

"necessary fictions":  
negotiating identity  
through storytelling in  
chang-rae lee'...



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In *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee, Luzan asks Henry, “ Who, my young friend, have you been all your life?” (205). It is through the narrative form that Luzan is able to see beyond Henry’s words. Luzan urges Henry “ to take up story-forms” (206), and as Henry narrates his dilemmas to the doctor, he also negotiates his identity through his storytelling. Although Lee presents various identity markers in *Native Speaker*, including skin colour, gender, occupation, language and values, she reveals that such markers are inadequate in expressing a person’s entire identity, as they bear with them stereotypes of different racial and social groups and therefore tend to set up binaries of the Self versus an Other. Society imposes such markers on individuals, ridding them of the ability to construct their own identity. Identity is a representative form based on what an individual feels defines and is a part of him or her. In the face of such a dilemma, Chang-Rae Lee presents storytelling as an alternative medium in *Native Speaker* for an individual such as Henry to negotiate his identity. Storytelling as a viable medium through which one can discover his or her identity might appear to suggest that verbal and written languages are feasible identity markers, but storytelling and worded language need not necessarily occur together. At its heart, storytelling is a universal activity that reveals humans’ desire to share experiences and communicate with others. Although Ludwig argues that “ language is a key; it tells you more about a person than the person’s face or ‘ ethnicity’ in the sense of origin...the way you speak defines you” (234), language can also be a tool to inflict violence, as seen from Henry’s spy registers. Henry writes “ like some sentient machine of transcription” (203), giving him the “ illusion of noninvolvement” (Ludwig 226). Henry simply notes down what he observes, and his conveyance of information using just

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language without storytelling results in Luzan's death. Henry understands that he "no longer can...paint a figure like Kwang with a momentary language, but that...the greater truths reside in our necessary fictions spanning human events and time" (206), revealing that it is storytelling, not language, that reveals a character's identity. Moreover, Lee shows us that language can be meaningless, as Henry's father starts hurling words like "my hot mama shit ass tight cock sucka" (63) at his wife in anger, and Henry breaks in by shouting big words like "socio-economic" (63) at his father in "complete sentences" (63). While the words themselves do not mean anything in this context, it is the true intention of the speaker, hidden behind those words, that conveys a message. When a person uses language to juxtapose and distance oneself from others, just like the other identity markers in the novel, it creates an "Other" figure. Rather than aiding in identity negotiation, such a usage of language locks people into stereotypes within binaries. Thus, language alone is insufficient as an identity marker because "the world isn't governed by fiends and saints but by ten thousand dim souls in between" (196). Lee portrays on a style of storytelling that resembles P'ansori, a Korean storytelling tradition in which it is not only the language of story that is important, but also elements such as rhythm, sound and audience participation. In P'ansori, a singer narrates a story, but he or she is not alone in the act of storytelling. A drummer who accompanies and interacts with the singer "is not a passive respondent but, rather, an equal partner" (Park 274) in narrating the story through rhythm. Lee draws out attention to sound in the novel as well, having Henry describe Kwang's accents as "melodic" (150) and being "a languorous baritone" (297).

Moreover, Kwang believes that the blacks' "songs and chants" (195)

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empowered them, even though he did not even understand the English language at that time. With P'ansori as the main example, it becomes clear that storytelling transcends narration in verbal or written language. Although language is one of the storytelling mediums, Lee demonstrates that stories could be told in more than just one way. For example, Lelia discovers the story of who Ahjuhma is not through verbal or textual language, but through a physical struggle over laundry. Storytelling through verbal language fails for Lelia and Ahjuhma, as Ahjuhma refuses to talk to Lelia, yet Lelia nevertheless is able to discern that Ahjuhma is "an abandoned girl" (73) after the tussle over the laundry. It is thus through the universal medium of storytelling that identity can be communicated, rather than through language alone. Henry is able to express his identity because of the universality of storytelling, but this medium also requires agency and personal involvement in order for it to be a feasible means of identity negotiation. As Okihiro mentions, "our memories have been massaged by white hands, and how can we remember the past when our storytellers have been whispering amid the din of western civilization and Anglo-conformity?" (Okihiro 34). Lee reflects this in *Native Speaker* when Henry's father "offer[s] the classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer" (49-50) because he knows "what every native loves to hear" (49), thus allowing the "native[s]" (49) to define his identity as part of the model minority. Yet Henry knows that the reason behind his father's success, the *ggeh*, reflects a communal success rather than an individualistic one, and although the *ggeh* occupies a significant part of Henry's father's life story, he gives it up in order to fit into the larger narrative of the "native[s]" (49). The abandonment of his personal story thus leads Henry's father to stereotype

