain their melancholic attachment to their lost roots, rather than renouncing them through a process of mourning (Žižek 2000, 658). For explicit expositions of this position, see, for instance, Kaplan (2007), Novak (1999), and Tettenborn (2006).

[8]   My understanding of the changing critical fate of Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is informed by Forter (2003), 134-43 (which also informs my critique of the recent critical embrace of melancholia), and Rae (2007), 16-23. Following especially the work of Judith Butler, both Forter and Rae remark that the "depathologization" of melancholia can be located in Freud's own later work, which argued that melancholia was essential to the construction of the ego, rather than a pathological deviation from normality (Rae 2007, 16; Forter 2003, 140-1). See Clewell (2004) for an extensive account of the different versions of Freud's mourning theory.

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Even if critical uses of melancholia are entirely justified in resisting the disciplinary social ideals that practices of restitutive mourning all too often support, this does not mean that an embrace of melancholia offers the best terms for an appropriate oppositional politics. In anticipation of *Native Speaker*'s critique of melancholia, I want to briefly indicate three problems with this "naturalization" or "depathologization" of melancholia (Rae 2007, 16; Forter 2003, 139). First, and almost trivially, the recourse to melancholia seems to forget the psychological damage that is unavoidably associated with it. As Greg Forter has noted, melancholia can only be promoted as the basis of an adequate political practice when we forget its profound affective ambivalence; for Freud, the phenomenon is characterized "by numbed disconnection and a self-loathing whose logical conclusion is suicide" (Forter 2003, 139). The critical return to melancholia is insufficiently aware of the extent to which these psychological problems interfere with an effective oppositional practice. The melancholic is unable to love or to find interest in the world, and it is hard to see how this numb disinterest can generate a desire to make that world a better place.

A second problem is that these discourses, by predicating collective identities on a shared experience of particular losses, give us identities with very strict outer borders; people who have not shared these particular losses simply need not apply. This overlooks the fact that social injustices and legacies of dispossession can very often be addressed most effectively by forging relations between different groups that suffer from injuries that often have very similar causes and effects. Whether these associations have a historically actual basis or are of a more strategic nature, it seems clear that minority claims can make more of an impact by multidirectionally reinforcing one another than by a competitive insistence on their separation from other minority perspectives.[9] An insular and competitive model of identity and memory forecloses intersubjective and intercultural dimensions that are essential in negotiating and accommodating loss. It makes coping with injuries a matter of heroic persistence rather than a collaborative social practice.

This refusal of collaboration and dialogue is aggravated by a prevalent misunderstanding of Freud's conception of mourning – and this is a third point of critique. It is often assumed that the mourner who reinvests her energies in the world simply *forgets* the lost object, and that mourning constitutes an act of infidelity for which a melancholic attachment offers a more ethically and politically attuned alternative. This overlooks the realization that in melancholia, as I noted, the object-loss often remains unconscious (Freud 1978, 245; 257). When the sources of aggression and hatred remain unconscious, this tends to pre-empt a conscious and adequate form of remembrance. Indeed, only a form of mourning that consciously articulates the precise extent and nature of loss can form the basis of an adequate memory practice

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9   The recent work of Michael Rothberg makes the compelling case that most contemporary discussions of the relation between memory and identity are based on a zero-sum logic that assumes that attention to one group's history automatically blocks out the perspective of other groups. Rothberg contrasts this model of "competitive memory" with a "multidirectional" view of the relation between different memories. See especially Rothberg (2009), 1-12.

(Forter 2003, 139). Mourning, far from hastening the forgetting of the lost object, is a necessary part of the effort of giving it a sustainable and remembrable form.

Only when we loosen our attachment to the things we have lost can we begin to remember them. And only when energies are detached from the lost object can they be redeployed to help mobilize these memories for change in the real world. These changes will often be facilitated when different groups no longer melancholically hold on to their own losses, but instead learn to appreciate the connections between their own experiences of dispossession and those of other groups. Giving up an uncompromising attachment to traumatic events has the further advantage of making it possible to look at social injuries that do not have the structure of a sudden and punctual irruption, but that are sustained and ongoing. As Seth Moglen has remarked, "experiences of social injury such as racism, mysogyny, homophobia and economic exploitation" cannot easily be identified with a particular moment of loss, and "the lack of adequately explanatory social narratives" that can account for these less tangible injuries perpetuates their symptoms (Moglen 2005, 151; 161).[10] Moglen sees the development of such explanatory accounts as a central aspect of the work of mourning. Instead of the dyadic Freudian model that focuses on the relation between the mourner and the lost object, he proposes a triadic model that also identifies "the social forces that have produced any particular experience of collective loss" (Moglen 2005, 158). While in melancholia, the sources of anger and the precise nature and object of the loss that has been suffered remain unconscious, bringing social forces into the equation makes it possible to understand, and develop a narrative about, *what* we have lost and *why* we have lost it. Making these injuries intelligible is crucial in creating a "renewed capacity for dynamic object-relation," a "capacity to experience new people and relations with spontaneity, with a receptivity to experience, to newness, to changes in oneself and others" (Moglen 2005, 162). Moglen's complementation of Freud makes clear that mourning is not merely a process of personal healing, but also a collective, and ultimately political, work of promoting change. It not only constitutes a personal victory over melancholia, but also a feasible alternative to cynical despair.

III

Melancholia can assert itself in two closely related ways. In the most familiar scenario, the process of mourning is *blocked* when the mourner is unable or unwilling to relinquish her attachment to loss, and to carry through her gradual and painful removal from the enormity of her grief. It is also possible that this affective and cognitive process is simply *foreclosed*, and that the process of learning to

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[10] Although Moglen does not mention this, his notion of non-punctual trauma is closely related to Laura Brown's notion of "insidious trauma." Brown coined her term in order to draw attention to chronic forms of psychic suffering that are the result of structural forms of violence and that do not fit the template of the punctual traumas that are arguably more central to the experience of dominant groups (cf. Brown 1995). See Craps / Buelens (2008), 3-4 for further discussion, and Cheah (2008), 196-200 for "incessant quotidian trauma" in a colonial context.

understand and accept loss is not even allowed to get under way. In such cases, rigorous canons of propriety or industriousness prevent that any time is spent on the necessarily affective and unhurried work of mourning. In its depiction of Henry's memories of his relation to his son and to his parents, *Native Speaker* portrays both kinds of failed mourning, and it shows how they lead to the affective disconnection from the world and from one's self that is characteristic of melancholia.

After the death of his son in a playground accident, Henry, unlike his wife Lelia, refuses to confront their loss and to reintegrate the memory of their son into their lives. While she attempts to understand how and why the accident could have happened, Henry refuses to see it as more than "a terrible accident" (Lee 1998, 120). Sometime after the accident, Henry's wife carefully constructs a twig house with materials from the grounds where the accident occurred, a sort of tangible memorial that can aid the process of mourning. Greg Forter has remarked that "[m]ourning helps us to relinquish *real* objects by building *psychic memorials* to them – the memorials we call 'memories'" (Forter 2003, 139; emphasis in the original). Lelia's frail construction not only literalizes Forter's building-metaphor, it also makes possible the process Forter describes by constructing a 'real' object that can serve as a relay in the psychological process in which the mourner slowly lets go of the lost object. Henry resists this mourning work by picking the house apart "leaf by twig, stone by rock" and flinging the materials into the woods (Lee 1998, 231-2). Henry is not only unwilling to repeat the psychological process his wife appears to be intent on: through this refusal, he also denies her (and himself) the dialogue and interaction that could facilitate that process. The intimacy between Henry and his wife remains burdened with what the book calls "that great obese heft of melancholy"; they continue to hear their son's "unlost voice, calling [them] from the bottom of the world" (Lee 1998, 99).

References to unfinished processes of mourning recur throughout *Native Speaker*: not only in the "unlost voice" I just quoted, but also when it refers to Henry's deceased father as an "undead old man" (Lee 1998, 148), or to Henry's disconnection from his Korean ancestors by calling their "ancestral graves" "the loneliest stones that each year go unblessed" (*ibid.*, 260). Henry's melancholic relation to the loss of his son is emblematic of his cultural and ethnic uprootedness, and of the removal from his Korean ancestors that he has failed to work through. For Henry, his ancestors as well as his dead son persist as what Freud, in his discussion of melancholia, describes as "an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies […] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished" (Freud 1978, 253). Henry has not only failed to mourn his ancestors, his melancholia is further aggravated because the example he inherits from his parents consists in a particularly fierce resistance to mourning. The book's most blatant example of the foreclosure of mourning occurs in relation to his mother's death. The avoidance of affect already sets in during her fatal illness, when Henry's parents "kept it from [him] until they couldn't hide it any longer" (Lee 1998, 71). Her death, when it comes, for Henry "was more a disappearance than a death," and not a loss