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himself as part of the model minority, and he therefore foregoes the true narrative that actually defines his identity. Similarly, there is a lack of personal involvement in the storytelling present in Henry's spy registers, as he merely writes what he observes in a passive manner, as though he were uninvolved. Here, Henry does more than just inflict violence through the passivity of his storytelling. He attempts to tell others' stories for them, eventually leading to the death of Luzan, and thus, robbing Luzan of his chance to tell his own story. It is only when Henry tears away from passive writing and narrates information of Kwang as a man rather than as a political figure that he discovers "the leap of [Kwang's] identity no one in [Henry's] work would find valuable but [him]" (211). As Henry begins to tell stories with more agency and personal involvement does he begin to discern others' identities, and through his communication with others, also discovers himself. However, without an audience, storytelling would be futile as well, because without someone to listen to them, the stories would become lost and forgotten. As such, even though storytelling is a viable medium through which to construct and negotiate identities, "the inalienable human condition of access to language...means nothing if access to an audience is absent" (Lim 14). The audience in this case includes not only the readers of *Native Speaker*, but also the fictional characters in the novel. Storytelling is not simply a unidirectional activity where a story is merely told, but a story must be told with the audience in mind as well. P'ansori is relevant here as audience participation in the form of ch'wimsae is a crucial component of storytelling in this novel. Ch'wimsae involves "stylized cries of encouragement... as a way of energizing the singer (as needed)" (Park 275), and "the more accomplished the person, the more powerfully his or her <https://assignbuster.com/necessary-fictions-negotiating-identity-through-storytelling-in-chang-rae-lees-native-speaker/>

voice blends into the rhythmic and melodic flow on the stage" (Park 275). Audience participation is thus a vital component of storytelling as it supports the storyteller and becomes a crucial part of the performance. Henry, however, is unable to perform *ch'wimsae* as he feels like " an audience member asked to stand up and sing with the diva, that [he] know[s] every pitch and note but can no longer call them forth" (267) whenever he enters a Korean shop. He suggests, though, that were he " able with [his] speech" (316), the Korean waitress he knows " would turn and she could confide in hushed tones" (316) the story of her life. Yet Henry is unable to do so and chooses not to express himself through a different medium of storytelling. As an audience member, he fails to participate in the storytelling process, leaving the Korean waitress's tale untold. Similarly, readers cannot simply turn an " educated gaze" (Moraru 71) to storytelling, as such an approach would be too formal and removed and thus lead to stories losing their personal significance. Without an audience, stories would remain confined within the " whispering amid the din of western civilization and Anglo-conformity" (Okhiro 34). Not only does the audience or reader have to listen to the stories being told, they also have to interact with such stories in order to shape the story through their own imagination. For Mitt, a silver coin which his grandfather gives him takes on significance because the story his grandfather tells him of " a lost young prince" (102) sparks his imagination, and in turn, Henry understands the significance even though Mitt dies. It is because Mitt imbues the coin with significance in his imagination that Henry is able to imagine that the coin could still bear " the press of a flesh" (102), therefore leaving a trace of Mitt behind for Henry. At the end of the novel, Lelia participates in a similar engagement through sounds, as she speaks " a