that could properly be mourned. After his wife's demise, Henry's father does not allow substantial changes in his and his son's lives, and lets "nothing unusual sully his days" (*ibid.*, 54). Soon enough, he has another woman fly over from Korea to take care of the house. In this case, the lost love object (the mother) is simply forgotten and substituted by another one who quite unproblematically assumes the initial love object's role. While critical discourses on melancholia object to 'normal' processes of mourning precisely because such processes, in their view, all too easily surrender lost love objects and replace them with new ones, *Native Speaker* makes clear that such facile substitutions are not part of the process of mourning, but in fact rely on a *foreclosure* of the emotional and affective work of mourning (Rae 2007, 22).[11] By presenting the alienation in which this act of substitution results in Henry's relation to his father and to his wife, who blames him for having failed to actively resist this logic of interchangeability (Lee 1998, 61-7), the novel not only indicates that this mode of affectless substitution is morally dubious, but also underlines its disastrous psycho-social consequences.

Native Speaker depicts how a melancholic pathology is able not only to mark personal reactions to loss, but how it can also beset the way ethnic or cultural identities are constructed around the memory of particular losses and injuries. The book repeatedly refers to boycotts of Korean grocery stores, hold-ups on these stores, and protests by Peruvian immigrants against Korean greengrocers. These conflicts often appear to be predetermined by injuries suffered in the past: "Blacks and Koreans somehow seem meant for trouble in America" (Lee 1998, 168); ethnic conflict is the "oldest strife of city and alley and schoolyard" (*ibid.*, 243). Different ethnic groups seem to be locked in a zero-sum logic in which membership of one group signals hatred of another, and sympathy for one group is automatically perceived as an insult to another. This dismal climate is one element in John Kwang's failure to unite different ethnic groups around a common political program: "Nothing John Kwang could say or do would win him praise. His sympathy for either side was a bias for one" (*ibid.*, 179). This distrust between ethnic groups is also part of the legacy that is passed on to Henry by his parents, and it also comes to infect his marriage to a white woman (*ibid.*, 14; 172). A too strict adherence to a legacy of reciprocal violence and distrust, to a history in which Korean greengrocers see their customers first of all as thieves, and these customers in their turn regard the shopkeepers as exploiters (*ibid.*, 172), prevents these groups from interacting and collaborating in a less inhibiting way. It makes it impossible for them to see that it is not the evil of the other party so much as their subordinate place in society and the structural dispossession they suffer as a result that condemn them to such a tense cohabitation. John Kwang's political project is an attempt to replace such an

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[11]   As I noted before, another familiar objection to mourning is that it is "closely and fatally identified with the imperative to do the work of getting and spending in a capitalist system" (Rae 2007, 31). *Native Speaker*'s depiction of the life of Henry's hardworking father, and of Henry's own absorption in his spy work, makes clear that the monomaniacal attention to work that result from capitalist dictates of industriousness is closely connected to an impoverishment of the world and a failure to sustain an interest in the world, phenomena that are in their turn connected to melancholia.

insistence on a history of loss and victimization with a perspective that acknowledges these histories, and that at the same time incorporates them into an explanatory social narrative that makes this suffering cognitively intelligible (Moglen 2005, 161). In light of the novel's persistent investigation of different strategies of coping with loss, Kwang's project indicates a shift from melancholia to mourning as the appropriate stance for the cultivation of political hope.

Henry's doubts about his past, his profession, and his marriage, which often shades into self-denigration, are intensified by his membership in a community that has, more than any other American community, been promoted as a 'model minority.' Henry is painfully aware of – and feels guilty about – his dubious ability to make white people feel good about themselves (Lee 1998, 6), and to remain invisible and silent (*ibid.*, 163). He calls himself an "assimilist, a lackey," fully aware that all this is "part of [his] own ugly and half-blind romance with the land" (*ibid.*, 149; 249). Henry's consciousness of his model minority status leads to intense feelings of self-depreciation, which is part of the novel's depiction of the melancholic effects of model minority discourse. By corrupting Korean Americans' attachment to their own community as well as their association with other minorities, and by filling them with a sense of betrayal and with feelings of guilt, it prevents them from mourning their attachment to a community which, as the novel chronicles in great detail, becomes less close and tight when its members become ever more economically successful, and when the first generation gradually disappears. Henry comes to realize that to the extent that American society holds out the promise of social and economic progress to Korean Americans, it also forecloses their capacity to mourn their fading connection to their community or the dispossessions they share with other minorities: they serve as "silent partners of the bordering WASPs and Jews, never rubbing them except with a smile, as if everything with us were always all right, in our great sham of propriety, as if nothing could touch or wreak anger and sadness upon us" (Lee 1998, 48).

As I noted before, Henry's spy work reflects the novel's analysis of his community's model status. Henry can infiltrate the group of Kwang's collaborators "through painstaking displays of competence and efficiency" (Lee 1998, 160) – by, in other words, appearing as a model employee without threatening to be quite as efficient as the 'natives': "I had to show the staff that I possessed native intelligence but not so great a one or of a certain kind that it impeded my sense of duty" (*ibid.*, 160). In keeping with its melancholic nature, his spy work forces him to swiftly alternate between different identities and to abandon his own self – as Henry notes, "[o]ur mode at the firm was always to resist history, at least our own" (*ibid.*, 25). Entrance in the firm forces him and his colleagues to lose "encumbering remnants of blood and flesh, and because of this he carries no memory of a house, no memory of a land, he seems to have emerged from nowhere" (*ibid.*, 161).

The novel's spy plot makes clear that model minority discourse compels members of minority groups to *forget* or *deny* their culture, and thereby effectively makes it impossible for them to *mourn* their community's experience. To the extent that Henry's ethnicity helps him win the confidence of John Kwang, and thus

constitutes a professional advantage, his spy work refuses him the opportunity to address the injuries and losses that his ethnic background still entails in the contemporary US. Just as Henry notes that the unmourned death of his mother "was more a disappearance than a death" (Lee 1998, 201), he realizes that his spy work thrives on the "moment of disappearance," and that it forces him to perform his "own instant live burial" and to live on as a "phantom" or a "spook" (*ibid.*, 188; 161; 290). If we appreciate that this condition is a melancholic one, we can understand that it asserts itself in Henry's aggressive antipathy toward his own community, and especially to the memory of his father, as well as in his feelings of self-denigration.

Seth Moglen has noted that "melancholia is, in essence, a form of mourning that is blocked by *unconscious* and *displaced* aggression" (Moglen 2005, 159; emphasis in the original). Henry directs his "self-beratement and misanthropy" (*ibid.*) at the memory of his father and at himself, and the novel shows that this psychological violence can only begin to be overcome by bringing the structural reasons for this aggression to consciousness. Near the beginning of the novel, Henry already captures the structural connection between success and betrayal when he notes that his father "like all successful immigrants before him gently and not so gently exploited his own" (Lee 1998, 50). Near the end of the book, this insight no longer serves to sustain his ambivalent aversion to his father's example, but it now instead establishes a link between them: "My ugly immigrant's truth, as was his, is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited" (*ibid.*, 297). The rest of this paragraph makes clear that at this late point in the novel Henry's statement no longer qualifies as an expression of self-hatred combined with a profound misanthropy that is directed at a vulernable social group (immigrants). Instead, this acknowledgement of the truth is surprisingly followed by the first-person narrator's address to the reader – a device that had already been used near the beginning of the novel (*ibid.*, 6). This address suddenly implicates the reader in the insight that the novel is attempting to formulate, and it emphasizes that constitutive (self-)betrayal is not a problem of immigrants alone:

> 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. (Lee 1998, 297)

Instead of offering a mere analysis of the causes and consequences of Henry's melancholia, the novel here directly addresses its reader, who is identified as a member of the American mainstream (Corley 2004, 72). By directing an affective writing operation at a third party, the novel interrupts the melancholic impasse in which Henry and his demoralized world initially find themselves, and underlines the importance of interaction and affect, "at once furious and sad," in working through this melancholic condition. By identifying a third party (the American mainstream, the reader) as part of the problem it addresses in the different domains it depicts, the novel also interrupts the melancholic cycle of unconscious and displaced aggression by bringing the causes of this aggression to light. The novel's affective operation goes together with what we earlier identified as an essential

aspect of social mourning: the development of "adequately explanatory social narra-tives" that make loss "cognitively intelligible" (Moglen 2005, 161).