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dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are" (349). Throughout the novel, the only words that reflect accents textually are names – " Leel-ya" (12), " Mahler" (232) and " Kwan" (238). This suggests that as names are suggestive of their own origins (for example, " Ichibata" would indicate that the name originates from Japan), they are also the words that potentially allow speakers to speak in different " native languages" (349) and use their own unique pronunciation. With Lelia speaking all the various names in different " native languages" (349), she thus participates as an audience member by engaging with children of the minority groups, producing their unique sounds rather than simply forcing them to produce hers. Moreover, by setting Henry up as the Speech Monster, Lee also positions Henry to play-act, allowing the children to participate in a story setting where they speak the " secret phrase" (348), or rather, produce the magical sounds to defeat the Speech Monster. Again, there are elements of P'ansori style audience participation here, as both storytellers and audiences alike negotiate the narrative through " mutual shaping" (Park 283), thus acting as " a confirmation of the close relationship linking the singer, drummer, and audience" (Park 275). The story told and sung in a P'ansori performance is therefore not static. It changes and shifts according to the input from the singer, the drummer, and the audience. In order for storytelling to have significance, readers and audiences must engage with stories imaginatively to shape the narratives and instill meaning and significance into them. At the end of Henry' and Lee's stories, at the end of the novel, there is no real resolution since stereotypes still remain. However, storytelling itself could be the means to the novel's conclusion. The novel ends with a scene that suggests that nothing has changed, because the

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children hear Henry speak and “wonder...as they check again that [Henry’s] voice moves in time with [his] mouth, truly belongs to [his] face” (349). Lee, however, might not necessarily be proposing a resolution to the problem of racial stereotypes and classification. As Henry leaves his job as a spy, his narrative starts to take on the present tense. In the earlier part of the novel, Henry says “who we were” (240) but in the closing scene he uses “who we are” (349) instead. The shift from past to present in the novel reveals its cyclical nature, since as the reader reaches the narrator’s present, the narrator starts writing the past, which is the story we have just read, and the beginning of his recollection signifies the start of the story for the audience. This cyclical structure suggests that storytelling as a means to the end for negotiating identity, as readers engage and reengage with the story of *Native Speaker* in this cyclical pattern. The reader participates in rediscovering and reconstructing Henry’s tale in order to better understand what Henry believes represents him. Such repeated engagements also allow readers to remember Henry’s story, unlike the facts which Hoagland shares with Henry about his clients. Hoagland “did the drill” (39) on Henry’s clients, running off lists of facts about the clients and whether the information was useful or not, and such facts do not usually stay in a reader’s mind as clearly as a story does because the significance does not register. Meanwhile, storytelling gives significance to an identity as an audience is able to listen to, engage with, and remember the tale. While the potential weakness of *Native Speaker* is that the different groups’ various accents are not conveyed and the novel thus comes dangerously close to advocating what Ludwig calls co-opting “a flattering pattern of ethnic pluralism as multiculturalism” (Ludwig 221), this flaw is justified because the story is told

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with and from Henry's voice and viewpoint. Henry himself tells us that he does not have a good command of the Korean language, that when he speaks it, his tone is "uncertain, tentative" (267), and it would be justifiable to say that Henry can only narrate his story through "the figurative power of his own language" (Kim 251). As the story is a first-person account, if Henry were to reflect the accents linguistically, his storytelling would not be as truthful because he would be defining others and fitting them into stereotypes. Rather, Henry allows these other characters to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories in the voices and sounds that are natural for them to produce. Moreover, the text also shows self-reflexivity in drawing our attention to the limitations of written text, as written text cannot truly produce sounds. Since there is a need to engage with storytelling as audiences or readers, Lee could be suggesting that even though his narrator does not provide us with linguistic cues of accents in his storytelling, we as readers can and have to produce and imagine these sounds ourselves, in order to participate in the communication process through storytelling, as Lelia does at the end of the novel when she speaks "a dozen lovely and native languages" (349). Perhaps Mitt dies of suffocation not due to a mere "accident" (129), but rather due to Henry's unwillingness to "read him stories" (239). Henry realizes this, as he recalls that Mitt and his grandfather were able to "build a bridge" (239) between them by communicating stories through words and sounds. Mitt, fascinated by the recorder, is himself a recorder, and only by recording can he "mimic...these notes of who we were...rich with disparate melodies" (240). Just as Henry rediscovers himself and his own father through storytelling, stories also need to be shared to be remembered, engaged with again and again to produce "a dozen lovely and

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native languages" (349). After all, "the truth, finally, is who can tell it" (7).

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