   This remarkable passage makes explicit the 'performative' dimension of the novel: the novel here states that its own 'lyrical modes' are part of the solution for the problem it addresses. The book's style, mood, and structure are vital aspects of a process of mourning that aims to overcome the melancholia that the book depicts and diagnoses.[12] Passages such as the one I discussed above remind the reader from time to time that the novel is in fact conceived as a memoir written by Henry. The novel underlines that Henry's spy work also means that he is, in a sense, also a writer: his job consists for a good part in writing "background studies, psychological assessments, daily chronologies, myriad facts and extrapolations" (Lee 1998, 16). *Native Speaker*'s celebrated literary style acquires its significance in the story because of its clear contrast to Henry's professional reports. These reports demand nothing more than the flawless execution of a fixed template: Henry writes "textbook examples" in which he unfailingly names "the who, the what, the where, when, and then very briefly interpret it" (*ibid.*, 158). What is missing in this kind of writing is an affective investment in the subject, as well as an attempt to understand the why of the facts that are being recorded. In his job, Henry is asked to "present the subject in question like some sentient machine of transcription," "in a rigorous present tense" (*ibid.*, 189-90).

   As Henry gradually becomes aware of the limitations of this kind of writing, he begins to feel the need for "a different story," one in which he himself can "come out, step into the light, bare himself" (Lee 1998, 190). Henry feels compelled to write a – necessarily more affective – story that brings his own personality into the picture, and that also abandons the "momentary language" of the reports and instead spans "human event and time" (*ibid.*, 192). In short, at one point in the story, Henry begins to write the memoir we are reading. The most overt formal device the novel uses to signal that the decision to take up the writing of a memoir not only determines *Native Speaker*'s tone and style, but also constitutes a decisive event in the novel's development, is the sudden shift from the past to the present tense in the middle of the book (*ibid.*, 215). The novel's narrative present is the time in which Henry is writing the memoir, including the part of the novel that we read in the past tense, and in this time of narration he acquires an increasingly clear understanding of the reasons for John Kwang's political disgrace and for the disintegration of his marriage, as well as of the importance of Kwang's doomed project. It also coincides with his rapprochement to his wife, as well as with the gradual development of a more enabling memory of his son.

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[12]   Daniel Y. Kim's discussion of the novel also sees the 'performative' dimension of the novel as a vital step in its treatment of the problems it poses (Kim 2003, 250-6). Interestingly, he writes about "the melancholic lyricism of Henry's narrative voice" (*ibid.*, 255). For Kim, this melan-cholic mood expresses an essentially Korean sensibility, which compensates for the novel's failure to embody an immigrant vernacular. My understanding of the novel equally emphasizes the affective qualities of Henry's voice, but I do not interpret it as an essentially Korean sen-sibility.

The point of all this is that the writing of the memoir, and thus the decision to opt for an *affective* writing practice that aims to *understand* the injuries and losses Henry has suffered, is instrumental to his psycho-social recovery. Henry's memoir spends numerous pages carefully and patiently revisiting the life of his father, the events surrounding and following the death of his son, and the history of his relationship to his wife. Henry's willingness to address these memories, and to restore an affective relation to them, takes place through the writing of the memoir, and actually has an impact on his melancholic condition. Many of Henry's insights only arise *through* the work of imaginatively and affectively revisiting these sites during the writing of his memoir (Lee 1998, 184). Henry's memory work allows him to understand aspects of the past that he failed to perceive as they first unfolded. Once we appreciate this 'performative' dimension of the novel, it emerges as an affective practice that emphatically does not break off Henry's association with the memory of his father, his earlier spy assignments, and his son, but rather sustains those attachments and thus makes it possible to mobilize these energies in order to recover a belief in the possibility of change.

The role that Henry's affective memory work plays in the story of *Native Speaker* indicates that the protracted recollection of loss can help us reconnect to "those aspects of ourselves that were inspired, stimulated, gratified" by the things we have lost, and that it is necessary in order to "extend these libidinal energies to new objects" (Moglen 2005, 162). The novel attributes an explicitly political dimension to this mourning work. In his recollections of his work with John Kwang, Henry comes to realize that his melancholic lack of interest in the world earlier prevented him from perceiving Kwang's project as a chance for political change. This possibility is only recognized in mournful hindsight. Because Henry initially lived "in one tiny part of [his] life at a time" (Lee 1998, 208), he lacked the imagination to even conceive of someone like Kwang who, as he realizes later, "displayed an ambition I didn't recognize, or more, one I hadn't yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion" (*ibid.*, 129). His melancholia prevents Henry from seeing Kwang as more than "just another ethnic pol from the outer boroughs," with "the adjutant interest groups, the unwavering agenda, the stridency, the righteousness" that always seem to come with such a figures (*ibid.*, 283; 129-30). Because, as the novel makes clear, this melancholia has also infected race relations and politics, it leads to Kwang's ultimate political failure.

Kwang himself offers the best analysis of this melancholia in a speech he gives after a meeting with black church leaders. Kwang enjoins Blacks and Koreans to overcome their exclusive attachment to their own particular losses and to "think instead of what [they] have to bear together" (Lee 1998, 140). In a remarkable deployment of the novel's typical imagery of unfinished mourning, Kwang states that as long as people are unwilling to make that change, the black and Korean victims of interracial violence, "though they may lie beneath the earth, they are not buried." The problem, Kwang argues, is "self-hate," and part of the solution is the gradual "acceptance of what we loathe and fear in ourselves" (*ibid.*, 140-1). He does not ask the different communities to forget their injuries and losses, but

calls on them to "remember, or now know" them; by bringing these losses to consciousness, it becomes possible to consider them no longer as competing claims for victimhood, but as mutually reinforcing energies that can be mobilized for social change: "I ask that you remember these things, or know them now. Know that what we have in common, the sadness and pain and injustice, will always be stronger than our differences" (Lee 1998, 142).

Henry only recognizes Kwang's plea for social mourning as an opportunity for change after Kwang has failed to realize this change. While this leads most interpretations of the novel to conclude that *Native Speaker* ends on a note of political despair, I argue that the novel's affirmation of the powers of mourning signals its decision to keep faith with the possibility of change. The possibility that Kwang embodied can yet be actualized, on the condition that the loss of that particular opportunity is properly mourned. Given the connection between mourning and the forging of explanatory narratives, this amounts to the condition that the lessons of Kwang's failure are properly learned, and the ruses of melancholic despair thoroughly understood and exposed.

In one of Henry's memories about his father's store, he notes that his father "generally saw his customers as adversaries," and especially "[w]ith blacks he just turned to stone" (Lee 1998, 172). Henry then evokes a confrontation between his father and a black customer. This imaginative effort allows Henry to understand the social conditioning of this melancholic stand-off, a conclusion that takes Kwang's untimely insights on board:

> They fight like lovers, scarred, knowing. Their song circular and vicious. For she always comes back the next day, and so does he. It's like they are here to torture each other. He can't afford a store anywhere else but where she lives, and she has no other place to buy a good apple or a fresh loaf of bread. (Lee 1998, 173)

Passages like this one show that Henry's imaginative efforts are intimately connected to the development of explanations and to the discovery of a shared legacy of pain and suffering. In this way, it also becomes possible to read the novel's final scene as an affirmation of political hope. Henry here assists Lelia in the ESL courses she teaches to an ethnically diverse group of kids. While Henry's life was earlier overshadowed by the unmourned loss of his son, in the final scene he hugs and kisses each of Lelia's pupils goodbye. This new affective connection is made possible by the successful mourning of the memory of his son, which is not denied, but is instead allowed to enable a renewed affective investment in the world:[13] "When I embrace them, half pick them up, they are just that size that I will forever know, that very weight so wondrous to me, and awful" (Lee 1998, 324). Mourning holds faith with loss, and mobilizes these energies for new experiences and encounters. Only in this way is the possibility of political change remembered; only if it is properly mourned can it ever be actualized.

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[13] The scene immediately preceding this one displays the same movement: it begins with Henry's admission that he "used to love to walk these streets of Flushing with Lelia and Mitt [his son]"; this is followed by a protracted fond memory of these days, and this memory work then allows Henry to again declare his love for this neigborhood (Lee 1998, 320-1).

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